ANDREW MOTION

SILVER

Return to Treasure Island

'All aboard! All aboard!'
Guardian

VINTAGE

CONTENTS

About the Book

‘I always liked your father – he was a lad of spirit. He was clever enough to know the value of an adventure, at any rate, and brave enough to carry it out!’

‘What adventure?’ I asked, although I already knew the answer.

‘Why the map of course, boy!’ Long John Silver’s voice rose into something of a scream. ‘The map and then the treasure across the sea! All the beautiful silver we left there. Your father and I only took what we could carry. But there’s more silver lying in the ground and the map will tell you where. Think of the fortune waiting for you.’

With that encouragement, young Jim Hawkins and Silver’s daughter Natty set off in the footsteps of their fathers. They are determined to find Captain Flint’s hidden treasure. But the thrill of the ocean journey soon gives way to terror as the *Nightingale* reaches its destination. Treasure Island is not uninhabited as it once was …

About the Author

Andrew Motion was the Poet Laureate from 1999 to 2009, he co-founded the Poetry Archive and was knighted for his services to literature in 2009. He is now Professor of Creative Writing at Royal Holloway, University of London, and President of the Campaign to Protect Rural England. When we asked him about *Silver* he said ‘I read *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson for the first time at university. And I started to notice then how unresolved some things were. Later, I realised that Stevenson was interested in sequels, and I wondered whether he would have gone back to it had he lived longer. This book takes place 40 years after the original and writing it was a kind of adventure.’

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FOR OSCAR FEARNLEY-DERÔME

ANDREW MOTION

Return to Treasure Island

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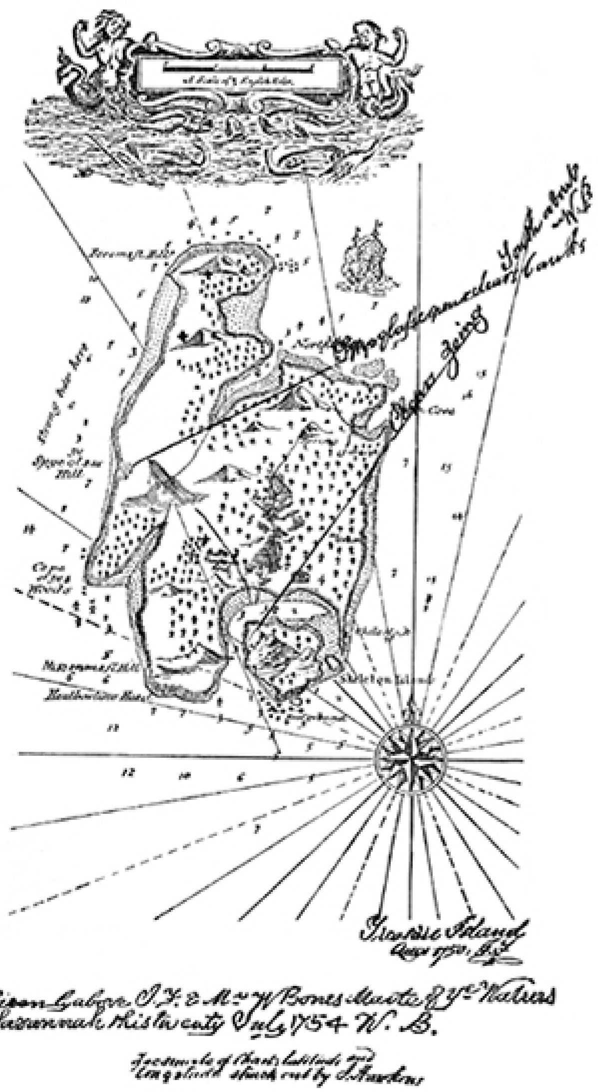
Treasure Island

PART I

THE TEMPTATION

CHAPTER 1

My Father’s Orders

In those days I did my father’s bidding. I would leave my bed at six o’clock every morning, tiptoe past his door so as not to disturb his slumber, then set to work as quietly as possible among the foul tankards, glasses, plates, knives, gobs of tobacco, broken pipe-stems and other signs of interrupted pleasure that awaited me in the taproom below. Only after an hour or so – when everything had been made straight and the air was fresh again – could my father be trusted to appear, cursing me for having made such an intolerable racket.

‘Good Lord, boy’ was his reliable greeting. ‘Must you dole out headaches to the entire *county*?’ He did not look in my direction as he asked this, but slouched from the doorway to a freshly wiped table, and collapsed there with both hands pressed to his temples. What followed was also always the same: I must look sharp and fetch him a reviving shot of grog, then cook some rashers of bacon and present them to him with a good thick slice of brown bread.

My father gulped his rum without so much as blinking, and chewed his meal in silence. I see him now as clearly as I did then – almost forty years distant. The flushed face, the tuft of sandy hair, the red-rimmed eyes – and melancholy engulfing him as palpably as smoke surrounds a fire. At the time I thought he must be annoyed by the world in general and me in particular. Now I suppose he was chiefly frustrated with himself. His life had begun with adventure and excitement, but was ending in the banality of repetition. His consolation – which might even have been a positive pleasure – was to finish his breakfast by issuing me with instructions he thought might keep me as unhappy as he felt himself.

On the day my story begins, which is early in the month of July in the year 1802, my orders were to find the nest of wasps he thought must be in our vicinity, then destroy it so our customers would not suffer any more annoyance from them. When this was done, I must return to the taproom, prepare food and drink for the day ahead, and make myself ready to serve. I did not in fact object to the first of these tasks, since it gave me the chance to keep my own company, which was my preference at that time of my life. I need not say how I regarded the prospect of further chores in the taproom.

Because it was not my habit to entertain my father by allowing him to see what did and did not please me, I set about my business in silence. This meant nodding to show I understood what was required, then turning to one of the several barrels that stood nearby, pouring a drop of best beer into a tankard, and taking this tankard outside to the bench that ran along the front of our home, where it faced the river. Here I sat down and waited for our enemies to find me.

It was a fine morning, with mist already burning off the banks and creeks, and the whole panorama of our neighbourhood looking very delightful. Beyond the river,

which at this point downstream from Greenwich was at least thirty yards wide, olive-coloured marshland faded into lilac where it reached the horizon. On the Thames itself, the work of the day was just beginning. Large merchant ships starting their journeys across the globe, stout little coal barges, ferries collecting men for work, humble skiffs and wherries were all gliding as smoothly as beetles along the outgoing tide. Although I had seen just such a procession every day of my life at home, I still found it a marvellous sight. Equally welcome was the thought that none of the sailors on these vessels, nor the fishermen tramping along the towpath, nor the bargees with their jingling horses, would acknowledge my existence with more than a simple greeting, or interrupt my concentration on my task – which, as I say, was merely to wait.

When the sun and breeze, combining with a drowsy scent from the emerging mudbanks, had almost wafted me back to sleep again, I had my wish. A large and inquisitive wasp (or *jasper*, as we called them along the estuary) hovered cautiously above my tankard, then clung to the lip, then dropped into its depths with a shy circling movement until it was almost touching the nectar I had provided. At this point I clapped my hand over the mouth of the tankard and swirled its contents vigorously, to create a sort of tidal wave.

When I had kept everything turbulent for a moment or two, like a tyrant terrifying one of his subjects, I removed my hand and carefully tipped the liquid onto the surface of the bench beside me. The jasper was by now half-drowned and half-drunk, its legs incapable of movement and its wings making the feeblest shudders. This was the incapacity I wanted, because it allowed me to delve into my pocket and find the length of bright red cotton I had brought with me, then to tie it around the waist of my prisoner. I did this very gently, so that I did not by accident turn myself into an executioner.

After this I continued to sit in the sun for as long as it took the jasper to recover his wits and his ability to fly. I had meant to rely on the breeze to accelerate this process, but when I heard my father clumping around his bedroom above me, I added my own breath to the warming; I did not want a second conversation with him, because I knew it would result in my receiving further orders to fetch this and carry that. I need not have worried. In the same moment that I heard his window shutters folding back, and started to imagine my father squaring his shoulders so that he could shout down to me, Mr Wasp tottered off from our bench.

The best he could manage was a low, stumbling sort of flight, which I thought might take him across the river – in which case I would have lost him. But he soon discovered his compass and set off towards the marshes, congratulating himself no doubt on a miraculous deliverance, and steadily gaining height. I ran quickly after, keeping my eyes fixed on the vivid thread that made him visible, and feeling relieved that he did not find it an inconvenience. Once my home and the river had fallen behind us, and the outhouses where my father kept his puncheons, and the orchard where we grew apples for cider, we came to open country.

To a stranger, the marshes would have seemed nothing more than wilderness – a bog-land crossed with so many small streams tending towards the Thames that from above it must have resembled the glaze on a pot. Everything was the same cracked green, or green-blue, or green-brown. There were no tall trees, only a few bare trunks the wind had twisted into shapes of agony, and no flowers that a gentleman or lady would recognise.

To me the place was a paradise, where I was the connoisseur of every mood and aspect. I relished its tall skies and wide view of the approaching weather. I loved its myriad different kinds of grass and herb. I kept records of every variety of goose and duck that visited in spring time

and left again in the autumn. I especially enjoyed its congregation of *English* birds – the wrens and linnets, the finches and thrushes, the blackbirds and starlings, the lapwings and kestrels – that stayed regardless of the season. When the tide was full, and the gullies brimmed with water, and the earth became too spongy for me to walk across it, I was like Adam expelled from his garden. When the current turned and the land became more nearly solid again, I was restored to my heart's desire.

Meandering was always my greatest pleasure – which I was not able to enjoy on this particular day, with my captive leading me forward. While he flew straight, I jinked and tacked, crossed and returned, leaped and veered, in order to keep up with him. And because I was expert in this, and knew the place intimately, I still had him clearly in sight when he reached his destination. This was one of the stunted trees I have mentioned – an ash that grew in a distant part of the marsh, and had been bent by storms into the shape of the letter C. As soon as this curiosity came into view, I knew where my friend was heading; even from as far away as fifty yards I could see the nest dangling like a jewel from an ear.

A jewel, that is, made of paste or paper and moulded into a long oval. For that is how jaspers manufacture their nests – by chewing tiny portions of wood and mixing them with their saliva until they have made a cone; within this cone they protect their hive and their queen especially, who lays her eggs at every level. It is remarkable: creatures that appear confused to the human eye, and are always buzzing in different directions, or no direction at all, are in fact very well organised and disciplined. Every individual has a part to play in the creation of their society and performs it by instinct.

As I drew closer to the nest, I began to admire it so much I wondered whether I might return to my father and tell him I had obeyed his orders without in fact having done so. I knew

he would never search for the thing himself: it lay in a part of the marsh that felt remote even to me. I also knew I would then have to live with the lie, which I would not enjoy, while the wasps themselves would continue to pester us.

These two reasons might have been enough to make me stick to my task. In truth, there was a third that felt even more compelling – albeit one I hesitate to admit, because it appears to contradict everything I have said so far about my likes and dislikes. This was my *desire* to destroy the nest. It intrigued me. I was fascinated by it. But my interest had quickly become a longing for possession – and since possession was impossible, destruction was the only alternative.

I therefore began to gather every fragment of flotsam or small stick the sun had dried, so that by the time I stood beside the ash tree at last my arms were filled with a bundle the size of a haycock. I placed this on the ground beneath the nest, then stood back to fix the scene in my memory. The tree itself was very smooth, as if the wind had caressed it for such a long time, and so admiringly, the bark had turned into marble. The nest – around which a dozen or so jaspers were bobbing and floating, all quite oblivious of me – was about a foot from top to bottom, and swollen in the middle. It was pale as vellum, with little ridges and bumps here and there; these I took to be the individual deposits, brought by each wasp as he worked.

When I had stared for long enough to feel I would never forget, I knelt down, pulled a tinderbox from my pocket, and set fire to the material I had collected. Flames rose very quickly, releasing a sweet smell of sap, and within a minute the whole nest was cupped in a kind of burning hand. I expected the inhabitants to fly out, and thought they might even attack me since I was their destroyer. But no such thing took place. The wasps outside the nest simply flew away – they appeared not to care what was happening. Those within the nest, which must have been many

hundred, chose to stay with their queen and to die with her. I heard the bodies of several explode with a strange high note, like the whine of a gnat; the rest suffocated in smoke without making any sound.

After no more than two or three minutes, I felt sure my job was done; I knocked the nest down, so that it fell into the ashes of my fire and broke apart. The comb inside was dark brown and wonderfully dainty, with every section containing a wrinkled grub; the queen – who was almost as big as my thumb – lay at the centre surrounded by her dead warriors. They made a noble sight, and filled me with such great curiosity, I did not notice how nearly I had scorched myself by kneeling among the wreckage and poring over them.

Eventually, I stood up and faced towards home, knowing my father would soon be expecting my return. After a moment, however, I decided to please myself, not him, and changed my direction. I walked further into the marshes, jumping across the creeks and striding this way and that to avoid the larger gullies, until I had quite lost my way. There, in the deepest solitude of green and blue, I fell to thinking about my life.

CHAPTER 2

The Story of My Life

I was never a wicked child, but a disappointment to my father all the same. Thieving, deception, cruelty – I left these to others. Mine were faults of a less grievous kind, amounting to no more than a streak of wildness. I often ignored my father's wishes and sometimes his orders. I resisted the plans he made for me. I preferred my own company to the society he wished me to enjoy.

On reflection, *independence* may be a better word than *wildness* for what I have just described. In either case the question remains: what caused it? In our early days we are blinded by the heat of moments as they pass, and seldom pause to consider. Now my youth is a distant memory, and I have a wider view of my existence, I am drawn more strongly to explanations.

The first is that my mother died of her trouble in bringing me into this world – which bred in me, as surely as if it had been one of her own characteristics, a tendency to regard myself as someone for whom the whole of life is a battle.

Where no fight exists, I am likely to invent one in order to reassure myself of my own courage.

The second, which was solidified by my having neither brother nor sister, was the country in which we lived. By country I do not mean the nation, England, but rather the country-*side* – being the north shore of the river Thames, at a point of no particular consequence between London and the open sea. How this landscape appears now I can only imagine, not having returned home for many years. Most likely it is overbuilt by everything that is necessary for the business of docks and docking. But I can tell how it was then, exactly.

On the landward side of our house, the marshes stood a mere quarter-fathom above the surface of the water, and the quarter of a quarter at high tide. Any buildings thereabouts were hardly buildings at all, but rough arrangements of timber in which fishermen kept their gear, and other more secretive visitors dropped off or collected things that were precious to them. If the mist allowed, these shacks made an impressive silhouette, with spars protruding at strange angles, roofs slumped forward like fringes, and windows completing a lopsided face. To my young eyes they resembled a community of ogres, or at least warty witches all rubbing their hands over a cauldron. None of them stood upright for long. Whatever the wind did not knock flat, the marsh swallowed. As for the tracks that wandered between and beyond them: these soon forgot the destination they had in mind when they began their journeys, and ended in confusion or nothing at all.

If I have made the place sound fearsome, I have good reasons. Many times, walking alone under its vast sky, I heard footsteps behind me where none existed, or felt silence itself seizing my collar like a hand. Yet to tell the truth, the voices of the marsh, and of the river in particular, were never entirely one thing or the other; they were a mixture of sounds, pitched between sighing and laughter, as

though they had never decided whether they meant to convey sorrow or joy. Perverse as it may seem, this is what I especially loved about the place; it was always in two minds.

The picture I have already painted of my father will make him seem straightforward by comparison – and so he was in certain respects. In others he was as contradictory as the landscape that surrounded him. I shall now show why, from the beginning.

My father's own father had also been an innkeeper – of the Admiral Benbow in the West Country, around the coast from Bristol. Here he died young – whereupon my father found himself at the start of the great adventure that it has been my fate to continue. This adventure began with the sudden arrival at the Benbow of Billy Bones, a battered old salt who once upon a time had been the first mate of the notorious buccaneer Captain Flint, and whose sole possession was an even more knocked-about sea-chest. For a week or two, the presence of this rascal caused no great difficulty at the Benbow – until the appearance of a second stranger, a pale, tallowy creature who, despite his ghostly countenance, went by the name of Black Dog – and soon after him a blind man named Pew, whose effect was so shocking that poor Bones fell dead almost the instant he saw him. To be particular, Pew tipped him the Black Spot; a man cannot long survive, once he has received that fatal sign.

There soon followed a whole history of dramatic episodes: an assault on the inn by pirates; a miraculous escape; the discovery of an ancient map; a perusal of the map; the understanding that treasure had been left by Captain Flint on a certain island; an expedition planned in Bristol and launched to recover said treasure; the treachery of the crew, and especially of a smooth-talking rogue named John Silver, who came ornamented with a parrot in compensation for missing a leg; a very dangerous and thrilling sojourn on

the island; the discovery of some parts of the treasure; and a subsequent return to England and safety.

I have mentioned all this in summary, omitting the names of most of the principal characters and even some parts of the adventure itself, for the important reason that I have heard it told so many hundreds of times by my father, I cannot bear to write it down at greater length. Even the most celebrated stories in the world, including perhaps that of Our Lord himself, weary with the retelling. I will only add, in the interest of illuminating what follows, that close attention should be paid to the phrase *some parts of the treasure*, in order to encourage the idea that certain *other parts of it* were left undisturbed. I will also point out that when my father eventually quit the island, three especially troublesome members of the crew – whom my father called *maroons* – were left behind to meet whatever fate they might find. Much of what remains to be said will depend on these details.

Once my father had returned to Bristol he received his share of the wealth, which was valued in total at the astonishing sum of seven hundred thousand pounds. He often boasted of the amount, using it as an excuse to moralise – in a rather more ambiguous way than he intended – on the wages of sin. Of his own portion he never spoke precisely, referring to it as merely ‘ample’ before running on to say how Ben Gunn, a wild-man he discovered on the island and helped to rescue, had been granted an allocation of one thousand pounds, which he contrived to spend in nineteen days, so that he was a beggar again on the twentieth and given a lodge to keep, which he had always feared.

Whatever the precise amount of my father’s treasure, it was clear that he need lack for nothing so long as he did not follow the example of this Ben Gunn. Accordingly, he returned to his mother, who was now in sole charge of the Benbow in Black Hill Cove, and helped her to manage the

place until he gained his majority. At that time, being tired of living in such an out-of-the-way spot, which contrasted very markedly with the excitement he had known on the high seas, he departed for London and devoted himself for several years to the pursuit of his own pleasure.

It is hard for any son to imagine the youth of his father – to the son, the father will generally be a creature of settled habits and solid opinions. Yet it is clear that throughout his time in the city, my parent lived more dashingly than I ever knew him do in the course of my own existence. Released from the burden of caring for his mother (who now rested her head on the shoulder of an affectionate and elderly sailor, who would shortly become her husband), and provoked by a million new temptations, he became by his own admission a *figure about the town*.

This was before the period in which a man of fashion would be able to cut his cheek upon his own collar if he turned his head too sharply. But it was nevertheless a time of increasing opportunity in our country, when a man of means could easily footle his way through a fortune if so inclined. My father was never one to spend the best part of a day patrolling the Strand just so that a young lady might notice the tension in his trouser-leg, and the particular shade of a canary glove. He was, however, of a disposition to enjoy himself – and it is evident from the gradual slide in his fortunes that a period of living in fine lodgings, with good pictures on the walls, and expensive china on the table, and servants to bring him whatever comforts he required, was sufficient to consume a large part of the wealth he had dug from those distant sands.

Whether he would eventually have slithered all the way into poverty I cannot say. What I know for certain is this: before his third decade was very far advanced (which is to say the first part of the 1780s), he encountered the steadying influence that was my mother. She was the daughter of an ostler who ran a successful business on the

eastern edge of the city, where day-visitors from Edmonton and Enfield would stable their horses, and often stay for dinner before completing their journeys home. Her experience in this place had turned a diligent child into a thrifty young woman. She soon persuaded my father to moderate his ways, and set him on the path that led to respectability in the world. He surrendered his cards and dice. He abandoned certain doubtful connections. He regulated his hours. He made himself a more pleasing prospect. And when he had showed the steadiness of his resolve for almost a year, she accepted the sincerity of his feelings and they were married.

It now became necessary for my parents to find useful employment. The obvious choice, given the history of both of them, was to run an inn – which soon they did. Not, however, an inn lying close to either of their previous connections, but one that proved the spirit of independence I would like to claim as my inheritance. The inn I have already mentioned, and will now give its proper name: the Hispaniola.

The place was at once marriage-bed, home and livelihood. And one more thing besides. For it was here, after only a year of bliss, in a room more like a fo’c’sle than anything on dry land, with a timber ceiling and walls, and a bay window overlooking the river, that my mother gave breath to me and was deprived of her own life in one and the same instant. I had, of course, no immediate knowledge of this. But from my first moment of remembered consciousness, which occurred some three years later, I was aware of what I had lost. To speak plainly: I grew up in an atmosphere stained by melancholy.

The weight of bereavement must nearly have broken my father. If the evidence of my own eyes had not told me this, I would have understood it from those who drank in our taproom, and had known him before the tragedy occurred. In the accounts they gave me, what had formerly been

spirited in him was now subdued, what had looked for excitement now longed for moderation, and what had imagined the future now clung to the past.

You might wonder how the Hispaniola managed to survive these changes in my father. Sadness, after all, is not the common fare of inns. Yet survive it did – for reasons that shed some light on the variety of pleasures men seek in the world. Some individuals, it is true, did not appreciate his sombre character, and these my father dismissed with directions to other establishments on the waterfront, which they might find more to their taste. But there were few ejections of this kind. The majority of our neighbours looked on the Hispaniola as a welcome relief from the raucousness and vulgarity of the world. They considered it a haven.

In saying this, I realise that I might appear to suggest my father had an unfriendly and withdrawn character. Yet while he could certainly seem fierce he also understood the need for human beings to live in the world – which I saw in his determination that I should have a better education than any he had received himself. The school he chose for me was in Enfield; I was dispatched there at the age of seven, and remained a ‘boarder’ for a large part of every year until I was sixteen.

This establishment, which was proud to describe itself as a Dissenting Academy, was managed by a liberal-minded gentleman whose good qualities deserve great praise. But I do not propose to divert myself from my story in order to dwell on this part of my existence. Suffice it to say that when I eventually returned home again I had ‘the tastes of a gentleman’ in reading and writing, and a clear idea of what it means to behave with decent concern for others. Also, and in spite of the influences to which I had been exposed, I had a quickened appetite for what had always pleased me most: my own company, and the life of the river and marshes.

I must mention one further thing before I continue any further – and that is another paradox. In his sadness after my mother's death, my father often seemed the opposite of grieving. This was thanks to his habit of reliving the adventures of his youth, as I have already mentioned. Sometimes this was done at the request of new customers who knew his reputation and wanted to share a part of his history. But when no such requests were forthcoming, he was inclined to tell the stories anyway, pausing sometimes to expand on a moment of particular danger, or to digress into the background of an especially striking individual or event.

Indeed, it would be fair to say that long before my boyhood was over, the story of Treasure Island had become almost the whole of my father's conversation. Its inhabitants were more companionable to him than the customers he served, and more vivid to me. They were not quite inventions, and not quite figures from history, but a blend of these things. This almost persuaded me I might have met them myself, and had seen with my own eyes the wickedness of John Silver the sea-cook; and glimpsed the Black Spot passing into the hand of Billy Bones; and even watched my father himself when he was a child, climbing the mast of the *Hispaniola* to escape Israel Hands, then firing his pistols so that Hands fell into the clear blue water, and finally sank onto its sandy bed, where he lay with the little fishes rippling to and fro across his body.

With the mention of these ghosts, I am ready to begin my story. I will therefore ask you to remember where we stood a moment ago – on the marshes behind the Hispaniola – and then to jump forward a few hours. My solitary day had ended and I was reluctantly wandering home. Darkness had fallen. The moon had risen. Mist crawled along the river. When I stepped indoors from the towpath, candle flames burned still and straight in the warm air of the taproom, where my father's adventures were once again approaching

their crisis before an audience of visitors. I kept in the background of the scene, slipping upstairs to my bedroom so that I did not have to follow him through the final windings of his tale.

A moment later I had reached my own space under the roof. This was the least comfortable room in the house – hardly a room at all, but infinitely precious to me because it was like a cabinet of curiosities. Every wall was covered with shelves, on which I had arranged the feathers, shells, eggs, pieces of twisted wood, rope, skulls, curious knots and other trophies I had collected from the marsh in the course of my short but busy life. And in the middle of this cabinet, my crow's-nest – which I might properly call my bed, where I lay every night to survey the rolling universe. Here it was that I lay down at last. And here it was that I turned my face to the window.

The towpath was deserted, patched by a large square of yellow light falling from the taproom window. The marshes all around had been simplified by moonlight into an arrangement of powdery grey and greens. The river seemed a richer kind of nothing – a gigantic ingot of solid silver, except that now and again it crinkled when a log rolled silently past, or a dimple appeared and then vanished.

I lay staring for long enough to feel I was entranced, and so cannot tell exactly when the boat and its occupant arrived. One moment the water was empty. The next it featured the crescent of a hull, with a figure sitting upright in the centre, oars in both hands, holding the vessel steady against the current. What sort of figure I could not say, only that it appeared slim and youthful; the head was covered with a shawl and the face was invisible.

It was an unusual sight so late in the evening. More remarkable still was the way the figure seemed to stare at me directly, even though it could not possibly have seen me in the lightless window. I propped myself on my elbows, but gave no other sign of interest. As I did so, the figure