
ARTHUR MORRISON
THE HOLE IN THE WALL

**Arthur Morrison**

# The Hole in the Wall

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# CHAPTER I

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## STEPHEN'S TALE

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

To remember Grandfather Nat is to bethink me of pear-drops. It is possible that that particular sort of sweetstuff is now obsolete, and I cannot remember how many years have passed since last I smelt it; for the pear-drop was a thing that could be smelt farther than seen, and oftener; so that its smell—a rather fulsome, vulgar smell I now believe—is almost as distinct to my imagination while I write as it was to my nose thirty years ago. For pear-drops were an unfailing part of the large bagful of sticky old-fashioned lollipops that my grandfather brought on his visits, stuffed into his overcoat pocket, and hard to get out without a burst and a spill. His custom was invariable, so that I think I must have come to regard the sweets as some natural production

of his coat pocket; insomuch that at my mother's funeral my muddled brain scarce realised the full desolation of the circumstances till I discovered that, for the first time in my experience, my grandfather's pocket was void of pear-drops. But with this new bereavement the world seemed empty indeed, and I cried afresh.

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

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

In these early days I lived with my mother in a little house of a short row that stood on a quay, in a place that was not exactly a dock, nor a wharf, nor a public thoroughfare; but

where people from the dock trying to find a wharf, people from a wharf looking for the dock, and people from the public thoroughfare in anxious search of dock and wharves, used to meet and ask each other questions. It was a detached piece of Blackwall which had got adrift among locks and jetties, and was liable to be cut off from the rest of the world at any moment by the arrival of a ship and the consequent swinging of a bridge, worked by two men at a winch. So that it was a commonplace of my early childhood (though the sight never lost its interest) to observe from a window a ship, passing as it were up the street, warped into dock by the capstans on the quay. And the capstan-songs of the dockmen—*Shenandore*, *Mexico is covered with Snow*, *Hurrah for the Black Ball Line*, and the like—were as much my nursery rhymes as *Little Boy Blue* and *Sing a Song o' Sixpence*. These things are done differently nowadays; the cottages on the quay are gone, and the neighbourhood is a smokier place, where the work is done by engines, with no songs.

My father was so much at sea that I remember little of him at all. He was a ship's officer, and at the time I am to tell of he was mate of the brig *Juno*, owned by Viney and Marr, one of the small shipowning firms that were common enough thirty years ago, though rarer now; the sort of firm that was made by a pushing skipper and an ambitious shipping clerk, beginning with a cheap vessel bought with money raised mainly by pawning the ship. Such concerns often did well, and sometimes grew into great lines; perhaps most of them yielded the partners no more than a comfortable subsistence; and a good few came to grief, or were kept going by questionable practices which have since become illegal—sometimes in truth by what the law called crime, even then. Viney had been a ship's officer—had indeed served under Grandfather Nat, who was an old skipper. Marr was the business man who had been a clerk. And the firm

owned two brigs, the *Juno* and another; though how much of their value was clear property and how much stood for borrowed money was matter of doubt and disagreement in the conversation of mates and skippers along Thames shore. What nobody disagreed about, however, was that the business was run on skinflint principles, and that the vessels were so badly found, so ill-kept, and so grievously under-manned, that the firm ought to be making money. These things by the way, though they are important to remember. As I was saying, I remember little of my father, because of his long voyages and short spells at home. But my mother is so clear and so kind in my recollection that sometimes I dream of her still, though she died before I was eight.

It was while my father was on a long voyage with the *Juno* that there came a time when she took me often upon her knee, asking if I should like a little brother or sister to play with; a thing which I demanded to have brought, instantly. There was a fat woman called Mrs. Dann, who appeared in the household and became my enemy. She slept with my mother, and my cot was thrust into another room, where I lay at night and brooded—sometimes wept with jealousy thus to be supplanted; though I drew what consolation I might from the prospect of the promised playmate. Then I could not go near my mother at all, for she was ill, and there was a doctor. And then… I was told that mother and baby-brother were gone to heaven together; a thing I would not hear of, but fought savagely with Mrs. Dann on the landing, shouting to my mother that she was not to die, for I was coming. And when, wearied with kicking and screaming—for I fought with neighbours as well as with the nurse and the undertaker, conceiving them to be all in league to deprive me of my mother—when at last the woman from next door took me into the bedroom, and I saw the drawn face that could not smile, and my tiny brother that could not play, lying across the dead breast, I so behaved that the good

soul with me blubbered aloud; and I had an added grief in the reflection that I had kicked her shins not half an hour before. I have never seen that good woman since; and I am ashamed to write that I cannot even remember her name.

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

They were not all women, for there was one quiet little man in their midst, who, when not eating cake or drinking wine, was sucking the bone handle of a woman's umbrella, which he carried with him everywhere, indoors and out. He was in the custody of the largest and grimmest of ladies, whom the others called Aunt Martha. He was so completely in her custody that after some consideration I judged he must be her son; though indeed he seemed very old for that. I now believe him to have been her husband; but I cannot remember to have heard his name, and I cannot invent him a better one than Uncle Martha.

Uncle Martha would have behaved quite well, I am convinced, if he had been left alone, and would have acquitted himself with perfect propriety in all the transactions of the day; but it seemed to be Aunt Martha's immovable belief that he was wholly incapable of any action, even the simplest and most obvious, unless impelled

by shoves and jerks. Consequently he was shoved into the mourning carriage—we had two—and jerked into the corner opposite to the one he selected; shoved out—almost on all fours—at the cemetery; and, perceiving him entering the little chapel of his own motion, Aunt Martha overtook him and jerked him in there. This example presently impressed the other ladies with the expediency of shoving Uncle Martha at any convenient opportunity; so that he arrived home with us at last in a severely jostled condition, faithful to the bone-handled umbrella through everything.

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, indeed!"

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

"That's true!"

"Rich an' poor—just the same."

"Ah!"

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

"Ah yes!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In truth there had been little enough of courage in my poor little body, and Grandfather Nat's words brought me a deal of relief. Beyond the vague terrors of loneliness and responsibility, I had been troubled by the reflection that

housekeeping cost money, and I had none. For though my mother's half-pay note had been sent in the regular way to Viney and Marr a week before, there had been neither reply nor return of the paper. The circumstance was unprecedented and unaccountable, though the explanation came before very long.

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

# CHAPTER II

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## IN BLUE GATE

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

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

foremast hand, was playing up to his borrowed character by being drunk in Blue Gate.

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

Front doors stood ever open in the Blue Gate, and some houses had no front doors at all. At the top of one of the grimy flights of stairs thus made accessible from the street, was a noisy and ill-smelling room; noisy because of the company it held; ill-smelling partly because of their tobacco, but chiefly because of the tobacco and the liquor of many that had been there before, and because of the aged foulness of the whole building. There were five in the room, four men and a woman. One of the men was Marr, though for the present he was not using that name. He was noticeable amid the group, being cleaner than the rest, fair-haired, and dressed like a sailor ashore, though he lacked the sunburn that was proper to the character. But sailor or none, there he sat where many had sat before him, a piece

of the familiar prey of Blue Gate, babbling drunk and reasonless. The others were watchfully sober enough, albeit with a great pretence of jollity; they had drunk level with the babbler, but had been careful to water his drink with gin. As for him, he swayed and lolled, sometimes on the table before him, sometimes on the shoulder of the woman at his side. She was no beauty, with her coarse features, dull eyes, and tousled hair, her thick voice and her rusty finery; but indeed she was the least repulsive of that foul company.

On the victim's opposite side sat a large-framed bony fellow, with a thin, unhealthy face that seemed to belong to some other body, and dress that proclaimed him long-shore ruffian. The woman called him Dan, and nods and winks passed between the two, over the drooping head between them. Next Dan was an ugly rascal with a broken nose; singular in that place, as bearing in his dress none of the marks of waterside habits, crimpery and the Highway, but seeming rather the commonplace town rat of Shoreditch or Whitechapel. And, last, a blind fiddler sat in a corner, fiddling a flourish from time to time, roaring with foul jest, and roiling his single white eye upward.

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

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

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

Dan and the woman exchanged a quick look; plainly something had gone before that gave the words significance. "No," Marr went on, "mus'n' go 'ome. I'm sailor

man jus' 'shore from brig *Juno* in from Barbadoes.... No, not *Juno*, course not. Dunno *Juno*. 'Tain' *Juno*. D'year? 'Tain' *Juno*, ye know, my ship. Never heard o' *Juno*. Mine's 'nother ship.... I say, wha'sh name my ship?"

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

The sham seaman chuckled feebly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But they shut the door on him, whereupon he broke into a torrent of curses on the landing; and presently, having descended several of the stairs, reached back to let drive a