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CHAPTER 1

In Moonfleet Village

So sleeps the pride of former days—*More*

The village of Moonfleet lies half a mile from the sea on the right or west bank of the Fleet stream. This rivulet, which is so narrow as it passes the houses that I have known a good jumper clear it without a pole, broadens out into salt marshes below the village, and loses itself at last in a lake of brackish water. The lake is good for nothing except sea fowl, herons, and oysters, and forms such a place as they call in the Indies a lagoon; being shut off from the open Channel by a monstrous great beach or dike of pebbles, of which I shall speak more hereafter. When I was a child I thought that this place was called Moonfleet because, on a still night, whether in summer, or in winter frosts, the moon shone very brightly on the lagoon; but learned afterwards that 'twas but short for 'Mohune-fleet', from the Mohunes, a great family who were once lords of all these parts.

My name is John Trenchard, and I was fifteen years of age when this story begins. My father and mother had both been

dead for years, and I boarded with my aunt, Miss Arnold, who was kind to me in her own fashion, but too strict and precise ever to make me love her.

I shall first speak of one evening in the fall of the year 1757. It must have been late in October, though I have forgotten the exact date, and I sat in the little front parlour reading after tea. My aunt had few books; a Bible, a Common Prayer, and some volumes of sermons are all that I can recollect now; but the Reverend Mr Glennie, who taught us village children, had lent me a storybook, full of interest and adventure, called the *Arabian Nights Entertainment*. At last the light began to fail, and I was nothing loath to leave off reading for several reasons; as, first, the parlour was a chilly room with horsehair chairs and sofa, and only a coloured paper screen in the grate, for my aunt did not allow a fire till the first of November; second, there was a rank smell of molten tallow in the house, for my aunt was dipping winter candles on frames in the back kitchen; third, I had reached a part in the *Arabian Nights* which tightened my breath and made me wish to leave off reading for very anxiousness of expectation. It was that point in the story of the 'Wonderful Lamp', where the false uncle lets fall a stone that seals the mouth of the underground chamber; and immures the boy, Aladdin, in the darkness, because he would not give up the lamp till he stood safe on the surface again. This scene reminded me of one of those dreadful nightmares, where we dream we are shut in a little room, the walls of which are closing in upon us, and so impressed me that the memory of it served as a warning in an adventure that befell me later on. So I gave up reading and stepped out into the street. It was a poor street at best, though once, no doubt,

it had been finer. Now, there were not two hundred souls in Moonfleet, and yet the houses that held them straggled sadly over half a mile, lying at intervals along either side of the road. Nothing was ever made new in the village; if a house wanted repair badly, it was pulled down, and so there were toothless gaps in the street, and overrun gardens with broken-down walls, and many of the houses that yet stood looked as though they could stand but little longer.

The sun had set; indeed, it was already so dusk that the lower or sea-end of the street was lost from sight. There was a little fog or smoke wreath in the air, with an odour of burning weeds, and that first frosty feeling of the autumn that makes us think of glowing fires and the comfort of long winter evenings to come. All was very still, but I could hear the tapping of a hammer farther down the street, and walked to see what was doing, for we had no trades in Moonfleet save that of fishing. It was Ratsey the sexton at work in a shed which opened on the street, lettering a tombstone with a mallet and graver. He had been mason before he became fisherman, and was handy with his tools; so that if anyone wanted a headstone set up in the churchyard, he went to Ratsey to get it done. I lent over the half-door and watched him a minute, chipping away with the graver in a bad light from a lantern; then he looked up, and seeing me, said:

'Here, John, if you have nothing to do, come in and hold the lantern for me, 'tis but a half-hour's job to get all finished.'

Ratsey was always kind to me, and had lent me a chisel many a time to make boats, so I stepped in and held the lantern, watching him chink out the bits of Portland stone with a graver, and blinking the while when they came too near my

eyes. The inscription stood complete, but he was putting the finishing touches to a little sea-piece carved at the top of the stone, which showed a schooner boarding a cutter. I thought it fine work at the time, but know now that it was rough enough; indeed, you may see it for yourself in Moonfleet churchyard to this day, and read the inscription too, though it is yellow with lichen, and not so plain as it was that night. This is how it runs:

Sacred to the Memory
of David Block

Aged 15, who was killed by a shot fired from the Elector *Schooner, 21 June 1757.*

Of life bereft (by fell design),
I mingle with my fellow clay.
On God's protection I recline
To save me in the Judgement Day.

There too must you, cruel man, appear,
Repent ere it be all too late;
Or else a dreadful sentence fear,
For God will sure revenge my fate.

The Reverend Mr Glennie wrote the verses, and I knew them by heart, for he had given me a copy; indeed, the whole village had rung with the tale of David's death, and it was yet in every mouth. He was only child to Elzevir Block, who

kept the Why Not? inn at the bottom of the village, and was with the contrabandiers when their ketch was boarded that June night by the Government schooner. People said that it was Magistrate Maskew of Moonfleet Manor who had put the Revenue men on the track, and anyway he was on board the *Elector* as she overhauled the ketch. There was some show of fighting when the vessels first came alongside of one another, and Maskew drew a pistol and fired it off in young David's face, with only the two gunwales between them. In the afternoon of Midsummer's Day the *Elector* brought the ketch into Moonfleet, and there was a posse of constables to march the smugglers off to Dorchester Jail. The prisoners trudged up through the village, ironed two and two together, while people stood at their doors or followed them, the men greeting them with a kindly word, for we knew most of them as Ringstave and Monkbury men, and the women sorrowing for their wives. But they left David's body in the ketch, so the boy paid dear for his night's frolic.

'Ay, 'twas a cruel, cruel thing to fire on so young a lad,' Ratsey said, as he stepped back a pace to study the effect of a flag that he was chiselling on the Revenue schooner, 'and trouble is likely to come to the other poor fellows taken, for Lawyer Empson says three of them will surely hang at next Assize. I recollect,' he went on, 'thirty years ago, when there was a bit of a scuffle between the *Royal Sophy* and the *Marnhull*, they hanged four of the contrabandiers, and my old father caught his death of cold what with going to see the poor chaps turned off at Dorchester, and standing up to his knees in the river Frome to get a sight of them, for all the countryside was there, and such a press there was no place on land. There,

that's enough,' he said, turning again to the gravestone. 'On Monday I'll line the ports in black, and get a brush of red to pick out the flag; and now, my son, you've helped with the lantern, so come down to the Why Not? and there I'll have a word with Elzevir, who sadly needs the talk of kindly friends to cheer him, and we'll find you a glass of Hollands to keep out autumn chills.'

I was but a lad, and thought it a vast honour to be asked to the Why Not?—for did not such an invitation raise me at once to the dignity of manhood? Ah, sweet boyhood, how eager are we as boys to be quit of thee, with what regret do we look back on thee before our man's race is halfway run! Yet was not my pleasure without alloy, for I feared even to think of what Aunt Jane would say if she knew that I had been at the Why Not?—and besides that, I stood in awe of grim old Elzevir Block, grimmer and sadder a thousand times since David's death.

The Why Not? was not the real name of the inn; it was properly the Mohune Arms. The Mohunes had once owned, as I have said, the whole of the village; but their fortunes fell, and with them fell the fortunes of Moonfleet. The ruins of their mansion showed grey on the hillside above the village; their almshouses stood halfway down the street, with the quadrangle deserted and overgrown; the Mohune image and superscription was on everything from the church to the inn, and everything that bore it was stamped also with the superscription of decay. And here it is necessary that I say a few words as to this family badge; for, as you will see, I was to bear it all my life, and shall carry its impress with me to the grave. The Mohune shield was plain white or silver, and bore

nothing upon it except a great black 'Y'. I call it a 'Y', though the Reverend Mr Glennie once explained to me that it was not a 'Y' at all, but what heralds call a *cross-pall*. *Cross-pall* or no *cross-pall*, it looked for all the world like a black 'Y', with a broad arm ending in each of the top corners of the shield, and the tail coming down into the bottom. You might see that cognizance carved on the manor, and on the stonework and woodwork of the church, and on a score of houses in the village, and it hung on the signboard over the door of the inn. Everyone knew the Mohune 'Y' for miles around, and a former landlord having called the inn the Why Not? in jest, the name had stuck to it ever since.

More than once on winter evenings, when men were drinking in the Why Not?, I had stood outside, and listened to them singing 'Ducky-stones', or 'Kegs bobbing One, Two, Three', or some of the other tunes that sailors sing in the west. Such songs had neither beginning nor ending, and very little sense to catch hold of in the middle. One man would crone the air, and the others would crone a solemn chorus, but there was little hard drinking, for Elzevir Block never got drunk himself, and did not like his guests to get drunk either. On singing nights the room grew hot, and the steam stood so thick on the glass inside that one could not see in; but at other times, when there was no company, I have peeped through the red curtains and watched Elzevir Block and Ratsey playing backgammon at the trestle table by the fire. It was on the trestle table that Block had afterwards laid out his son's dead body, and some said they had looked through the window at night and seen the father trying to wash the blood-matting out of the boy's yellow hair, and heard him groaning and talking to the lifeless

clay as if it could understand. Anyhow, there had been little drinking in the inn since that time, for Block grew more and more silent and morose. He had never courted customers, and now he scowled on any that came, so that men looked on the Why Not? as a blighted spot, and went to drink at the Three Choughs at Ringstave.

My heart was in my mouth when Ratsey lifted the latch and led me into the inn parlour. It was a low sanded room with no light except a fire of seawood on the hearth, burning clear and lambent with blue salt flames. There were tables at each end of the room, and wooden-seated chairs round the walls, and at the trestle table by the chimney sat Elzevir Block smoking a long pipe and looking at the fire. He was a man of fifty, with a shock of grizzled hair, a broad but not unkindly face of regular features, bushy eyebrows, and the finest forehead that I ever saw. His frame was thickset, and still immensely strong; indeed, the countryside was full of tales of his strange prowess or endurance. Blocks had been landlords at the Why Not? father and son for years, but Elzevir's mother came from the Low Countries, and that was how he got his outland name and could speak Dutch. Few men knew much of him, and folks often wondered how it was he kept the Why Not? on so little custom as went that way. Yet he never seemed to lack for money; and if people loved to tell stories of his strength, they would speak also of widows helped, and sick comforted with unknown gifts, and hint that some of them came from Elzevir Block for all he was so grim and silent.

He turned round and got up as we came in, and my fears led me to think that his face darkened when he saw me.

'What does this boy want?' he said to Ratsey sharply.

'He wants the same as I want, and that's a glass of Ararat milk to keep out autumn chills,' the sexton answered, drawing another chair up to the trestle table.

'Cow's milk is best for children such as he,' was Elzevir's answer, as he took two shining brass candlesticks from the mantelboard, set them on the table, and lit the candles with a burning chip from the hearth.

'John is no child; he is the same age as David, and comes from helping me to finish David's headstone. 'Tis finished now, barring the paint upon the ships, and, please God, by Monday night we will have it set fair and square in the churchyard, and then the poor lad may rest in peace, knowing he has above him Master Ratsey's best handiwork, and the parson's verses to set forth how shamefully he came to his end.'

I thought that Elzevir softened a little as Ratsey spoke of his son, and he said, 'Ay, David rests in peace. 'Tis they that brought him to his end that shall not rest in peace when their time comes. And it may come sooner than they think,' he added, speaking more to himself than to us. I knew that he meant Mr Maskew, and recollected that some had warned the magistrate that he had better keep out of Elzevir's way, for there was no knowing what a desperate man might do. And yet the two had met since in the village street, and nothing worse come of it than a scowling look from Block.

'Tush, man!' broke in the sexton, 'it was the foulest deed ever man did; but let not thy mind brood on it, nor think how thou mayest get thyself avenged. Leave that to Providence; for He whose wisdom lets such things be done, will surely see they meet their due reward. "Vengeance is Mine; I will repay, saith the Lord".' And he took his hat off and hung it on a peg.

Block did not answer, but set three glasses on the table, and then took out from a cupboard a little round long-necked bottle, from which he poured out a glass for Ratsey and himself. Then he half-filled the third, and pushed it along the table to me, saying, 'There, take it, lad, if thou wilt; 'twill do thee no good, but may do thee no harm.'

Ratsey raised his glass almost before it was filled. He sniffed the liquor and smacked his lips. 'O rare milk of Ararat!' he said, 'it is sweet and strong, and sets the heart at ease. And now get the backgammon board, John, and set it for us on the table.' So they fell to the game, and I took a sly sip at the liquor, but nearly choked myself, not being used to strong waters, and finding it heady and burning in the throat. Neither man spoke, and there was no sound except the constant rattle of the dice, and the rubbing of the pieces being moved across the board. Now and then one of the players stopped to light his pipe, and at the end of a game they scored their totals on the table with a bit of chalk. So I watched them for an hour, knowing the game myself, and being interested at seeing Elzevir's backgammon board, which I had heard talked of before.

It had formed part of the furniture of the Why Not? for generations of landlords, and served perhaps to pass time for cavaliers of the Civil Wars. All was of oak, black and polished, board, dice boxes, and men, but round the edge ran a Latin inscription inlaid in light wood, which I read on that first evening, but did not understand till Mr Glennie translated it to me. I had cause to remember it afterwards, so I shall set it down here in Latin for those who know that tongue, *Ita in vita ut in lusu alae pessima jactura arte corrigenda est*, and in English as Mr Glennie translated it, *As in life, so in a game of hazard*,

skill will make something of the worst of throws. At last Elzevir looked up and spoke to me, not unkindly, 'Lad, it is time for you to go home; men say that Blackbeard walks on the first nights of winter, and some have met him face to face betwixt this house and yours.' I saw he wanted to be rid of me, so bade them both goodnight, and was off home, running all the way thither, though not from any fear of Blackbeard, for Ratsey had often told me that there was no chance of meeting him unless one passed the churchyard by night.

Blackbeard was one of the Mohunes who had died a century back, and was buried in the vault under the church, with others of his family, but could not rest there, whether, as some said, because he was always looking for a lost treasure, or as others, because of his exceeding wickedness in life. If this last were the true reason, he must have been bad indeed, for Mohunes have died before and since his day, wicked enough to bear anyone company in their vault or elsewhere. Men would have it that on dark winter nights Blackbeard might be seen with an old-fashioned lanthorn digging for treasure in the graveyard; and those who professed to know said he was the tallest of men, with full black beard, coppery face, and such evil eyes that any who once met their gaze must die within a year. However that might be, there were few in Moonfleet who would not rather walk ten miles round than go near the churchyard after dark; and once when Cracky Jones, a poor doited body, was found there one summer morning, lying dead on the grass, it was thought that he had met Blackbeard in the night.

Mr Glennie, who knew more about such things than anyone else, told me that Blackbeard was none other than a

certain Colonel John Mohune, deceased about one hundred years ago. He would have it that Colonel Mohune, in the dreadful wars against King Charles the First, had deserted the allegiance of his house and supported the cause of the rebels. So being made Governor of Carisbrooke Castle for the Parliament, he became there the King's jailer, but was false to his trust. For the King, carrying constantly hidden about his person a great diamond which had once been given him by his brother King of France, Mohune got wind of this jewel, and promised that if it were given him he would wink at His Majesty's escape. Then this wicked man, having taken the bribe, plays traitor again, comes with a file of soldiers at the hour appointed for the King's flight, finds His Majesty escaping through a window, has him away to a stricter ward, and reports to the Parliament that the King's escape is only prevented by Colonel Mohune's watchfulness. But how true, as Mr Glennie said, that we should not be envious against the ungodly, against the man that walketh after evil counsels. Suspicion fell on Colonel Mohune; he was removed from his Governorship, and came back to his home at Moonfleet. There he lived in seclusion, despised by both parties in the State, until he died, about the time of the happy Restoration of King Charles the Second. But even after his death he could not get rest; for men said that he had hid somewhere that treasure given him to permit the King's escape, and that not daring to reclaim it, had let the secret die with him, and so must needs come out of his grave to try to get at it again. Mr Glennie would never say whether he believed the tale or not, pointing out that apparitions both of good and evil spirits are related in Holy Scripture, but that the churchyard was an unlikely spot

for Colonel Mohune to seek his treasure in; for had it been buried there, he would have had a hundred chances to have it up in his lifetime. However this may be, though I was brave as a lion by day, and used indeed to frequent the churchyard, because there was the widest view of the sea to be obtained from it, yet no reward would have taken me thither at night. Nor was I myself without some witness to the tale, for having to walk to Ringstave for Dr Hawkins on the night my aunt broke her leg, I took the path along the down which overlooks the churchyard at a mile off; and thence most certainly saw a light moving to and fro about the church, where no honest man could be at two o'clock in the morning.