

“And yet,” said Smee, “I have often heard you say that hook was worth a score of hands, for combing the hair and other homely uses.”

“Ay,” the captain answered, “if I was a mother I would pray to have my children born with this instead of that,” and he cast a look of pride upon his iron hand and one of scorn upon the other. Then again he frowned.

“Peter flung my arm,” he said, wincing, “to a crocodile that happened to be passing by.”

“I have often,” said Smee, “noticed your strange dread of crocodiles.”

“Not of crocodiles,” Hook corrected him, “but of that one crocodile.” He lowered his voice. “It liked my arm so much, Smee, that it has followed me ever since, from sea to sea and from land to land, licking its lips for the rest of me.”

“In a way,” said Smee, “it’s a sort of compliment.”

“I want no such compliments,” Hook barked petulantly. “I want Peter Pan, who first gave the brute its taste for me.”

He sat down on a large mushroom, and now there was a quiver in his voice. “Smee,” he said huskily, “that crocodile would have had me before this, but by a lucky chance it swallowed a clock which goes *tick tick* inside it, and so before it can reach me I hear the tick and bolt.” He laughed, but in a hollow way.

“Some day,” said Smee, “the clock will run down, and then he’ll get you.”

Hook wetted his dry lips. “Ay,” he said, “that’s the fear that haunts me.”

Since sitting down he had felt curiously warm. “Smee,” he said, “this seat is hot.” He jumped up. “Odds bobs, hammer and tongs I’m burning.”

They examined the mushroom, which was of a size and solidity unknown on the mainland; they tried to pull it up, and it came away at once in their hands, for it had no root. Stranger still, smoke began at once to ascend. The pirates looked at each other. “A chimney!” they both exclaimed.

They had indeed discovered the chimney of the home under the ground. It was the custom of the boys to stop it with a mushroom when enemies were in the neighbourhood.

Not only smoke came out of it. There came also children’s voices, for so safe did the boys feel in their hiding-place that they were gaily chattering. The pirates listened grimly, and then replaced the mushroom. They looked around them and noted the holes in the seven trees.