

Morrison Arthur

The Hole in the Wall



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CHAPTER I

STEPHEN'S TALE

My grandfather was a publican – and a sinner, as you will see. His public-house was the Hole in the Wall, on the river's edge at Wapping; and his sins – all of them that I know of – are recorded in these pages. He was a widower of some small substance, and the Hole in the Wall was not the sum of his resources, for he owned a little wharf on the river Lea. I called him Grandfather Nat, not to distinguish him among a multitude of grandfathers – for indeed I never knew another of my own – but because of affectionate habit; a habit perhaps born of the fact that Nathaniel Kemp was also my father's name. My own is Stephen.

To remember Grandfather Nat is to bethink me of pear-drops. It is possible that that particular sort of sweetstuff is now obsolete, and I cannot remember how many years have passed since last I smelt it; for the pear-drop was a thing that could be smelt farther than seen, and oftener; so that its smell – a rather fulsome, vulgar smell I now believe – is almost as distinct to my imagination while I write as it was to my nose thirty years ago. For pear-drops were an unfailing part of the large bagful of sticky old-fashioned lollipops that my grandfather brought on his visits, stuffed into his overcoat pocket, and hard to get out without a burst and a spill. His custom was invariable, so that I think I must have come to regard the sweets as some natural production of his coat pocket; insomuch that at my mother's funeral my muddled brain scarce realised the full desolation of the circumstances till I discovered that, for the first time in my experience, my grandfather's pocket was void of pear-drops. But with this new bereavement the world seemed empty indeed, and I cried afresh.

Associated in my memory with my grandfather's bag of sweets, almost more than with himself, was the gap in the right hand where the middle finger had been; for it was commonly the maimed hand that hauled out the paper bag, and the gap was plain and singular against the white paper. He had lost the finger at sea, they told me; and as my notion of losing a thing was derived from my Noah's ark, or dropping a marble through a grating, I was long puzzled to guess how anything like that could have happened to a finger. Withal the circumstance fascinated me, and added vastly to the importance and the wonder of my grandfather in my childish eyes.

He was perhaps a little over the middle height, but so broad and so deep of chest and, especially, so long of arm, as to seem squat. He had some grey hair, but it was all below the line of his hat-brim; above that it was as the hair of a young man. So that I was led to reason that colour must be washed out of hair by exposure to the weather; as perhaps in his case it was. I think that his face was almost handsome, in a rough, hard-bitten way, and he was as hairy a man as I ever saw. His short beard was like curled wire; but I can remember that long after I had grown to resent being kissed by women, being no longer a baby, I gladly climbed his knee to kiss my grandfather, though his shaven upper-lip was like a rasp.

In these early days I lived with my mother in a little house of a short row that stood on a quay, in a place that was not exactly a dock, nor a wharf, nor a public thoroughfare; but where people from the dock trying to find a wharf, people from a wharf looking for the dock, and people from the public thoroughfare in anxious search of dock and wharves, used to meet and ask each other questions. It was a detached piece of Blackwall which had got adrift among locks and jetties, and was liable to be cut off from the rest of the world at any moment by the arrival of a ship and the consequent swinging of a bridge, worked by two men at a winch. So that it was a commonplace of

my early childhood (though the sight never lost its interest) to observe from a window a ship, passing as it were up the street, warped into dock by the capstans on the quay. And the capstan-songs of the dockmen — *Shenandore, Mexico is covered with Snow, Hurrah for the Black Ball Line*, and the like — were as much my nursery rhymes as *Little Boy Blue* and *Sing a Song o' Sixpence*. These things are done differently nowadays; the cottages on the quay are gone, and the neighbourhood is a smokier place, where the work is done by engines, with no songs.

My father was so much at sea that I remember little of him at all. He was a ship's officer, and at the time I am to tell of he was mate of the brig *Juno*, owned by Viney and Marr, one of the small shipowning firms that were common enough thirty years ago, though rarer now; the sort of firm that was made by a pushing skipper and an ambitious shipping clerk, beginning with a cheap vessel bought with money raised mainly by pawning the ship. Such concerns often did well, and sometimes grew into great lines; perhaps most of them yielded the partners no more than a comfortable subsistence; and a good few came to grief, or were kept going by questionable practices which have since become illegal — sometimes in truth by what the law called crime, even then. Viney had been a ship's officer — had indeed served under Grandfather Nat, who was an old skipper. Marr was the business man who had been a clerk. And the firm owned two brigs, the *Juno* and another; though how much of their value was clear property and how much stood for borrowed money was matter of doubt and disagreement in the conversation of mates and skippers along Thames shore. What nobody disagreed about, however, was that the business was run on skinflint principles, and that the vessels were so badly found, so ill-kept, and so grievously under-manned, that the firm ought to be making money. These things by the way, though they are important to remember. As I was saying, I remember little of my father, because of his long voyages and short spells at home. But my mother is so clear and so kind in my recollection that sometimes I dream of her still, though she died before I was eight.

It was while my father was on a long voyage with the *Juno* that there came a time when she took me often upon her knee, asking if I should like a little brother or sister to play with; a thing which I demanded to have brought, instantly. There was a fat woman called Mrs. Dann, who appeared in the household and became my enemy. She slept with my mother, and my cot was thrust into another room, where I lay at night and brooded — sometimes wept with jealousy thus to be supplanted; though I drew what consolation I might from the prospect of the promised playmate. Then I could not go near my mother at all, for she was ill, and there was a doctor. And then ... I was told that mother and baby-brother were gone to heaven together; a thing I would not hear of, but fought savagely with Mrs. Dann on the landing, shouting to my mother that she was not to die, for I was coming. And when, wearied with kicking and screaming — for I fought with neighbours as well as with the nurse and the undertaker, conceiving them to be all in league to deprive me of my mother — when at last the woman from next door took me into the bedroom, and I saw the drawn face that could not smile, and my tiny brother that could not play, lying across the dead breast, I so behaved that the good soul with me blubbered aloud; and I had an added grief in the reflection that I had kicked her shins not half an hour before. I have never seen that good woman since; and I am ashamed to write that I cannot even remember her name.

I have no more to say of my mother, and of her funeral only so much as records the least part of my grief. Some of her relations came, whom I cannot distinctly remember seeing at any other time: a group of elderly and hard-featured women, who talked of me as "the child," very much as they might have talked of some troublesome article of baggage; and who turned up their noses at my grandfather: who, for his part, was uneasily respectful, calling each of them "mum" very often. I was not attracted by my mother's relations, and I kept as near my grandfather as possible, feeling a vague fear that some of them might have a design of taking me away. Though indeed none was in the least ambitious of that responsibility.

They were not all women, for there was one quiet little man in their midst, who, when not eating cake or drinking wine, was sucking the bone handle of a woman's umbrella, which he carried with

him everywhere, indoors and out. He was in the custody of the largest and grimmest of ladies, whom the others called Aunt Martha. He was so completely in her custody that after some consideration I judged he must be her son; though indeed he seemed very old for that. I now believe him to have been her husband; but I cannot remember to have heard his name, and I cannot invent him a better one than Uncle Martha.

Uncle Martha would have behaved quite well, I am convinced, if he had been left alone, and would have acquitted himself with perfect propriety in all the transactions of the day; but it seemed to be Aunt Martha's immovable belief that he was wholly incapable of any action, even the simplest and most obvious, unless impelled by shoves and jerks. Consequently he was shoved into the mourning carriage – we had two – and jerked into the corner opposite to the one he selected; shoved out – almost on all fours – at the cemetery; and, perceiving him entering the little chapel of his own motion, Aunt Martha overtook him and jerked him in there. This example presently impressed the other ladies with the expediency of shoving Uncle Martha at any convenient opportunity; so that he arrived home with us at last in a severely jostled condition, faithful to the bone-handled umbrella through everything.

Grandfather Nat had been liberal in provision for the funeral party, and the cake and port wine, the gin and water, the tea and the watercress, occupied the visitors for some time; a period illuminated by many moral reflections from a rather fat relation, who was no doubt, like most of the others, an aunt.

"Ah well," said the Fat Aunt, shaking her head, with a deep sigh that suggested repletion; "ah well; it's what we must all come to!"

There had been a deal of other conversation, but I remember this remark because the Fat Aunt had already made it twice.

"Ah, indeed," assented another aunt, a thin one; "so we must, sooner or later."

"Yes, yes; as I often say, we're all mortal."

"Yes, indeed!"

"We've all got to be born, an' we've all got to die."

"That's true!"

"Rich an' poor – just the same."

"Ah!"

"In the midst of life we're in the middle of it."

"Ah yes!"

Grandfather Nat, deeply impressed, made haste to refill the Fat Aunt's glass, and to push the cake-dish nearer. Aunt Martha jerked Uncle Martha's elbow toward his glass, which he was neglecting, with a sudden nod and a frown of pointed significance – even command.

"It's a great trial for all of the family, I'm sure," pursued the Fat Aunt, after applications to glass and cake-dish; "but we must bear up. Not that we ain't had trials enough, neither."

"No, indeed," replied Aunt Martha with a snap at my grandfather, as though he were the trial chiefly on her mind; which Grandfather Nat took very humbly, and tried her with watercress.

"Well, she's better off, poor thing," the Fat Aunt went on.

Some began to say "Ah!" again, but Aunt Martha snapped it into "Well, let's hope so!" – in the tone of one convinced that my mother couldn't be much worse off than she had been. From which, and from sundry other remarks among the aunts, I gathered that my mother was held to have hurt the dignity of her family by alliance with Grandfather Nat's. I have never wholly understood why; but I put the family pride down to the traditional wedding of an undoubted auctioneer with Aunt Martha's cousin. So Aunt Martha said "Let's hope so!" and, with another sudden frown and nod, shoved Uncle Martha toward the cake.

"What a blessing the child was took too!" was the Fat Aunt's next observation.

"Ah, that it is!" murmured the chorus. But I was puzzled and shocked to hear such a thing said of my little brother.

"And it's a good job there's only one left."

The chorus agreed again. I began to feel that I had seriously disoblged my mother's relations by not dying too.

"And him a boy; boys can look after themselves." This was a thin aunt's opinion.

"Ah, and that's a blessing," sighed the Fat Aunt; "a great blessing."

"Of course," said Aunt Martha. "And it's not to be expected that his mother's relations can be burdened with him."

"Why, no indeed!" said the Fat Aunt, very decisively.

"I'm sure it wouldn't be poor Ellen's wish to cause more trouble to her family than she has!" And Aunt Martha, with a frown at the watercress, gave Uncle Martha another jolt. It seemed to me that he had really eaten all he wanted, and would rather leave off; and I wondered if she always fed him like that, or if it were only when they were visiting.

"And besides, it 'ud be standing in the child's way," Aunt Martha resumed, "with so many openings as there is in the docks here, quite handy."

Perhaps it was because I was rather dull in the head that day, from one cause and another; at any rate I could think of no other openings in the docks but those between the ships and the jetties, and at the lock-sides, which people sometimes fell into, in the dark; and I gathered a hazy notion that I was expected to make things comfortable by going out and drowning myself.

"Yes, of course it would," said the Fat Aunt.

"It stands to reason," said a thin one.

"Anybody can see *that*," said the others.

"And many a boy's gone out to work no older."

"Ah, and been members o' Parliament afterwards, too."

The prospect of an entry into Parliament presented so stupefying a contrast with that of an immersion in the dock that for some time the ensuing conversation made little impression on me. On the part of my mother's relations it was mainly a repetition of what had gone before, very much in the same words; and as to my grandfather, he had little to say at all, but expressed himself, so far as he might, by furtive pats on my back; pats increasing in intensity as the talk of the ladies pointed especially and unpleasingly to myself. Till at last the food and drink were all gone. Whereupon the Fat Aunt sighed her last moral sentiment, Uncle Martha was duly shoved out on the quay, and I was left alone with Grandfather Nat.

"Well Stevy, ol' mate," said my grandfather, drawing me on his knee; "us two's left alone; left alone, ol' mate."

I had not cried much that day – scarce at all in fact, since first meeting my grandfather in the passage and discovering his empty pocket – for, as I have said, I was a little dull in the head, and trying hard to think of many things. But now I cried indeed, with my face against my grandfather's shoulder, and there was something of solace in the outburst; and when at last I looked up I saw two bright drops hanging in the wiry tangle of my grandfather's beard, and another lodged in the furrow under one eye.

"'Nough done, Stevy," said my grandfather; "don't cry no more. You'll come home along o' me now, won't ye? An' to-morrow we'll go in the London Dock, where the sugar is."

I looked round the room and considered, as well as my sodden little head would permit. I had never been in the London Dock, which was a wonderful place, as I had gathered from my grandfather's descriptions: a paradise where sugar lay about the very ground in lumps, and where you might eat it if you would, so long as you brought none away. But here was my home, with nobody else to take care of it, and I felt some muddled sense of a new responsibility. "I'm 'fraid I can't leave the place, Gran'fa' Nat," I said, with a dismal shake of the head. "Father might come home, an' he wouldn't know, an' –"

"An' so – an' so you think you've got to stop an' keep house?" my grandfather asked, bending his face down to mine.

The prospect had been oppressing my muzzy faculties all day. If I escaped being taken away, plainly I must keep house, and cook, and buy things and scrub floors, at any rate till my father came home; though it seemed a great deal to undertake alone. So I answered with a nod and a forlorn sniff.

"Good pluck! good pluck!" exclaimed my grandfather, exultantly, clapping his hand twice on my head and rubbing it vigorously. "Stevy, ol' mate, me an' you'll get on capital. I knowed you'd make a plucked 'un. But you won't have to keep house alone jest yet. No. You an' me'll keep house together, Stevy, at the Hole in the Wall. Your father won't be home a while yet; an' I'll settle all about this here place. But Lord! what a pluck for a shaver!" And he brightened wonderfully.

In truth there had been little enough of courage in my poor little body, and Grandfather Nat's words brought me a deal of relief. Beyond the vague terrors of loneliness and responsibility, I had been troubled by the reflection that housekeeping cost money, and I had none. For though my mother's half-pay note had been sent in the regular way to Viney and Marr a week before, there had been neither reply nor return of the paper. The circumstance was unprecedented and unaccountable, though the explanation came before very long.

For the present, however, the difficulty was put aside. I put my hand in my grandfather's, and, the door being locked behind us and the key in his pocket, we went out together, on the quay, over the bridge and into the life that was to be new for us both.

CHAPTER II IN BLUE GATE

While his mother's relations walked out of Stephen's tale, and left his grandfather in it, the tales of all the world went on, each man hero in his own.

Viney and Marr were owners of the brig *Juno*, away in tropic seas, with Stephen's father chief mate; and at this time the tale of Viney and Marr had just divided into two, inasmuch as the partners were separated and the firm was at a crisis – the crisis responsible for the withholding of Mrs. Kemp's half-pay. No legal form had dissolved the firm, indeed, and scarce half a mile of streets lay between the two men; but in truth Marr had left his partner with uncommon secrecy and expedition, carrying with him all the loose cash he could get together; and a man need travel a very little way to hide in London. So it was that Mr. Viney, left alone to bear the firm's burdens, was loafing, sometimes about his house in Commercial Road, Stepney, sometimes in the back streets and small public-houses hard by; pondering, no doubt, the matter contained in a paper that had that afternoon stricken the colour from the face of one Crooks, ship-chandler, of Shadwell, and had hardly less disquieted others in related trades. While Marr, for the few days since his flight no more dressed like the business partner in a shipowning concern, nor even like a clerk, but in serge and anklejacks, like a foremast hand, was playing up to his borrowed character by being drunk in Blue Gate.

The Blue Gate is gone now – it went with many places of a history only less black when Ratcliff Highway was put to rout. As you left High Street, Shadwell, for the Highway – they made one thoroughfare – the Blue Gate was on your right, almost opposite an evil lane that led downhill to the New Dock. Blue Gate Fields, it was more fully called, though there was as little of a field as of a gate, blue or other, about the place, which was a street, narrow, foul and forbidding, leading up to Back Lane. It was a bad and a dangerous place, the worst in all that neighbourhood: worse than Frederick Street – worse than Tiger Bay. The sailor once brought to anchor in Blue Gate was lucky to get out with clothes to cover him – lucky if he saved no more than his life. Yet sailors were there in plenty, hilarious, shouting, drunk and drugged. Horrible draggled women pawed them over for whatever their pockets might yield, and murderous ruffians were ready at hand whenever a knock on the head could solve a difficulty.

Front doors stood ever open in the Blue Gate, and some houses had no front doors at all. At the top of one of the grimy flights of stairs thus made accessible from the street, was a noisy and ill-smelling room; noisy because of the company it held; ill-smelling partly because of their tobacco, but chiefly because of the tobacco and the liquor of many that had been there before, and because of the aged foulness of the whole building. There were five in the room, four men and a woman. One of the men was Marr, though for the present he was not using that name. He was noticeable amid the group, being cleaner than the rest, fair-haired, and dressed like a sailor ashore, though he lacked the sunburn that was proper to the character. But sailor or none, there he sat where many had sat before him, a piece of the familiar prey of Blue Gate, babbling drunk and reasonless. The others were watchfully sober enough, albeit with a great pretence of jollity; they had drunk level with the babbler, but had been careful to water his drink with gin. As for him, he swayed and lolled, sometimes on the table before him, sometimes on the shoulder of the woman at his side. She was no beauty, with her coarse features, dull eyes, and tousled hair, her thick voice and her rusty finery; but indeed she was the least repulsive of that foul company.

On the victim's opposite side sat a large-framed bony fellow, with a thin, unhealthy face that seemed to belong to some other body, and dress that proclaimed him long-shore ruffian. The woman called him Dan, and nods and winks passed between the two, over the drooping head between them. Next Dan was an ugly rascal with a broken nose; singular in that place, as bearing in his dress none

of the marks of waterside habits, crimpéry and the Highway, but seeming rather the commonplace town rat of Shoreditch or Whitechapel. And, last, a blind fiddler sat in a corner, fiddling a flourish from time to time, roaring with foul jest, and roiling his single white eye upward.

"No, I won'av another," the fair-haired man said, staring about him with uncertain eyes. "Got bishness 'tend to. I say, wha' pubsh this? 'Tain' Brown Bear, ish't? Ish't Brown Bear?"

"No, you silly," the woman answered playfully. "'Tain't the Brown Bear; you've come 'ome along of us."

"O! Come home – come home... I shay – this won' do! Mus'n' go 'ome yet – get collared y'know!" This with an owlish wink at the bottle before him.

Dan and the woman exchanged a quick look; plainly something had gone before that gave the words significance. "No," Marr went on, "mus'n' go 'ome. I'm sailor man jus' 'shore from brig *Juno* in from Barbadoes... No, not *Juno*, course not. Dunno *Juno*. 'Tain' *Juno*. D'year? 'Tain' *Juno*, ye know, my ship. Never heard o' *Juno*. Mine's 'nother ship... I say, wha'sh name my ship?"

"You're a rum sailor-man," said Dan, "not to know the name of your own ship ten minutes together. Why, you've told us about four different names a'ready."

The sham seaman chuckled feebly.

"Why, I don't believe you're a sailor at all, mate," the woman remarked, still playfully. "You've just bin a-kiddin' of us fine!"

The chuckle persisted, and turned to a stupid grin. "Ha, ha! Ha, ha! Have it y'r own way." This with a clumsily stealthy grope at the breast pocket – a movement that the others had seen before, and remembered. "Have it y'r own way. But I say; I say, y'know" – suddenly serious – "you're all right, ain't you? Eh? All right, you know, eh? I s-say – I hope you're – orright?"

"Awright, mate? Course we are!" And Dan clapped him cordially on the shoulder.

"Awright, mate?" shouted the blind man, his white eye rolling and blinking horribly at the ceiling. "Right as ninepence! An' a 'a'penny over, damme!"

"We're awright," growled the broken-nosed man, thickly.

"We don't tell no secrets," said the woman.

"Thash all very well, but I was talkin' about the *Juno*, y'know. Was'n I talkin' about *Juno*?" A look of sleepy alarm was on the fair man's face as he turned his eyes from one to another.

"Ay, that's so," answered the fellow at his side. "Brig *Juno* in from Barbadoes."

"Ah! Thash where you're wrong; she *ain't* in – see?" Marr wagged his head, and leered the profoundest sagacity. "She *ain't* in. What's more, 'ow d'you know she ever will come in, eh? 'Ow d'ye know that? Thash one for ye, ole f'ler! Whar'll ye bet me she ever gets as far as – but I say, I say; I say, y'know, you're all right, ain't you? Qui' sure you're orright'?"

There was a new and a longer chorus of reassurance, which Dan at last ended with: "Go on; the *Juno* ain't ever to come back; is that it?"

Marr turned and stared fishily at him for some seconds. "Wha'rr you mean?" he demanded, at length, with a drivelling assumption of dignity. "Wha'rr you mean? N-never come back? Nishe remark make 'spectable shipowner! Whassor' firm you take us for, eh?"

The blind fiddler stopped midway in a flourish and pursed his lips silently. Dan looked quickly at the fiddler, and as quickly back at the drunken man. Marr's attitude and the turn of his head being favourable, the woman quietly detached his watch.

"Whassor' firm you take us for?" he repeated. "D'ye think 'cause we're – 'cause I come here – 'cause I come 'ere an' – " he stopped foolishly, and tailed off into nothing, smiling uneasily at one and another.

The woman held up the watch behind him – a silver hunter, engraved with Marr's chief initial – a noticeably large letter M. Dan saw it, shook his head and frowned, pointed and tapped his own breast pocket, all in a moment. And presently the woman slipped the watch back into the pocket it came from.

"'Ere, 'ave another drink," said Dan hospitably. "'Ave another all round for the last, 'fore the fiddler goes. 'Ere y'are, George, reach out."

"Eh?" ejaculated the fiddler. "Eh? I ain't goin'! Didn't the genelman ask me to come along? Come, I'll give y' a toon. I'll give y' a chant as 'll make yer 'air curl!"

"Take your drink, George," Dan insisted, "we don't want our 'air curled."

The fiddler groped for and took the drink, swallowed it, and twangled the fiddle-strings. "Will y'ave *Black Jack*?" he asked.

"No," Dan answered with a rising voice. "We won't 'ave Black Jack, an' what's more we won't 'ave Blind George, see? You cut your lucky, soon as ye like!"

"Awright, awright, cap'en," the fiddler remonstrated, rising reluctantly. "You're 'ard on a pore blind bloke, damme. Ain't I to get nothin' out o' this 'ere? I ask ye fair, didn't the genelman tell me to come along?"

Marr, ducking and lolling over the table, here looked up and said, "Whassup? Fiddler won' go? Gi'm twopence an' kick'm downstairs. 'Ere y'are!" and he pulled out some small change between his fingers, and spilt it on the table.

Dan and the broken-nosed man gathered it up and thrust it into the blind man's hand. "This ain't the straight game," he protested, in a hoarse whisper, as they pushed him through the doorway. "I want my reg'lars out o' that lot. D'ye 'ear? I want my reg'lars!"

But they shut the door on him, whereupon he broke into a torrent of curses on the landing; and presently, having descended several of the stairs, reached back to let drive a thump at the door with his stick; and so went off swearing into the street.

Marr sniggered feebly. "Chucked out fiddler," he said. "Whash we do now? I won'ave any more drink. I 'ad 'nough... Think I'll be gett'n' along... Here, what you after, eh?"

He clapped his hand again to his breast pocket, and turned suspiciously on the woman. "You keep y'r hands off," he said. "Wha' wan' my pocket?"

"Awright, mate," the woman answered placidly. "I ain't a touchin' yer pockets. Why, look there – yer watchguard's 'angin'; you'll drop that presently an' say it's me, I s'pose!"

"You'd better get away from the genelman if you can't behave yourself civil," interposed Dan, pushing the woman aside and getting between them. "'Ere, mate, you got to 'ave another drink along o' me. I'll turn her out arter the fiddler, if she ain't civil."

"I won'ave another drink," said Marr, thickly, struggling unsteadily to his feet and dropping back instantly to his chair. "I won'avanother."

"We'll see about that," replied Dan. "'Ere, you get out," he went on, addressing the woman as he hauled her up by the shoulders. "You get out; we're goin' to be comf'table together, us two an' 'im. Out ye go!" He thrust her toward the door and opened it. "I'm sick o' foolin' about," he added in an angry undertone; "quick's the word."

"O no, Dan – don't," the woman pleaded, whispering on the landing. "Not that way! Not again! I'll get it from him easy in a minute! Don't do it, Dan!"

"Shut yer mouth! I ain't askin' you. You shove off a bit."

"Don't, Dan!"

But the door was shut.

"I tell ye I won'avanother!" came Marr's voice from within.

The woman went down the stairs, her gross face drawn as though she wept, though her eyes were dry. At the door she looked back with something like a shudder, and then turned her steps down the street.

The two partners in Viney and Marr were separated indeed; but now it was by something more than half a mile of streets.

CHAPTER III

STEPHEN'S TALE

I had never been home with Grandfather Nat before. I fancy that some scruples of my mother's, in the matter of the neighbourhood and the character of the company to be seen and heard at the Hole in the Wall, had hitherto kept me from the house, and even from the sugary elysium of the London Dock. Now I was going there at last, and something of eager anticipation overcame the sorrow of the day.

We went in an omnibus, which we left in Commercial Road. Here my grandfather took order to repair my disappointment in the matter of pear-drops; and we left the shop with such a bagful that it would not go into the accustomed pocket at all. A little way from this shop, and on the opposite side of the way, stood a house which my mother had more than once pointed out to me already; and as we came abreast of it now, Grandfather Nat pointed it out also. "Know who lives there, Stevy?" he asked.

"Yes," I said; "Mr. Viney, that father's ship belongs to."

There was a man sitting on the stone baluster by the landing of the front steps, having apparently just desisted from knocking at the door. He was pale and agitated, and he slapped his leg distractedly with a folded paper.

"Why," said my grandfather, "that's Crooks, the ship-chandler. He looks bad; wonder what's up?"

With that the door opened, and a servant-girl, in bonnet and shawl, emerged with her box, lifting and dragging it as best she might. The man rose and spoke to her, and I supposed that he was about to help. But at her answer he sank back on the balustrade, and she hauled the box to the pavement by herself. The man looked worse than ever, now, and he moved his head from side to side; so that it struck me that it might be that his mother also was dead; perhaps to-day; and at the thought all the flavour went from the pear-drop in my mouth.

We turned up a narrow street which led us to a part where the river plainly was nearer at every step; for well I knew the curious smell that grew as we went, and that had in it something of tar, something of rope and junk, something of ships' stores, and much of a blend of unknown outlandish merchandise. We met sailors, some with parrots and accordions, and many with undecided legs; and we saw more of the hang-dog fellows who were not sailors, though they dressed in the same way, and got an inactive living out of sailors, somehow. They leaned on posts, they lurked in foul entries, they sat on sills, smoking; and often one would accost and hang to a passing sailor, with a grinning, trumped-up cordiality that offended and repelled me, child as I was. And there were big, coarse women, with flaring clothes, and hair that shone with grease; though for them I had but a certain wonder; as for why they all seemed to live near the docks; why they all grew so stout; and why they never wore bonnets.

As we went where the street grew fouler and more crooked, and where dark entries and many turnings gave evidence of the complication of courts and alleys about us, we heard a hoarse voice crooning a stave of a sea-song, with the low scrape of a fiddle striking in here and there, as it were at random. And presently there turned a corner ahead and faced toward us a blind man, with his fiddle held low against his chest, and his face lifted upward, a little aside. He checked at the corner to hit the wall a couple of taps with the stick that hung from his wrist, and called aloud, with fouler words than I can remember or could print: "Now then, damn ye! Ain't there ne'er a Christian sailor-man as wants a toon o' George? Who'll 'ave a toon o' George? Ain't ye got no money, damn ye? Not a brown for pore blind George? What a dirty mean lot it is! Who'll 'ave a 'ornpipe? Who'll 'ave a song o' pore George?.. O damn y' all!"

And so, with a mutter and another tap of the stick, he came creeping along, six inches at a step, the stick dangling loose again, and the bow scraping the strings to the song: —

Fire on the fore-top, fire on the bow,
Fire on the main-deck, fire down below!
Fire! fire! fire down below!
Fetch a bucket o' water; fire down below!

The man's right eye was closed, but the left was horribly wide and white and rolling, and it quite unpleasantly reminded me of a large china marble that lay at that moment at the bottom of my breeches pocket, under some uniform buttons, a key you could whistle on, a brass knob from a fender, and a tangle of string. So much indeed was I possessed with this uncomfortable resemblance in later weeks, when I had seen Blind George often, and knew more of him, that at last I had no choice but to fling the marble into the river; though indeed it was something of a rarity in marbles, and worth four "alleys" as big as itself.

My grandfather stopped his talk as we drew within earshot of the fiddler; but blind men's ears are keen beyond the common. The bow dropped from the fiddle, and Blind George sang out cheerily: "Why, 'ere comes Cap'en Nat, 'ome from the funeral; and got 'is little grandson what 'e's goin' to take care of an' bring up so moral in 'is celebrated 'ouse o' call!" All to my extreme amazement: for what should this strange blind man know of me, or of my mother's funeral?

Grandfather Nat seemed a little angry. "Well, well," he said, "your ears are sharp, Blind George; they learn a lot as ain't your business. If your eyes was as good as your ears you'd ha' had your head broke 'fore this – a dozen times!"

"If my eyes was as good as my ears, Cap'en Nat Kemp," the other retorted, "there's many as wouldn't find it so easy to talk o' breakin' my 'ed. Other people's business! Lord! I know enough to 'ang some of 'em, that's what I know! I could tell you some o' *your* business if I liked, – some as you don't know yourself. Look 'ere! You bin to a funeral. Well, it ain't the last funeral as 'll be wanted in your family; see? The kid's mother's gone; don't you be too sure 'is father's safe! I bin along o' some one you know, an' 'e don't look like lastin' for ever, 'e don't; 'e ain't in 'ealthy company."

Grandfather Nat twitched my sleeve, and we walked on.

"Awright!" the blind man called after us, in his tone of affable ferocity. "Awright, go along! You'll see things, some day, near as well as I can, what's blind!"

"That's a bad fellow, Stevy," Grandfather Nat said, as we heard the fiddle and the song begin again. "Don't you listen to neither his talk nor his songs. Somehow it don't seem nat'ral to see a blind man such a bad 'un. But a bad 'un he is, up an' down."

I asked how he came to know about the funeral, and especially about my coming to Wapping – a thing I had only learned of myself an hour before. My grandfather said that he had probably learned of the funeral from somebody who had been at the Hole in the Wall during the day, and had asked the reason of the landlord's absence; and as to myself, he had heard my step, and guessed its meaning instantly. "He's a keen sharp rascal, Stevy, an' he makes out all of parties' business he can. He knew your father was away, an' he jumped the whole thing at once. That's his way. But I don't stand him; he don't corne into my house barrin' he comes a customer, which I can't help."

Of the meaning of the blind man's talk I understood little. But he shocked me with a sense of insult, and more with one of surprise. For I had entertained a belief, born of Sunday-school stories, that blindness produced saintly piety – unless it were the piety that caused the blindness – and that in any case a virtuous meekness was an essential condition of the affliction. So I walked in doubt and cogitation.

And so, after a dive down a narrower street than any we had yet traversed (it could scarce be dirtier), and a twist through a steep and serpentine alley, we came, as it grew dusk, to the Hole in

the Wall. Of odd-looking riverside inns I can remember plenty, but never, before or since, have I beheld an odder than this of Grandfather Nat's. It was wooden and clap-boarded, and, like others of its sort, it was everywhere larger at top than at bottom. But the Hole in the Wall was not only top-heavy, but also most alarmingly lopsided. By its side, and half under it, lay a narrow passage, through which one saw a strip of the river and its many craft, and the passage ended in Hole-in-the-Wall Stairs. All of the house that was above the ground floor on this side rested on a row of posts, which stood near the middle of the passage; and the burden of these posts, twisted, wavy, bulging, and shapeless, hung still more toward the opposite building; while the farther side, bounded by a later brick house, was vertical, as though a great wedge, point downward, had been cut away to permit the rise of the newer wall. And the effect was as of a reeling and toppling of the whole construction away from its neighbour, and an imminent downfall into the passage. And when, later, I examined the side looking across the river, supported on piles, and bulging and toppling over them also, I decided that what kept the Hole in the Wall from crashing into the passage was nothing but its countervailing inclination to tumble into the river.

Painted large over the boards of the front, whose lapped edges gave the letters ragged outlines, were the words THE HOLE IN THE WALL; and below, a little smaller, NATHANIEL KEMP. I felt a certain pride, I think, in the importance thus given the family name, and my esteem of my grandfather increased proportionably with the size of the letters.

There was a great noise within, and Grandfather Nat, with a quick look toward the entrance, grunted angrily. But we passed up the passage and entered by a private door under the posts. This door opened directly into the bar parlour, the floor whereof was two steps below the level of the outer paving; and the size whereof was about thrice that of a sentry-box.

The din of a quarrel and a scuffle came from the bar, and my grandfather, thrusting me into a corner, and giving me his hat, ran out with a roar like that of a wild beast. At the sound the quarrel hushed in its height. "What's this?" my grandfather blared, with a thump on the counter that made the pots jump. "What sort of a row's this in my house? Damme, I'll break y' in halves, every mother's son of ye!"

I peeped through the glass partition, and saw, first, the back of the potman's head (for the bar-floor took another drop) and beyond that and the row of beer-pulls, a group of rough, hulking men, one with blood on his face, and all with an odd look of sulky guilt.

"Out you go!" pursued Grandfather Nat, "every swab o' ye! Can't leave the place not even to go to – not for nothin', without a row like this, givin' the house a bad name! Go on, Jim Crute! Unless I'm to chuck ye!"

The men had begun filing out awkwardly, with nothing but here and there: "Awright, guv'nor" – "Awright, cap'en." "Goin', ain't I?" and the like. But one big ruffian lagged behind, scowling and murmuring rebelliously.

In a flash Grandfather Nat was through the counter-wicket. With a dart of his long left arm he had gripped the fellow's ear and spun him round with a wrench that I thought had torn the ear from the head; and in the same moment had caught him by the opposite wrist, so as to stretch the man's extended arm, elbow backward, across his own great chest; a posture in which the backward pull against the elbow joint brought a yell of agony from the victim. Only a man with extraordinarily long arms could have done the thing exactly like that. The movement was so savagely sudden that my grandfather had kicked open the door and flung Jim Crute headlong into the street ere I quite understood it; when there came a check in my throat and tears in my eyes to see the man so cruelly handled.

Grandfather Nat stood a moment at the door, but it seemed that his customer was quelled effectually, for presently he turned inward again, with such a grim scowl as I had never seen before. And at that a queer head appeared just above the counter – I had supposed the bar to be wholly cleared – and a very weak and rather womanish voice said, in tones of over-inflected indignation: "Serve 'em

right, Cap'en Kemp, I'm sure. Lot o' impudent vagabones! Ought to be ashamed o' theirselves, that they ought. Pity every 'ouse ain't kep' as strict as this one is, that's what I say!"

And the queer head looked round the vacant bar with an air of virtuous defiance, as though anxious to meet the eye of any so bold as to contradict.

It was anything but a clean face on the head, and it was overshadowed by a very greasy wideawake hat. Grubbiness and unhealthy redness contended for mastery in the features, of which the nose was the most surprising, wide and bulbous and knobbed all over; so that ever afterward, in any attempt to look Mr. Cripps in the face, I found myself wholly disregarding his eyes, and fixing a fascinated gaze on his nose; and I could never recall his face to memory as I recalled another, but always as a Nose, garnished with a fringe of inferior features. The face had been shaved – apparently about a week before; and by the sides hung long hair, dirtier to look at than the rest of the apparition.

My grandfather gave no more than a glance in the direction of this little man, passed the counter and re-joined me, pulling off his coat as he came. Something of my tingling eyes and screwed mouth was visible, I suppose, for he stooped as he rolled up his shirt-sleeves and said: "Why, Stevy boy, what's amiss?"

"You – you – hurt the man's ear," I said, with a choke and a sniff; for till then Grandfather Nat had seemed to me the kindest man in the world.

Grandfather Nat looked mightily astonished. He left his shirt-sleeve where it was, and thrust his fingers up in his hair behind, through the grey and out at the brown on top. "What?" he said. "Hurt 'im? Hurt 'im? Why, s'pose I did? He ain't a friend o' yours, is he, young 'un?"

I shook my head and blinked. There was a gleam of amusement in my grandfather's grim face as he sat in a chair and took me between his knees. "Hurt 'im?" he repeated. "Why, Lord love ye, *I'd* get hurt if I didn't hurt some of 'em, now an' then. They're a rough lot – a bitter bad lot round here, an' it's hurt or be hurt with them, Stevy. I got to frighten 'em, my boy – an' I do it, too."

I was passing my fingers to and fro in the matted hair on my grandfather's arm, and thinking. He seemed a very terrible man now, and perhaps something of a hero; for, young as I was, I was a boy. So presently I said, "Did you ever kill a man, Gran'fa' Nat?"

CHAPTER IV

STEPHEN'S TALE

Many small matters of my first few hours at the Hole in the Wall were impressed on me by later events. In particular I remember the innocent curiosity with which I asked: "Did you ever kill a man, Gran'fa' Nat?"

There was a twitch and a frown on my grandfather's face, and he sat back as one at a moment's disadvantage. I thought that perhaps he was trying to remember. But he only said, gruffly, and with a quick sound like a snort: "Very nigh killed myself once or twice, Stevy, in my time," and rose hastily from his chair to reach a picture of a ship that was standing on a shelf. "There," he said, "that's a new 'un, just done; pretty picter, ain't it? An' that there," pointing to another hanging on the wall, "that's the *Juno*, what your father's on now."

I had noticed that the walls, both of the bar and of the bar-parlour, were plentifully hung with paintings of ships; ships becalmed, ships in full sail, ships under bare spars; all with painful blue skies over them, and very even-waved seas beneath; and ships in storms, with torn sails, pursued by rumbustious piles of sooty cloud, and pelted with lengths of scarlet lightning. I fear I should not have recognised my father's ship without help, but that was probably because I had only seen it, months before, lying in dock, battered and dingy, with a confusion of casks and bales about the deck, and naked yards dangling above; whereas in the picture (which was a mile too small for the brig) it was booming along under a flatulent mountain of clean white sail, and bulwarks and deck-fittings were gay with lively and diversified colour.

I said something about its being a fine ship, or a fine picture, and that there were a lot of them.

"Ah," he said, "they do mount up, one arter another. It's one gentleman as did 'em all – him out in the bar now, with the long hair. Sometimes I think I'd rather a-had money; but it's a talent, that's what it is!"

The artist beyond the outer bar had been talking to the potman. Now he coughed and said: "Ha – um! Cap'en Kemp, sir! Cap'en Kemp! No doubt as you've 'eard the noos to-day?"

"No," said Grandfather Nat, finishing the rolling of his shirt-sleeves as he stepped down into the bar; "not as I know on. What is it?"

"Not about Viney and Marr?"

"No. What about 'em?"

Mr. Cripps rose on his toes with the importance of his information, and his eyes widened to a moment's rivalry with his nose. "Gone wrong," he said, in a shrill whisper that was as loud as his natural voice. "Gone wrong. Unsolvent. Cracked up. Broke. Busted, in a common way o' speakin'." And he gave a violent nod with each synonym.

"No," said Grandfather Nat; "surely not Viney and Marr?"

"Fact, Cap'en; I can assure you, on 'igh a'thority. It's what I might call the universal topic in neighbourin' circles, an' a gen'ral subjick o' local discussion. You'd 'a 'eard it 'fore this if you'd bin at 'ome."

My grandfather whistled, and rested a hand on a beer-pull.

"Not a stiver for nobody, they say," Mr. Cripps pursued, "not till they can sell the wessels. What there was loose Marr's bolted with; or, as you might put it, absconded; absconded with the proceeds. An' gone abroad, it's said."

"I see the servant gal bringin' out her box from Viney's just now," said Grandfather Nat. "An' Crooks the ship-chandler was on the steps, very white in the gills, with a paper. Well, well! An' you say Marr's bolted?"

"Absconded, Cap'en Kemp; absconded with the proceeds; 'opped the twig. Viney says 'e's robbed 'im as well as the creditors, but I 'ear some o' the creditors' observation is 'gammon.' An' they say the wessels is pawned up to their r'yals. Up to their r'yals!"

"Well," commented my grandfather, "I wouldn't ha' thought it. The *Juno* was that badly found, an' they did everything that cheap, I thought they made money hand over fist."

"Flyin' too 'igh, Cap'en Kemp, flyin' too 'igh. You knowed Viney long 'fore 'e elevated hisself into a owner, didn't you? What was he then? Why, 'e was your mate one voy'ge, wasn't he?"

"Ay, an' more."

"So I've 'eard tell. Well, arter that surely 'e was flyin' too 'igh! An' now Marr's absconded with the proceeds!"

The talk in the bar went on, being almost entirely the talk of Mr. Cripps; who valued himself on the unwonted importance his news gave him, and aimed at increasing it by saying the same thing a great many times; by saying it, too, when he could, in terms and phrases that had a strong flavour of the Sunday paper. But as for me, I soon ceased to hear, for I discovered something of greater interest on the shelf that skirted the bar-parlour. It was a little model of a ship in a glass case, and it was a great marvel to me, with all its standing and running rigging complete, and a most ingenious and tumultuous sea about it, made of stiff calico cockled up into lumps and ridges, and painted the proper colour. Much better than either of the two we had at home, for these latter were only half-models, each nothing but one-half of a little ship split from stem to stern, and stuck against a board, on which were painted sky, clouds, seagulls, and (in one case) a lighthouse; an exasperating make-believe that had been my continual disappointment.

But this was altogether so charming and delightful and real, and the little hatches and cuddy-houses so thrilled my fancy, that I resolved to beg of my grandfather to let me call the model my own, and sometimes have the glass case off. So I was absorbed while the conversation in the bar ranged from the ships and their owners to my father, and from him to me; as was plain when my grandfather called me.

"Here he is," said my grandfather, with a deal of pride in his voice, putting his foot on a stool and lifting me on his knee. "Here he is, an' a plucked 'un; ain't ye, Stevy?" He rubbed his hand over my head, as he was fond of doing. "Plucked? Ah! Why, he was agoin' to keep house all by hisself, with all the pluck in life, till his father come home! Warn't ye, Stevy boy? But he's come along o' me instead, an' him an' me's goin' to keep the Hole in the Wall together, ain't we? Pardners: eh, Stevy?"

I think I never afterwards saw my grandfather talking so familiarly with his customers. I perceived now that there was another in the bar in addition to Mr. Cripps; a pale, quiet, and rather ragged man who sat in an obscure corner with an untouched glass of liquor by him.

"Come," said my grandfather, "have one with me, Mr. Cripps, an' drink the new pardner's health. What is it? An' you – you drink up too, an' have another." This last order Grandfather Nat flung at the man in the corner, just in the tones in which I had heard a skipper on a ship tell a man to "get forrard lively" with a rope fender, opposite our quay at Blackwall.

"I'm sure 'ere's wishin' the young master every 'ealth an' 'appiness," said Mr. Cripps, beaming on me with a grin that rather frightened than pleased me, it twisted the nose so. "Every 'ealth and 'appiness, I'm sure!"

The pale man in the corner only looked up quickly, as if fearful of obtruding himself, gulped the drink that had been standing by him, and receiving another, put it down untasted where the first had stood.

"That ain't drinkin' a health," said my grandfather, angrily. "There – that's it!" and he pointed to the new drink with the hand that held his own.

The pale man lifted it hurriedly, stood up, looked at me and said something indistinct, gulped the liquor and returned the glass to the counter; whereupon the potman, without orders, instantly refilled it, and the man carried it back to his corner and put it down beside him, as before.

I began to wonder if the pale man suffered from some complaint that made it dangerous to leave him without a drink close at hand, ready to be swallowed at a moment's notice. But Mr. Cripps blinked, first at his own glass and then at the pale man's; and I fancy he thought himself unfairly treated.

Howbeit his affability was unconquerable. He grinned and snapped his fingers playfully at me, provoking my secret indignation; since that was what people did to please babies.

"An' a pretty young gent 'e is too," said Mr. Cripps, "of considerable personal attractions. Goin' to bring 'im up to the trade, I s'pose, Cap'en Kemp?"

"Why, no," said Grandfather Nat, with some dignity. "No. Something better than that, I'm hopin'. Pardners is all very well for a bit, but Stevy's goin' to be a cut above his poor old gran'father, if I can do it. Eh, boy?" He rubbed my head again, and I was too shy, sitting there in the bar, to answer. "Eh, boy? Boardin' school an' a gentleman's job for this one, if the old man has his way."

Mr. Cripps shook his head sagaciously, and could plainly see that I was cut out for a statesman. He also lifted his empty glass, looked at it abstractedly, and put it down again. Nothing coming of this, he complimented my personal appearance once more, and thought that my portrait should certainly be painted, as a memorial in my future days of greatness.

This notion seemed to strike my grandfather rather favourably, and he forthwith consulted a slate which dangled by a string; during his contemplation of which, with its long rows of strokes, Mr. Cripps betrayed a certain anxious discomfort. "Well," said Grandfather Nat at length, "you are pretty deep in, you know, an' it might as well be that as anything else. But what about that sign? Ain't I ever goin' to get that?"

Mr. Cripps knitted his brows and his nose, turned up his eyes and shook his head. "It ain't come to me yet, Cap'en Kemp," he said; "not yet. I'm still waiting for what you might call an inspiration. But when it comes, Cap'en Kemp – when it comes! Ah! you'll 'ave a sign then! Sich a sign! You'll 'ave sich a sign as'll attract the 'ole artistic feelin' of Wapping an' surroundin' districks of the metropolis, I assure you. An' the signs on the other 'ouses – phoo!" Mr. Cripps made a sweep of the hand, which I took to indicate generally that all other publicans, overwhelmed with humiliation, would have no choice but straightway to tear down their own signs and bury them.

"Umph! but meanwhile I haven't got one at all," objected Grandfather Nat; "an' they have."

"Ah, yes, sir – some sort o' signs. But done by mere jobbers, and poor enough too. My hart, Cap'en Kemp – I respect my hart, an' I don't rush at a job like that. It wants conception, sir, a job like that – conception. The common sort o' sign's easy enough. You go at it, an' you do it or hexicute it, an' when it's done or hexicuted – why there it is. A ship, maybe, or a crown, or a Turk's 'ed or three cats an' a fryin' pan. Simple enough – no plannin', no composition, no invention. But a 'ole in a wall, Cap'en Kemp – it takes a hartist to make a picter o' that; an' it takes study, an' meditation, an' invention!"

"Simplest thing o' the lot," said Captain Nat. "A wall, an' a hole in it. Simplest thing o' the lot!"

"As you observe, Cap'en Kemp, it may seem simple enough; that's because you're thinkin' o' subjick, instead o' treatment. A common jobber, if you'll excuse my sayin' it, 'ud look at it just in that light – a wall with a 'ole in it, an' 'e'd give it you, an' p'rhaps you'd be satisfied with it. But I soar 'igher, sir, 'igher. What I shall give you'll be a 'ole in the wall to charm the heye and delight the intelleck, sir. A dramatic 'ole in the wall, sir, a hepic 'ole in the wall; a 'ole in the wall as will elevate the mind and stimulate the noblest instincts of the be'older. Cap'en Kemp, I don't 'esitate to say that my 'ole in the wall, when you get it, will be – ah! it'll be the moral palladium of Wapping!"

"When I get it," my grandfather replied with a chuckle, "anything might happen without surprisin' me. I think p'rhaps I might be so startled as to forget the bit you've had on account, an' pay full cash."

Mr. Cripps's eyes brightened at the hint. "You're always very 'andsome in matters o' business, Cap'en Kemp," he said, "an' I always say so. Which reminds me, speakin' of 'andsome things. This

morning goin' to see my friend as keeps the mortuary, I see as 'andsome a bit o' panel for to paint a sign as ever I come across. A lovely bit o' stuff to be sure – enough to stimulate anybody's artistic invention to look at it, that it was. Not dear neither – particular moderate in fact. I'm afraid it may be gone now; but if I'd 'a 'ad the money – "

A noise of trampling and singing without neared the door, and with a bang and a stagger a party of fresh customers burst in and swept Mr. Cripps out of his exposition. Two were sun-browned sailors, shouting and jovial, but the rest, men and women, sober and villainous in their mock jollity, were land-sharks plain to see. The foremost sailor drove against Mr. Cripps, and having almost knocked him down, took him by the shoulders and involved him in his flounderings; apologising, meanwhile, at the top of his voice, and demanding to know what Mr. Cripps would drink. Whereupon Grandfather Nat sent me back to the bar-parlour and the little ship, and addressed himself to business and the order of the bar.

And so he was occupied for the most of the evening. Sometimes he sat with me and taught me the spars and rigging of the model, sometimes I peeped through the glass at the business of the house. The bar remained pretty full throughout the evening, in its main part, and my grandfather ruled its frequenters with a strong voice and an iron hand.

But there was one little space partitioned off, as it might be for the better company: which space was nearly always empty. Into this quieter compartment I saw a man come, rather late in the evening, furtive and a little flustered. He was an ugly ruffian with a broken nose; and he was noticeable as being the one man I had seen in my grandfather's house who had no marks of seafaring or riverside life about him, but seemed merely an ordinary London blackguard from some unmaritime neighbourhood. He beckoned silently to Grandfather Nat, who walked across and conferred with him. Presently my grandfather left the counter and came into the bar-parlour. He had something in his closed hand, which he carried to the lamp to examine, so that I could see it was a silver watch; while the furtive man waited expectantly in the little compartment. The watch interested me, for the inward part swung clean out from the case, and hung by a single hinge, in a way I had never seen before. I noticed, also, that a large capital letter M was engraved on the back.

Grandfather Nat shut the watch and strode into the bar.

"Here you are," he said aloud, handing it to the broken-nosed man. "Here you are. It seems all right – good enough watch, I should say."

The man was plainly disconcerted – frightened, indeed – by this public observation; and answered with an eager whisper.

"What?" my grandfather replied, louder than ever; "want me to buy it? Not me. This ain't a pawnshop. I don't want a watch; an' if I did, how do I know where you got it?"

Much discomposd by this rebuff, the fellow hurried off. Whereupon I was surprised to see the pale man rise from the corner of the bar, put his drink, still untasted, in a safe place on the counter, beyond the edge of the partition, and hurry out also. Cogitating this matter in my grandfather's arm-chair, presently I fell asleep.

What woke me at length was the loud voice of Grandfather Nat, and I found that it was late, and he was clearing the bar before shutting up. I rubbed my eyes and looked out, and was interested to see that the pale man had come back, and was now swallowing his drink at last before going out after the rest. Whereat I turned again, drowsily enough, to the model ship.

But a little later, when Grandfather Nat and I were at supper in the bar-parlour, and I was dropping to sleep again, I was amazed to see my grandfather pull the broken-nosed man's watch out of his pocket and put it in a tin cash-box. At that I rubbed my eyes, and opened them so wide on the cash-box, that Grandfather Nat said, "Hullo, Stevy! Woke up with a jump? Time you was in bed."

CHAPTER V IN THE HIGHWAY

The Hole in the Wall being closed, its customers went their several ways; the sailors, shouting and singing, drifting off with their retinue along Wapping Wall toward Ratcliff; Mr. Cripps, fuller than usual of free drinks – for the sailors had come a long voyage and were proportionally liberal – scuffling off, steadily enough, on the way that led to Limehouse; for Mr. Cripps had drunk too much and too long ever to be noticeably drunk. And last of all, when the most undecided of the stragglers from Captain Nat Kemp's bar had vanished one way or another, the pale, quiet man moved out from the shadow and went in the wake of the noisy sailors.

The night was dark, and the streets. The lamps were few and feeble, and angles, alleys and entries were shapes of blackness that seemed more solid than the walls about them. But instead of the silence that consorts with gloom, the air was racked with human sounds; sounds of quarrels, scuffles, and brawls, far and near, breaking out fitfully amid the general buzz and whoop of discordant singing that came from all Wapping and Ratcliff where revellers rolled into the open.

A stone's throw on the pale man's way was a swing bridge with a lock by its side, spanning the channel that joined two dock-basins. The pale man, passing along in the shadow of the footpath, stopped in an angle. Three policemen were coming over the bridge in company – they went in threes in these parts – and the pale man, who never made closer acquaintance with the police than he could help, slunk down by the bridge-foot, as though designing to make the crossing by way of the narrow lock; no safe passage in the dark. But he thought better of it, and went by the bridge, as soon as the policemen had passed.

A little farther and he was in Ratcliff Highway, where it joined with Shadwell High Street, and just before him stood Paddy's Goose. The house was known by that name far beyond the neighbourhood, among people who were unaware that the actual painted sign was the White Swan. Paddy's Goose was still open, for its doors never closed till one; though there were a few houses later even than this, where, though the bars were cleared and closed at one, in accordance with Act of Parliament, the doors swung wide again ten minutes later. There was still dancing within at Paddy's Goose, and the squeak of fiddles and the thump of feet were plain to hear. The pale man passed on into the dark beyond its lights, and soon the black mouth of Blue Gate stood on his right.

Blue Gate gave its part to the night's noises, and more; for a sudden burst of loud screams – a woman's – rent the air from its innermost deeps; screams which affected the pale man not at all, nor any other passenger; for it might be murder or it might be drink, or sudden rage or fear, or a quarrel; and whatever it might be was common enough in Blue Gate.

Paddy's Goose had no monopoly of music, and the common plenty of street fiddlers was the greater as the early houses closed. Scarce eighty yards from Blue Gate stood Blind George, fiddling his hardest for a party dancing in the roadway. Many were looking on, drunk or sober, with approving shouts; and every face was ghastly phosphorescent in the glare of a ship's blue-light that a noisy negro flourished among the dancers. Close by, a woman and a man were quarrelling in the middle of a group; but the matter had no attention till of a sudden it sprang into a fight, and the man and another were punching and wrestling in a heap, bare to the waist. At this the crowd turned from the dancers, and the negro ran yelping to shed his deathly light on the new scene.

The crowd howled and scrambled, and a drunken sailor fell in the mud. Quick at the chance, a ruffian took him under the armpits and dragged him from among the trampling feet to a near entry, out of the glare. There he propped his prey, with many friendly words, and dived among his pockets. The sailor was dazed, and made no difficulty; till the thief got to the end of the search in a trouser pocket, and thence pulled a handful of silver. With that the victim awoke to some sense of affairs,

and made a move to rise; but the other sprang up and laid him over with a kick on the head, just as the pale man came along. The thief made off, leaving a few shillings and sixpences on the ground, which the pale man instantly gathered up. He looked from the money to the man, who lay insensible, with blood about his ear; and then from the man to the money. Then he stuffed some few of the shillings into the sailor's nearest pocket and went off with the rest.

The fight rose and fell, the crowd grew, and the blue light burned down. In twenty seconds the pale man was back again. He bent over the bleeding sailor, thrust the rest of the silver into the pocket, and finally vanished into the night. For, indeed, though the pale man was poor, and though he got a living now in a way scarce reputable: yet he had once kept a chandler's shop. He had kept it till neither sand in the sugar nor holes under the weights would any longer induce it to keep him; and then he had fallen wholly from respectability. But he had drawn a line – he had always drawn a line. He had never been a thief; and, with a little struggle, he remembered it now.

Back in Blue Gate the screams had ceased. For on a black stair a large bony man shook a woman by the throat, so that she could scream no more. He cursed in whispers, and threatened her with an end of all noise if she opened her mouth again. "Ye stop out of it all this time," he said, "an' when ye come ye squall enough to bring the slops from Arbour Square!"

"O! O!" the woman gasped. "I fell on it, Dan! I fell on it! I fell on it in the dark!.."

There was nothing commoner in the black streets about the Highway than the sight of two or three men linked by the arms, staggering, singing and bawling. Many such parties went along the Highway that night, many turned up its foul tributaries; some went toward and over the bridge by the lock that was on the way to the Hole in the Wall. But they were become fewer, and the night noises of the Highway were somewhat abated, when a party of three emerged from the mouth of Blue Gate. Of them that had gone before the songs were broken and the voices unmelodious enough; yet no other song sung that night in the Highway was so wild as the song of these men – or rather of two of them, who sang the louder because of the silence of the man between them; and no other voices were so ill-governed as theirs. The man on the right was large, bony and powerful; he on the left was shorter and less to be noticed, except that under some rare and feeble lamp it might have been perceived that his face was an ugly one, with a broken nose. But what reveller so drunk, what drunkard so insensible, what clod so silent as the man they dragged between them? His feet trailed in the mire, and his head, hidden by a ragged hat, hung forward on his chest. So they went, reeling ever where the shadows were thickest, toward the bridge; but in all their reelings there was a stealthy hasting forward, and an anxious outlook that went ill with their song. The song itself, void alike of tune and jollity, fell off altogether as they neared the bridge, and here they went the quicker. They turned down by the bridge foot, though not for the reason the pale man had, two hours before, for now no policeman was in sight; and soon were gone into the black shadow about the lock-head...

It was the deep of the night, and as near quiet as the Highway ever knew; with no more than a cry here or there, a distant fiddle, and the faint hum of the wind in the rigging of ships. Off in Blue Gate the woman sat on the black stair, with her face in her hands, waiting for company before returning to the room where she had fallen over something in the dark.

CHAPTER VI

STEPHEN'S TALE

High under the tiles of the Hole in the Wall, I had at first a night of disturbed sleep. I was in my old familiar cot, which had been brought during the evening, on a truck. But things were strange, and, in particular, my grandfather, who slept on the opposite side of the room, snored so amazingly, and with a sound so unlike anything I had ever heard before, that I feared he must be choking to death, and climbed out of bed, once, to see. There were noises from without too, sometimes of discordant singing, sometimes of quarrels; and once, from a distance, a succession of dreadful screams. Then the old house made curious sounds of its own; twice I was convinced of stealthy steps on the stair, and all night the very walls creaked aloud. So for long, sleepy as I was, I dozed and started and rolled and lay awake, wondering about the little ship in the bar-parlour, and Mr. Cripps, and the pale man, and the watch with the M on it. Also I considered again the matter of my prayers, which I had already discussed with Grandfather Nat, to his obvious perplexity, by candle-light. For I was urgent to know if I must now leave my mother out, and if I might not put my little dead brother in; being very anxious to include them both. My grandfather's first opinion was, that it was not the usual thing; which opinion he expressed with hesitation, and a curious look of the eyes that I wondered at. But I argued that God could bless them just as well in heaven as here; and Grandfather Nat admitted that no doubt there was something in that. Whereupon I desired to know if they would hear if I said in my prayers that I was quite safe with him, at the Hole in the Wall; or if I should rather ask God to tell them. And at that my grandfather stood up and turned away, with a rub and a pat on my head, toward his own bed; telling me to say whatever I pleased, and not to forget Grandfather Nat.

So that now, having said what I pleased, and having well remembered Grandfather Nat, and slept and woke and dozed and woke again, I took solace from his authority and whispered many things to my little dead brother, whom I could never play with: of the little ship in the glass case, and the pictures, and of how I was going to the London Dock to-morrow; and so at last fell asleep soundly till morning.

Grandfather Nat was astir early, and soon I was looking from the window by his bed at the ships that lay so thick in the Pool, tier on tier. Below me I could see the water that washed between the slimy piles on which the house rested, and to the left were the narrow stairs that terminated the passage at the side. Several boats were moored about these stairs, and a waterman was already looking out for a fare. Out in the Pool certain other boats caught the eye as they dodged about among the colliers, because each carried a bright fire amidships, in a brazier, beside a man, two small barrels of beer, and a very large handbell. The men were purlmen, Grandfather Nat told me, selling liquor – hot beer chiefly, in the cold mornings – to the men on the colliers, or on any other craft thereabout. It struck me that the one thing lacking for perfect bliss in most rowing boats was just such a brazier of cosy fire as the purl-boat carried; so that after very little consideration I resolved that when I grew up I would not be a sailor, nor an engine-driver, nor any one of a dozen other things I had thought of, but a purlman.

The staircase would have landed one direct into the bar-parlour but for an enclosing door, which strangers commonly mistook for that of a cupboard. A step as light as mine was possibly a rarity on this staircase; for, coming down before my grandfather, I startled a lady in the bar-parlour who had been doing something with a bottle which involved the removal of the cork; which cork she snatched hastily from a shelf and replaced, with no very favourable regard to myself; and straightway dropped on her knees and went to work with a brush and a dustpan. She was scarce an attractive woman, I thought, being rusty and bony, slack-faced and very red-nosed. She swept the carpet and dusted the shelves with an air of angry contempt for everything she touched, and I got into the bar out of her way

as soon as I could. The potman was flinging sawdust about the floor, and there, in the same corner, sat the same pale, ragged man that was there last night, with the same full glass of liquor – or one like it – by his side: like a trade fixture that had been there all night.

When Grandfather Nat appeared, I learned the slack-faced woman's name. "This here's my little gran'son, Mrs. Grimes," he said, "as is goin' to live here a bit, 'cordin' as I mentioned yesterday."

"Hindeed?" said Mrs. Grimes, with a glance that made me feel more contemptible than the humblest article she had dusted that morning. "Hindeed? Then it'll be more work more pay, Cap'en Kemp."

"Very well, mum," my grandfather replied. "If you reckon it out more work –"

"Ho!" interjected Mrs. Grimes, who could fill a misplaced aspirate with subtle offence; "reckon or not, I s'pose there's another bed to be made? An' buttons to be sewed? An' plates for to be washed? An' dirt an' litter for to be cleared up everywhere? To say nothink o' crumbs – which the biscuit-crumbs in the bar-parlour this mornin' was thick an' shameful!"

I had had biscuits, and I felt a reprobate. "Very well, mum," Grandfather Nat said, peaceably; "we'll make out extry damages, mum. A few days'll give us an idea. Shall we leave it a week an' see how things go?"

"Ham I to consider that a week's notice, Captain Kemp?" Mrs. Grimes demanded, with a distinct rise of voice. "Ham I or ham I not?"

"Notice!" My grandfather was puzzled, and began to look a trifle angry. "Why, damme, who said notice? What –"

"Because notice is as easy give as took, Cap'en Kemp, as I'd 'ave you remember. An' slave I may be though better brought up than slave-drivers any day, but swore at vulgar I won't be, nor trampled like dirt an' litter beneath the feet, an' will not endure it neither!" And with a great toss of the head Mrs. Grimes flounced through the staircase door, and sniffed and bridled her way to the upper rooms.

Her exit relieved my mind; first, because I had a wretched consciousness that I was causing all the trouble, and a dire fear that Grandfather Nat might dislike me for it; and second, because when he looked angry I had a fearful foreboding vision of Mrs. Grimes being presently whirled round by the ear and flung into the street, as Jim Crute had been. But it was not long ere I learned that Mrs. Grimes was one of those persons who grumble and clamour and bully at everything and everybody on principle, finding that, with a concession here and another there, it pays very well on the whole; and so nag along very comfortably through life. As for herself, as I had seen, Mrs. Grimes did not lack the cunning to carry away any fit of virtuous indignation that seemed like to push her employer out of his patience.

My grandfather looked at the bottle that Mrs. Grimes had recorked.

"That rum shrub," he said, "ain't properly mixed. It works in the bottle when it's left standing, an' mounts to the cork. I notice it almost every morning."

The day was bright, and I resigned myself with some impatience to wait for an hour or two till we could set out for the docks. It was a matter of business, my grandfather explained, that he must not leave the bar till a fixed hour – ten o'clock; and soon I began to make a dim guess at the nature of the business, though I guessed in all innocence, and suspected not at all.

Contrary to my evening observation, at this early hour the larger bar was mostly empty, while the obscure compartment at the side was in far greater use than it had been last night. Four or five visitors must have come there, one after another: perhaps half a dozen. And they all had things to sell. Two had watches – one of them was a woman; one had a locket and a boatswain's silver call; and I think another had some silver spoons. Grandfather Nat brought each article into the bar-parlour, to examine, and then returned it to its owner; which behaviour seemed to surprise none of them as it had surprised the man last night; so that doubtless he was a stranger. To those with watches my grandfather said nothing but "Yes, that seems all right," or "Yes, it's a good enough watch, no doubt." But to the man with the locket and the silver call he said, "Well, if ever you want to sell 'em you

might get eight bob; no more"; and much the same to him with the spoons, except that he thought the spoons might fetch fifteen shillings.

Each of the visitors went out with no more ado; and as each went, the pale man in the larger bar rose, put his drink safely on the counter, just beyond the partition, and went out too; and presently he came back, with no more than a glance at Grandfather Nat, took his drink, and sat down again.

At ten o'clock my grandfather looked out of the bar and said to the pale man: "All right – drink up."

Whereupon the pale man – who would have been paler if his face had been washed – swallowed his drink at last, flat as it must have been, and went out; and Grandfather Nat went out also, by the door into the passage. He was gone scarce two minutes, and when he returned he unlocked a drawer below the shelf on which the little ship stood, and took from it the cash box I had seen last night. His back was turned toward me, and himself was interposed between my eyes and the box, which he rested on the shelf; but I heard a jingling that suggested spoons.

So I said, "Did the man go to buy the spoons for you, Gran'fa' Nat?"

My grandfather looked round sharply, with something as near a frown as he ever directed on me. Then he locked the box away hastily, with a gruff laugh. "You won't starve, Stevy," he said, "as long as wits finds victuals. But see here," he went on, becoming grave as he sat and drew me to his knee; "see here, Stevy. What you see here's my business, private business; understand? You ain't a tell-tale, are you? Not a sneak?"

I repudiated the suggestion with pain and scorn; for I was at least old enough a boy to see in sneakery the blackest of crimes.

"No, no, that you ain't, I know," Grandfather Nat went on, with a pinch of my chin, though he still regarded me earnestly. "A plucked 'un's never a sneak. But there's one thing for you to remember, Stevy, afore all your readin' an' writin' an' lessons an' what not. You must never tell of anything you see here, not to a soul – that is, not about me buyin' things. I'm very careful, but things don't always go right, an' I might get in trouble. I'm a straight man, an' I pay for all I have in any line o' trade; I never stole nor cheated not so much as a farden all my life, nor ever bought anything as I *knew* was stole. See?"

I nodded gravely. I was trying hard to understand the reason for all this seriousness and secrecy, but at any rate I was resolved to be no tale-bearer; especially against Grandfather Nat.

"Why," he went on, justifying himself, I fancy, more for his own satisfaction than for my information; "why, even when it's on'y just suspicious I won't buy – except o' course through another party. That's how I guard myself, Stevy, an' every man has a right to buy a thing reasonable an' sell at a profit if he can; that's on'y plain trade. An' yet nobody can't say truthful as he ever sold me anything over that there counter, or anywhere else, barrin' what I have reg'lar of the brewer an' what not. I may look at a thing or pass an opinion, but what's that? Nothin' at all. But we've got to keep our mouths shut, Stevy, for fear o' danger; see? You wouldn't like poor old Grandfather Nat to be put in gaol, would ye?"

The prospect was terrible, and I put my hands about my grandfather's neck and vowed I would never whisper a word.

"That's right, Stevy," the old man answered, "I know you won't if you don't forget yourself – so don't do that. Don't take no notice, not even to me."

There was a knock at the back door, which opened, and disclosed one of the purlmen, who had left his boat in sight at the stairs, and wanted a quart of gin in the large tin can he brought with him. He was a short, red-faced, tough-looking fellow, and he needed the gin, as I soon learned, to mix with his hot beer to make the purl. He had a short conversation with my grandfather when the gin was brought, of which I heard no more than the words "high water at twelve." But as he went down the passage he turned, and sang out: "You got the news, Cap'en, o' course?"

"What? Viney and Marr?"

The man nodded, with a click and a twitch of the mouth. Then he snapped his fingers, and jerked them expressively upward. After which he ejaculated the single word "Marr," and jerked his thumb over his shoulder. By which I understood him to repeat, with no waste of language, the story that it was all up with the firm, and the junior partner had bolted.

"That," said Grandfather Nat, when the man was gone – "that's Bill Stagg, an' he's the on'y purlman as don't come ashore to sleep. Sleeps in his boat, winter an' summer, does Bill Stagg. How'd you like that, Stevy?"

I thought I should catch cold, and perhaps tumble overboard, if I had a bad dream; and I said so.

"Ah well, Bill Stagg don't mind. He was A.B. aboard o' me when Mr. Viney was my mate many years ago, an' a good A.B. too. Bill Stagg, he makes fast somewhere quiet at night, an' curls up snug as a weevil. Mostly under the piles o' this here house, when the wind ain't east. Saves him rent, ye see; so he does pretty well."

And with that my grandfather put on his coat and reached the pilot cap that was his everyday wear.

CHAPTER VII

STEPHEN'S TALE

We walked first to the head of the stairs, where opened a wide picture of the Thames and all its traffic, and where the walls were plastered with a dozen little bills, each headed "Found Drowned," and each with the tale of some nameless corpse under the heading.

"That's my boat, Stevy," said my grandfather, pointing to a little dinghy with a pair of sculls in her; "our boat, if you like, seeing as we're pardners. Now you shall do which you like; walk along to the dock, where the sugar is, or come out in our boat."

It was a hard choice to make. The glory and delight of the part ownership of a real boat dazzled me like another sun in the sky; but I had promised myself the docks and the sugar for such a long time. So we compromised; the docks to-day and the boat to-morrow.

Out in the street everybody seemed to know Grandfather Nat. Those who spoke with him commonly called him Captain Kemp, except a few old acquaintances to whom he was Captain Nat. Loafers and crimps gazed after him and nodded together; and small ship-chandlers gave him good morning from their shop-doors.

A hundred yards from the Hole in the Wall, at a turn, there was a swing bridge and a lock, such as we had by the old house in Blackwall. At the moment we came in hail the men were at the winch, and the bridge began to part in the middle; for a ship was about to change berth to the inner dock. "Come, Stevy," said my grandfather, "we'll take the lock 'fore they open that. Not afraid if I'm with you, are you?"

No, I was not afraid with Grandfather Nat, and would not even be carried. Though the top of the lock was not two feet wide, and was knotted, broken and treacherous in surface and wholly unguarded on one side, where one looked plump down into the foul dock-water; and though on the other side there was but a slack chain strung through loose iron stanchions that staggered in their sockets. Grandfather Nat gripped me by the collar and walked me before him; but relief tempered my triumph when I was safe across; my feet never seemed to have twisted and slipped and stumbled so much before in so short a distance – perhaps because in that same distance I had never before recollected so many tales of men drowned in the docks by falling off just such locks, in fog, or by accidental slips.

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