"Take me in quick," I said. "They're after me."

MARTIN HYDE:

THE DUKE'S MESSENGER

by

John Masefield

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CHAPTER I

I LEAVE HOME

I was born at Oulton, in Suffolk, in the year 1672. I know not the day of my birth, but it was in March, a day or two after the Dutch war began. I know this, because my father, who was the clergyman at Oulton, once told me that in the night of my birth a horseman called upon him, at the rectory, to ask the way to Lowestoft. He was riding from London with letters for the Admiral, he said; but had missed his way somewhere beyond Beccles. He was mud from head to foot (it had been a wet March) but he would not stay to dry himself. He reined in at the door, just as I was born, as though he were some ghost, bringing my life in his saddle bags. Then he shook up his horse, through the mud, towards Lowestoft, so that the splashing of the horse's hoofs must have been the first sound heard by me. The Admiral was gone when he reached Lowestoft, poor man, so all his trouble was wasted. War wastes more energy, I suppose, than any other form of folly. I know that on the East Coast, during all the years of my childhood, this Dutch war wasted the energies of thousands. The villages had to drill men, each village according to its size, to make an army in case the Dutch should land. Long after the

war was over, they drilled thus. I remember them on the field outside the church, drilling after Sunday service, firing at a stump of a tree. Once some wag rang the alarm-bell at night, to fetch them out of their beds. Then there were the smugglers; they, too, were caused by the war. After the fighting there was a bitter feeling against the Dutch. Dutch goods were taxed heavily (spice, I remember, was made very dear thus) to pay for the war. The smugglers began then to land their goods secretly, all along the coast, so that they might avoid the payment of the duty. The farmers were their friends; for they liked to have their gin cheap. Indeed, they used to say that in an agueish place like the fens, gin was a necessity, if one would avoid fever. Often, at night, in the winter, when I was walking home from Lowestoft school, I would see the farmers riding to the rendezvous in the dark, with their horses' hoofs all wrapped up in sacks, to make no noise.

I lived for twelve years at Oulton. I learned how to handle a boat there, how to swim, how to skate, how to find the eggs of the many wild fowl in the reeds. In those days the Broad country was a very wild land, half of it swamp. My father gave me a coracle on my tenth birthday. In this little boat I used to explore the country for many miles, pushing up creeks among the reeds, then watching, in the pools (far out of the world it seemed) for ruffs or wild duck. I was a hardy boy, much older than my years, like so many only children. I used to go away, sometimes, for two or three days together, with my friend John Halmer, Captain Halmer's son, taking some bread, with a blanket or two, as my ship's

stores. We used to paddle far up the Waveney to an island hidden in reeds. We were the only persons who knew of that island. We were like little kings there. We built a rough sort of tent-hut there every summer. Then we would pass the time there deliciously, now bathing, now fishing, but always living on what we caught. John, who was a wild lad, much older than I, used to go among the gipsies in their great winter camp at Oulton. He learned many strange tricks from them. He was a good camp-companion. I think that the last two years of my life at Oulton were the happiest years of my life. I have never cared for dry or hilly countries since. Wherever I have been in the world, I have always longed for the Broads, where the rivers wander among reeds for miles, losing themselves in thickets of reeds. I have always thought tenderly of the flat land, where windmills or churches are the only landmarks, standing up above the mist, in the loneliness of the fens. But when I was nearly thirteen years old (just after the death of Charles the Second) my father died, leaving me an orphan. My uncle, Gabriel Hyde, a man about town, was my only relative. The vicar of Lowestoft wrote to him, on my behalf. A fortnight later (the ways were always very foul in the winter) my uncle's man came to fetch me to London. There was a sale of my father's furniture. His books were sent off to his college at Cambridge by the Lowestoft carrier. Then the valet took me by wherry to Norwich, where we caught a weekly coach to town. That was the last time I ever sailed on the Waveney as a boy, that journey to Norwich. When I next saw the Broads, I was a man of thirty-five. I remember how

strangely small the country seemed to me when I saw it after my wanderings. But this is away from my tale. All that I remember of the coach-ride was my arrival late at night at the London inn, a dark house full of smells, from which the valet led me to my uncle's house.

I lay awake, that first night, much puzzled by the noise, fearing that London would be all streets, a dismal place. When I fell asleep, I was waked continually by chiming bells. In the morning, early, I was roused by the musical calling made by milkmen on their rounds, with that morning's milk for sale. At breakfast my uncle told me not to go into the street without Ephraim, his man; for without a guide, he said, I should get lost. He warned me that there were people in London who made a living by seizing children ("kidnapping" or "trepanning" them, as it was called) to sell to merchant-captains bound for the plantations. "So be very careful, Martin," he said. "Do not talk to strangers." He went for his morning walk after this, telling me that I might run out to play in the garden.

I went out of doors feeling that London must be a very terrible place, if the folk there went about counting all who met them as possible enemies. I was homesick for the Broads, where everybody, even bad men, like the worst of the smugglers, was friendly to me. I hated all this noisy city, so full of dirty jumbled houses. I longed to be in my coracle on the Waveney, paddling along among the reeds, chucking pebbles at the water-rats. But when I went out into the garden I found that even London held something for me, not so good as the Broads, perhaps, but pleasant in its way.

Now before I go further, I must tell you that my uncle's house was one of the old houses in Billingsgate. It stood in a narrow, crowded lane, at the western end of Thames Street, close to the river. Few of the houses thereabouts were old; for the fire of London had nearly destroyed that part of the city, but my uncle's house, with a few more in the same lane, being built of brick, had escaped. The bricks of some of the houses were scorched black. I remember, also, at the corner house, three doors from my uncle's house, the melted end of a water pipe, hanging from the roof like a long leaden icicle, just as it had run from the heat eighteen years before. I used to long for that icicle: it would have made such fine bullets for my sling. I have said that Fish Lane, where my uncle lived, was narrow. It was very narrow. The upper stories of the houses opposite could be touched from my bed-room window with an eight-foot fishing rod. If one leaned well out, one could see right into their upper rooms. You could even hear the people talking in them.

At the back of the house there was a garden of pot-herbs. It sloped down to the river-bank, where there were stairs to the water. The stairs were covered in, so as to form a boat-house, in which (as I learned afterwards) my uncle's skiffs were kept. You may be sure that I lost no time in getting down to the water, after I had breakfasted with my uncle, on the morning after my arrival.

A low stone parapet, topped by iron rails, shut off the garden from the beach. Just beyond the parapet, within slingshot, as I soon proved, was the famous Pool

of London, full of ships of all sorts, some with flags flying. The mild spring sun (it was early in April) made the sight glorious. There must have been a hundred ships there, all marshalled in ranks, at double-moorings, head to flood. Boats full of merchandise were pulling to the wharves by the Custom House. Men were working aloft on the yards, bending or unbending sails. In some ships the sails hung loose, drying in the sun. In others, the men were singing out as they walked round the capstan, hoisting goods from the hold. One of the ships close to me was a beautiful little Spanish schooner, with her name *La Reina* in big gold letters on her transom. She was evidently one of those very fast fruit boats, from the Canary Islands, of which I had heard the seamen at Oulton speak. She was discharging oranges into a lighter, when I first saw her. The sweet, heavy smell of the bruised peels scented the river for many yards.

I was looking at this schooner, wishing that I could pass an hour in her hold, among those delicious boxes, when a bearded man came on deck from her cabin. He looked at the shore, straight at myself as I thought, raising his hand swiftly as though to beckon me to him. A boat pushed out instantly, in answer to the hand, from the garden next to the one in which I stood. The waterman, pulling to the schooner, talked with the man for a moment, evidently settling the amount of his fare. After the haggling, my gentleman climbed into the boat by a little rope-ladder at the stern. Then the boatman pulled away upstream, going on the last of the flood, within twenty yards of where I stood.

I had watched them idly, attracted, in the beginning,

by that sudden raising of the hand. But as they passed me, there came a sudden puff of wind, strong enough to flurry the water into wrinkles. It lifted the gentleman's hat, so that he saved it only by a violent snatch which made the boat rock. As he jammed the hat down he broke or displaced some string or clip near his ears. At any rate his beard came adrift on the side nearest to me. The man was wearing a false beard. He remedied the matter at once, very cleverly, so that I may have been the only witness; but I saw that the boatman was in the man's secret, whatever it was. He pulled hard on his starboard oar, bringing the boat partly across the current, thus screening him from everybody except the workers in the ships. It must have seemed to all who saw him that he was merely pulling to another arch of London Bridge.

I was not sure of the man's face. It seemed handsome; that was all that I could say of it. But I was fascinated by the mystery. I wondered why he was wearing a false beard. I wondered what he was doing in the schooner. I imagined all sorts of romantic plots in which he was taking part. I watched his boat go through the Bridge with the feeling that I was sharing in all sorts of adventures already. There was a fall of water at the Bridge which made the river dangerous there even on a flood tide. I could see that the waves there would be quite enough for such a boat without the most tender handling. I watched to see how they would pass through. Both men stood up, facing forwards, each taking an oar. They worked her through, out of sight, in a very clever fashion; which set me wondering again what this

handsome gentleman might be, who worked a boat so well. I hung about at the end of the garden until dinner time, hoping that they would return. I watched every boat which came downstream, finding a great pleasure in the watermen's skill, for indeed the water at the Bridge was frightful; only a strong nerve could venture on it. But the boat did not come back, though one or two other boats brought people, or goods, to the stairs of the garden beside me. I could not see into the garden; that party wall was too high.

I did not go indoors again till Ephraim came to fetch me, saying that it was time I washed my hands for dinner. I went to my room; but instead of washing my hands, I leaned out of the window to watch a dancing bear which was sidling about in the lane, just below, while his keeper made a noise on the pan-pipes. A little crowd of idlers was gathered round the bear. Some of them were laughing at the bear, some at his keeper. I saw two boys sneaking about among the company; they were evil-looking little ruffians, with that hard look in the eyes which always marks the thoroughly wicked. As I watched, one of them slipped his hand into a man's pocket, then withdrew it, passing something swiftly to his companion, who walked unconcernedly away. I ran out of doors at once, to the man who had been robbed.

"Sir," I said, when he had drawn away from the little crowd. "Have you not been robbed of something?"

He turned to look down on me, searching his pockets with both hands. It gave me a start to see him, for he was the bearded man who had passed me in the

boat that morning. You may be sure that I took a good note of him. He was a handsome, melancholy-looking man, with a beard designed to make him look fairer than he really was.

"Robbed of something?" he repeated in a quiet voice. "Yes, I have been robbed of something." It seemed to me that he turned pale, when he found that he had been robbed. "Did you see it?" he asked. "Don't point. Just describe him to me. No. Don't look round, boy. Tell me without looking round."

"Sir," I said, "do you see two little boys moving about among the people there?"

"Yes," he said.

"It's the boy with the bit of broken pipe in his hat who has the, whatever it was, sir, I'm sure. I saw it all."

"I see," he said. "That's the coverer. Let this be a warning to you, boy, never to stop in a crowd to watch these street-performers. Where were you, when you saw it?"

"Up above there, sir. In that house.

"In Mr. Hyde's house. Do you live there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Since when? Not for long, surely?"

"No, sir. Only since yesterday. I'm Mr. Hyde's nephew."

"Ah! Indeed. And that is your room up there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where do you come from then? You've not been in town before. What is your father?"

"My father's dead, sir. I come from Oulton. My father was rector there."

"Ah," he said quietly. "Now give this penny to the bear-ward."

While I was giving the penny to the keeper, the strange man edged among the lookers-on, apparently watching the bear's antics, till he was just behind the pickpocket's accomplice. Watching his time, he seized the boy from behind by both wrists.

"This boy's a pickpocket," he cried aloud. "Stop that other boy. He's an accomplice." The other boy, who had just taken a purse, started to run, letting the booty drop. A boatman who was going towards the river, tripped him up with an oar so that he fell heavily. He lay still where he had fallen (all the wind was knocked out of him) so that he was easily secured. The boy who had been seized by the bearded man made no attempt to get away. He was too firmly held. Both boys were then marched off to the nearest constable where (after a strict search), they were locked into a cellar till the morrow. The crowd deserted the bear-ward when the cry of pickpockets was raised. They followed my mysterious friend to the constable's house, hoping, no doubt, that they would be able to crowd in to hear the constable bully the boys as he searched them. One or two, who pretended to have missed things, managed to get in. The bearded man told me to come in, as he said that I should be needed as a witness. The others were driven

out into the street, where, I suppose, their monkey-minds soon found other game, a horse fallen down, or a drunken woman in the gutter, to divert their idleness. Such sights seem to attract a London crowd at once.

The boys were strictly searched by the constable. The booty from their pockets was turned out upon the table.

"Now, sir," said the constable to the bearded man, after he had made a note of my story. "What is it they 'ad of you, sir?"

"A shagreen leather pocket-book," said the man. "There it is."

"This one?" said the constable.

"Yes."

"Oh," said the constable, opening the clasps, so that he could examine the writing on the leaves. "What's inside?"

"A lot of figures," said the man. "Sums. Problems in arithmetic."

"Right," said the constable, handing over the book. "Here you are, sir. What name, sir?"

"Edward Jermyn."

"Edward German," the constable repeated. "Where d' you live, sir?"

"At Mr. Scott's in Fish Lane."

"Right, sir," said the constable, writing down the address. "You must appear tomorrow at ten before

Mr. Gatty the magistrate. You, too, young master, to give your evidence."

At this the boys burst out crying, begging us not to appear, using all those deceptive arts which the London thieves practise from childhood. I, who was new to the world's deceits, was touched to the marrow by their seeming misery. The constable roughly silenced them.

"I know you," he said. "I 'ad my eye on you two ever since Christmas. Now you'll go abroad to do a bit of honest work, instead of nickin' pockets. Stow your blubbing now, or I'll give you Mogador Jack." He produced "Mogador Jack," a supple shark's backbone, from behind the door. The tears stopped on the instant.

After this, the bearded man showed me the way back to Fish Lane, where Ephraim (who was at the door, looking out for me) gave me a shrewd scolding, for venturing out without a guide. Mr. Jermyn silenced him by giving him a shilling.

The next day, Mr. Jermyn took me to the magistrate's house, where the two thieves were formally committed for trial. Mr. Jermyn told me that they would probably be transported for seven years, on conviction at the Assizes; but that, as they were young, the honest work abroad, in the plantations, might be the saving of them. "So do not be so sad, Mr. Martin," he said. "You do not know how good a thing you did when you looked out of the window yesterday. Do you know, by the way, how much my book is worth?"

"No, sir," I said.

"Well. It's worth more than the King's crown," he said.

"But I thought it was only sums, sir."

"Yes," he said, with a strange smile. "But some sums have to do with a great deal of money. Now I want you to think tonight of something to the value of twenty pounds or so. I want to give you something as a reward for your smartness. Don't decide at once. Think it over. Here we are at our homes, you see. We live just opposite to each other."

We were standing at this moment in the narrow lane at my uncle's door. As he spoke, he raised his hand in a farewell salute with that dignity of gesture which was in all his movements. On the instant, to my surprise, the door of the house opposite opened slowly, till it was about half open. No one opened it, as I could see; it swung back of itself. After my friend had stepped across the threshold it swung to with a click in the same mysterious way. It was as though it had a knowledge of Mr. Jermyn's mind, as though the raised hand had had a magical power over it. When I went indoors to my uncle's house I was excited. I felt that I was in the presence of something romantic, something mysterious. I liked Mr. Jermyn. He had been very kind. But I kept wondering why he wore a false beard, why his door opened so mysteriously, why he valued a book of sums above the worth of a King's crown. As for his offer of a present, I did not like it, though he had not given me time to say as much. I remembered how indignant the Oulton wherrymen had been when a gentleman offered

them money for saving his daughter's life. I had seen the man robbed, what else could I have done? I could have done no less than tell him. I resolved that I would refuse the gift when next I saw him.

At dinner that day, I was full of Mr. Jermyn, much to my uncle's annoyance.

"Who is this Mr. Jermyn, Martin?" he asked. "I don't know him. Is he a gentleman?"

"Yes, uncle."

"Do you know him, Ephraim?"

"No, sir. I know him by sight, sir. Gentleman who lives over the way, Mr. Hyde."

"That's Mr. Scott's, though."

"No, sir. Mr. Jermyn's been there ever since February."

"But the house is empty."

"The lower floor is furnished, sir."

"Do you know anything of him? Do you know his man?"

"They say he's in the fruit way, sir. In the Spanish trade. His men are Spaniards. They do say he's not quite to be trusted."

"Who says this?" my uncle asked.

"I don't like to mention names, sir," Ephraim said.

"Quite right. Quite right. But what do they say?"

"Very queer things goes on in that 'ouse," said Ephraim. "I don't 'ardly like to say. But they think 'e

raises the devil, sir. Awful noises goes on there. I seen some things myself there, as I don't like to talk of. Well. I saw a black bird as big as a man stand flapping in the window. Then I seen eyes glaring out at the door. They give the 'ouse a bad name, sir; everyone."

"H'm," said my uncle. "What's he like, Martin, this Mr. Jermyn?"

"A tall man, with a beard," I answered. I thought it wrong to mention that I knew the beard to be false. "He's always stroking the bridge of his nose with his hand."

"Ha," my uncle said, as though recognizing the trait. "But with a beard, you tell me?"

"Yes, sir. With a beard."

"H'm," he answered, musing, "I must have a look at this Mr. Jermyn. Remember, Martin, you're to have nothing more to do with him, till I know a little more of what he is. You understand?"

"Yes, uncle."

"One cannot be too careful in this town. I won't allow you in the streets, Martin. No matter who has his pockets picked. I told you that before."

"Please, uncle, may I go on the river, then, if I'm not to go into the street? I'm used to boats."

"Yes. You may do that. But you're not to go on board the ships, mind."

"Beg pardon, sir," Ephraim put in. "The fall at the Bridge is very risky, sir."

"Is it?" said my uncle, testily. "Then of course you can't go in a boat, Martin. You must play in the garden, or read."

CHAPTER II

I LEAVE HOME AGAIN

I THOUGHT Ephraim a pig for putting in that word about the fall. Though I had only known Ephraim for a few days I disliked him perhaps as much as he disliked me. He was angry (I could feel it) at having a boy in the house, after many years of quiet alone with my uncle. I know that when he had occasion to speak to me, he always went away muttering about my being a charity brat who ought to be in the poor-house. Still, like most servants, he vented most of his malice indirectly, as in this hint of his about the river. I rose up from the dinner-table full of rebellion. I would go on the river, I said to myself, fall or no fall. I would see more of Mr. Jermyn, too. I would find out what went on in that house. I would find out everything. In all this, of course, I was very wrong, but having made sure that I was being treated unjustly I felt that I was only doing right in rebelling. So after waiting till Ephraim was in the pantry, washing up the dinner-things with the housemaid, I slipped down the garden to the boat-house. The door was padlocked, as I had feared; but with an old hammer-head I managed to pry off the staple. I felt like a burglar when the lock came off in my hand.

I felt that I was acting deceitfully. Then the thought of Ephraim came over me, making me rebellious to my finger-tips. I would go on the river, I said to myself, I would go aboard all the ships in the Pool. I would show them all that I could handle a boat anywhere. So in a moment my good angel was beaten. I was in the boat-house, prying at the staple of the outer door, like the young rogue that I was. Well, I paid a heavy price for that day of disobedience. It was the most dearly bought day's row I ever heard of.

It took me a few moments to open the outer door. Then, with a thrill of pleasure, such as only those who love the water can feel, I thrust out into the river, on to the last of the ebb, then fast ebbing. The fall under the bridge at that state of the tide was truly terrifying. It roared so loudly that I could hear nothing else. It boiled about the bridge piers so fiercely that I was scared to see it. I had seen the sea in storm; but then one does not put to sea in a storm. This waterfall tumbled daily, even in a calm. I shuddered to think of small boats, caught in the current above it, being drawn down, slowly at first, then with a whirl, till all was whelmed in the tumble below the arches. I saw how hatefully the back wash seemed to saunter back to the fall along the banks. I thought that if I was not careful I might be caught in the back wash, drawn slowly along it by the undertow, till the cataract sank me. As I watched the fall, fascinated, yet scared by it, there came a shooting rush, with shouts of triumph. A four-oared wherry with two passengers shot through the arch over the worst of the water into the quiet of the midstream. They waved to me, evidently

very pleased with their exploit. That set me wondering whether the water were really as bad as it looked. My first feat was to back up cautiously almost to the fall, till my boat was dancing so vigorously that I was spattered all over. Standing up in the boat there, I could see the oily water, like a great arched snake's back, swirl past the arch towards me, bubbleless, almost without a ripple, till it showed all its teeth at once in breaking down. The piers of the arches jutted far out below the fall, like pointed islands. I was about to try to climb on to the top of one from the boat, a piece of madness which would probably have ended in my death, but some boys in one of the houses on the bridge began to pelt me with pebbles, so that I had to sheer off. I pulled down among the shipping, examining every vessel in the Pool. Then I pulled down stream, with the ebb, as far as Wapping, where I was much shocked by the sight of the pirates' gallows, with seven dead men hung in chains together there, for taking the ship *Delight,* so a waterman told me, on the Guinea Coast, the year before. I left my boat at Wapping Stairs, while I went into a pastry-cook's shop to buy cake; for I was now hungry. The pastry-cook was also a vintner. His tables were pretty well crowded with men, mostly seafaring men, who were drinking wine together, talking of politics. I knew nothing whatever about politics, but hearing the Duke of Monmouth named I pricked up my ears to listen. My father had told me, in his last illness, when the news of the death of Charles the Second reached us, that trouble would come to England through this Duke, because, he said, "he will never agree with King James." Many people

(the Duke himself being one of them) believed that this James Scott, Duke of Monmouth, was the son of a very beautiful woman by Charles the Second, who (so the tale went) had married her in his wanderings abroad, while Cromwell ruled in England here. I myself shall ever believe this story. I am quite sure, now, in my own mind, that Monmouth was our rightful King. I have heard accounts of this marriage of Charles the Second from people who were with him in his wanderings. When Charles the Second died (being poisoned, some said, by his brother James, who wished to seize the throne while Monmouth was abroad, unable to claim his rights) James succeeded to the crown. At the time of which I write he had been King for about two months. I did not know anything about his merits as a King; but hearing the name of Monmouth I felt sure, from the first, that I should hear more of what my father had told me.

One of the seamen, a sour-looking, pale-faced man, was saying that Holland was full of talk that the Duke was coming over, to try for the Kingdom. Another said that it wasn't the Duke of Monmouth but the Duke of Argyle that was coming, to try, not for England, but for Scotland. A third said that all this was talk, for how could a single man, without twenty friends in the world, get through a cruising fleet? "How could he do anything, even if he did land?"

"Ah," said another man. "They say that the West is ready to rally round him. That's what they say."

"Well," said the first, raising his cup. "Here's to King

James, I say. England's had enough of civil troubles." The other men drank the toast with applause. It is curious to remember how cautious people were in those troublous days. One could never be sure of your friend's true opinion. It was a time when there were so many spies abroad that everybody was suspicious of his neighbour. I am sure that a good half of that company was disloyal; yet they drank that toast, stamping their feet, as though they would have shed their blood for King James with all the pleasure in life. "Are you for King James, young waterman?" said one of the men to me. "Yes," I said, "I am for the rightful King." At this they all laughed. One of the men said that if there were many like me the Duke of Monmouth might spare himself the trouble of coming over.

I finished my cake quietly, after that. Then, as the tide was not yet making, to help me back up the river, I wandered into Wapping fields, where a gang of beggars camped. They were a dirtier, more troublesome company than the worst of the Oulton gipsies. They crowded round me, whining about their miseries, with the fawning smiles of professional beggars. There were children among them who lied about their wants as glibly as their parents lied. The Oulton beggars had taught me to refuse such people, as being, nearly always, knaves; so I said that I had nothing for them. I felt the hands of these thieves lightly feeling the outsides of my pockets for something worth taking. One of them with a sudden thrust upon me snatched my handkerchief. He tossed it to a friend. As he started to run from me, a young man with an evil, weak face pushed me

backwards with a violent shove. I staggered back, from the push, to fall over a boy who had crouched behind me there, ready to upset me. When I got up, rather shaken from my fall, the dirty gang was scattering to its burrow; for they lived, like beasts, in holes scratched in the ground, thatched over with sacks or old clothes. I hurried back towards Wapping in the hope of finding a constable to recover my handkerchief for me. The constable (when I found him) refused to stir until I made it worth his while. Sixpence was his fee, he said, but he was sure that a handsome young gentleman like myself would not grudge a sixpence to recover a handkerchief. On searching for my purse (in which I had about two shillings) I found that that had gone, too, "nicked" by these thieves. I told the constable that my purse had been stolen.

"Oh," he said. "How much was in it?" I told him.

"Could you describe the man who took it?"

"No." I said. "I did not see the man take it."

"Then how do you know that anybody took it?" Of course I did not know that anybody had taken it; but thought it highly probable. "That won't do here," he said, settling down in his chair to his tobacco. "I'll look into it. If I hear of it, why, next time you come here, you shall have it."

"But my handkerchief," I said.

"Sixpence is my fee," the brute answered. "Do you want to rob a poor man of his earnings? Why, what a rogue you must be, young master." I tried to move him

to recover my handkerchief, but without success. At last, growing weary of the sound of my pipe, as he said, he rounded on me.

"If you don't run away 'ome," he said, "I'll commit you for a nuisance. Think I'm goin' to be bothered by yer. Be off, now."

At that, I set off down to the river. There I found two dirty little boys in my uncle's boat, busy with the dipper, trying to fill her with water. I boxed the ears of one of them, when the other, coming behind me, hit me over the head with the stretcher. I turned sharply, giving him a punch which made his nose bleed. The other, seeing his chance (my back being turned) promptly soused me with the dipper. I saw that I would have to settle one of them at a time, so, paying no attention to the dipper, I followed up my blow on the nose with one or two more, which drove the stretcher-boy out of the boat. The other was a harder lad; who would, perhaps, have beaten me, had not a waterman on the stairs taken my part. He took my enemy by the ear. "Get out of that," he said, giving him a kick. "If I catch you messing boats again, I'll give you Mogador Jack." I pushed off from the stairs then, glad to get away with both oars. My enemies, running along the banks, flung stones at me as long as I was in range. If I had had my sling with me, I would have warmed their legs for them. When I was out of range of their shot, I laid in my oars, so that I could bail. The boys had poured about six inches of water into the boat. If the plug had been less tightly hammered in, they would no doubt have sunk her at her painter by pulling it out. Then I should have been indeed in difficulty. It

took me about twenty minutes to bail the boat clear. As I bailed her, I thought that Londoners must be the most unpleasant people in the world, since, already, in two days, I had met so many knaves. It did not occur to me at the time that I was a young knave, too, to be out in a stolen boat, against orders. I never once thought how well I had been served for my disobedience.

I had an uncomfortable journey upstream, for I was very wet from my sousing. I loitered at the Tower to watch the garrison drilling with the big guns. Then I loitered about among the ships, reading their names, or even climbing their gangways to look at their decks. I lingered a long time at the schooner *La Reina*, partly because she was much the prettiest ship in the Pool, but partly because I was beginning to dread Ephraim. I wondered whether Mr. Jermyn was on board of her. I was half tempted to climb aboard to find out. I clambered partly up her gangway, so that I could peer over her rail. To my surprise, I found that her hatches were battened down as in ships ready for the sea. Her cargo of oranges, that had smelt so sweetly, must have been a blind, for no ship, discharging cargo the day before, could be loaded, ready for sea, within twenty-four hours. Indeed, she was in excellent trim. She was not too light to put to sea. No doubt, I said to myself, she has taken in ballast to equal the weight of oranges sent ashore. But I knew just enough of ships to know that there was some mystery in the business. The schooner could not be the plain fruit-trader for which men took her. As I looked over her rail, noting this, I said to myself that "here is another mystery with which Mr. Jermyn

has to do." I felt a thrill of excitement go through me. I was touching mysterious adventure at half a dozen different points. I felt inclined to creep to the hatchway of the little cabin, to listen there if any plots were being hatched. It was getting duskish by this time, it must have been nearly seven o'clock. Two men came up the cabin hatch together. One of them was Mr. Jermyn, the other a shorter fellow, to whom Mr. Jermyn seemed extremely respectful. I wished not to be seen, so I ducked down nimbly into my boat, drawing her forward by a guess-warp, till I could row without being heard by them. I heard Mr. Jermyn calling to a waterman; so very swiftly I paddled behind other ships in the tier, without being observed. Then I paddled back to my uncle's boat-house, the door of which, to my horror, was firmly fastened against me.

CHAPTER III

I LEAVE HOME A THIRD TIME

I MUST have made some little noise at the door, trying to get in. At any rate, Ephraim, who was waiting for such a signal, came forward with a churlish glee to rate me.

"So you're come back, Mr. Martin," he said. "These are nice carryings-on for a young gentleman." I thought that I might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb. Ephraim's tone jarred upon me, so I told him to shut up, as I didn't want any of his jaw. This rather staggered him, so I told him further to open the boat-house, instead of standing like a stock, as I wanted to moor the boat. He opened the door for me, glowering at me moodily. "Mr. Hyde shall know of this," he said when all was secured. He caught me by the arm to drag me out of the boat-house; so I, expecting this, rapped him shrewdly with the stretcher on the elbow. I thought for a moment that he would beat me. I could see his face very fierce in the dusk. I heard his teeth gritting. Then fear of my uncle restrained him. All that he said was, "If I 'ad my way I'd 'ave it out of you for this. A good sound whippin's

what you want." "Is it?" I asked contemptuously. "Lock the door."

Ephraim left me in the sitting-room while he made his report to my uncle. It was not a long report. He returned in a few minutes to say that I was to be locked into my room without supper. "Mr. 'Ide is in a fine taking," he said. "Per'aps 'e'll knock some of your pride out of you." I made no answer, but let him march me to my room, to the execution of the sentence. "There," he said, through the door, as he turned the key on me. "Per'aps that'll bring you to your senses."

"Ephraim the stiff-neck!" I answered loudly. "Old Ephraim Stiff-neck! Stiff-neck!"

"Ah," he answered, clumping down the corridor. He was thinking how small I should sing when, in the morning, he gave me the option of apologizing to him, or going without breakfast.

It was pretty dark by this time. Fish Lane was as quiet as a country road. No one was stirring there. I thought that, as my uncle would shortly go to supper, I might soon venture out by the window, high up as I was, to buy myself some food in the town. I liked the notion; but when I came to look down from the window it seemed a giddy height from the pavement. Going down would be easy; but getting back would be quite another matter. Thinking it over, I remembered that I had seen a short gardener's ladder hooked to the garden wall. If I could make a rope, by which to let myself down, I could, I thought, make use of this ladder to get back by, for it would cover nearly half the height

to my window sill, a full thirty feet from the ground. If, by standing on the upper rungs, I could reach within five yards of the window, I knew that I should be able to scramble up so far by a rope. There was no difficulty about a rope. I had a good eighteen yards of choice stout rope there in the room with me, the lashings of my two trunks. I was about to pay this out into the lane, when I thought that it would be far more effective if I fashioned a ladder for myself, using the two trunk lashings as the uprights. This was a glorious thought. I tied the lashings together behind the wooden bed-post which was to be my support in mid-air. Then I rummaged out a hank of sailor's spunyarn, a kind of very strong tarred string, with which to make my steps, or rungs. I did not do this very well, for I was working in the dark, but you may be sure that I made those steps with all my strength, since my bones were to depend upon them. I ran short of spunyarn before I had finished, so my last three steps were made of the fire-irons. They made a good finish to the whole; for, being heavy, they kept the ladder steady. At least I thought that they would keep the ladder steady, in the innocence of my heart.

I was so excited, when I finished the tying of the tongs, that I almost forgot to take some money from the little store which I kept locked up in my trunk. A shilling would be ample, I thought; but I took rather more than that, so as to be on the safe side. I took the precaution, before leaving, of bolting my door from the inside, lest Ephraim should visit me in my absence. Then, having tested all my knots, I paid out my ladder from the window. No one was within sight along the

lane. Downstairs they were at supper, for I heard the dining-room bell ring. Very cautiously I swung myself over the window ledge on my adventure. Now a rope ladder is an unsteady thing at the best of times; but when I swung myself on to this one it jumped about like a wild colt, banging the fire-irons against the wall, making noise enough to raise the town. I had to climb down it on the inner side, or I should have had Ephraim out to see what the matter was. Even so, my heart was in my mouth, with fright, as I stepped on to the pavement. After making sure that no one saw, I hooked up the lower ends of my ladder as far as I could reach, so that a passer-by might run less chance of seeing them. Then I scuttled off to the delights of Eastcheap, thinking what glorious sport I could have with this ladder in time to come. I thought of the moonlight adventures on the river, skulking along in my boat, like a pirate on a night attack. I thought how, perhaps, I should overhear gangs of highwaymen making their plans, or robbers in their dens, carousing after a victory. It seemed to me that London might be a wonderful place, to one with such a means of getting out at night.

I ate a good supper at a cook-shop, sauntered about the streets for awhile, then sauntered slowly home, after buying a tinder box, with which to light my candles. I found my ladder dangling unnoticed, so I nimbly climbed to my room, pulling it up after me, like the savages in Polynesia. I lit my candles, intending to read; but I found that I was far too well inclined for mischief to pay much heed to my book. Casting about for something to do, I thought that I would open a little

I nimbly climbed to my room.

locked door which led to some (apparently disused) room beyond my own. I had some difficulty in breaking the lock of this door; but a naughty boy is generally very patient. I opened it at last, with some misgivings as to what my uncle might say on the morrow, though with the feeling that I was a sort of conspirator, or, shall we say, a man haunting a house, playing ghost, coming at night to his secret chamber. I was disappointed with the room. Like my own room, it was nothing more than a long, bare attic. It had a false floor, like so many houses of the time, but there was no thought of concealment here. Half a dozen of the long flooring planks were stored in a stack against the wall, so that anyone could see what lay in the hollow below. There was nothing romantic there. A long array of docketed, ticketed bundles of receipts filled more than half the space. I suppose that nearly every bill which my uncle had ever paid lay there, gathering dust. The rest of the space was filled with Ephraim's dirty old account books, jumbled higgledy-piggledy with collections of printed, unbound sermons, such as used to be sold forty years before, in the great Puritan time. I examined a few of the sermons, hoping to find some lighter fare among them. I examined also a few of the old account books, in the same hope. Other rubbish lay scattered in the corners of the room; old mouse-eaten saddle-bags mostly. There were one or two empty baskets, which had once been lined with silk. In one of them, I can't think why, there was an old empty, dusty powder-horn, the only thing in that room at all to my taste. I stuck it into my belt with a scrap of spunyarn, feeling that it

made me a wonderful piratical figure. If I had had a lantern I should have been a very king there.

As I sat among the rubbish there, with my pistol (a sailmaker's fid) in my belt, it occurred to me that I would sit up till everyone had gone to bed. Then, at eleven or twelve o'clock, I would, I thought, creep downstairs, to explore all over the house, down even to the cellars. It shocked me when I remembered that I was locked in. I dared not pick the lock of that door. My scheme (after all) would have to wait for another night, when the difficulties would be less. That scheme of mine has waited until the present time. Though I never thought it, that was the last hour I was to spend in my uncle's house. I walked past it, only the other day, thinking how strange my life has been, feeling sad, too, that I should never know to what room a door at the end of the upper passage led. Well, I never shall know, now. I was a wild, disobedient young rogue. Read on.

When I decided not to pick the lock of my door I thought of the mysterious Mr. Jermyn as an alternative excitement. I crept to my window to look out at the house, watching it with a sort of terrified pleasure, half expecting to see a ghost flapping his wings, outside the window. I was surprised to see that the window of the upper floor (which I knew to be uninhabited) was open. I watched it, (it was just opposite) hoping that something would happen. Presently two men came quickly up the lane from the river. As they neared the house they seemed to me to shuffle in their walk rather more than was necessary. It must have been a signal, for, as they came opposite the door, I saw it swing back

upon its hinges, as it had swung that morning, with Mr. Jermyn. Both men entered the house swiftly, just as the city churches, one after the other, chimed half-past nine o'clock. Almost directly afterwards I got the start of my life. I was looking into the dark upper room across the lane, expecting nothing, when suddenly, out of the darkness, so terribly that I was scared beyond screaming, two large red eyes glowed, over a mouth that trembled in fire. I started back in my seat, sick with fright, but I could not take my eyes away. I watched that horrid thing, with my hair stiffening on my head. Then in the room below it, the luminous figure of an owl gleamed out. That was not the worst, either. I heard that savage, "chacking" noise which brown owls make when they are perched. This great gleaming owl, five times greater than any earthly owl, was making that chacking noise, as though it would soon spread its wings, to swoop on some such wretched mouse as myself. I could see its eyes roll. I thought I saw the feathers stiffen on its breast. Then, as the sweat rolled down my face, both the horrible things vanished as suddenly as they had appeared. They were gone for more than a minute, then they appeared again, only to disappear a second time. They were exactly alike at each appearance. Soon my horror left me, for I saw that the things disappeared at regular intervals. I found that I could time each reappearance by counting ninety slowly from the instant the things vanished. That calmed me. "I believe they're only clock-work," I said to myself. A moment later I saw Mr. Jermyn's head in sharp outline against the brightness of the owl. He seemed to be

fixing something with his hand. It made me burst into a cackle of laughter, to find how easily I had been scared. "Why, it's only clock-work," I said aloud. "They're carved turnips with candles inside them, fixed to a revolving pole, like those we used to play with at Oulton, on the 5th of November." My fear was gone in an instant. I thought to myself how fine it would be if I could get into that house, to stop the works, in revenge for the scare they had given me. I wondered how could I do that.