

“They say,” said another, looking viciously at Hook, “that when he comes it’s in the likeness of the wickedest man aboard.”

“Had he a hook, Captain?” asked Cookson insolently; and one after another took up the cry, “The ship’s doomed.” At this the children could not resist raising a cheer. Hook had well-nigh forgotten his prisoners, but as he swung round on them now his face lit up again.

“Lads,” he cried to his crew, “here’s a notion. Open the cabin door and drive them in. Let them fight the doodle-doo for their lives. If they kill him, we’re so much the better; if he kills them, we’re none the worse.”

For the last time his dogs admired Hook, and devotedly they did his bidding. The boys, pretending to struggle, were pushed into the cabin and the door was closed on them.

“Now, listen,” cried Hook, and all listened. But not one dared to face the door. Yes, one, Wendy, who all this time had been bound to the mast. It was for neither a scream nor a crow that she was watching; it was for the reappearance of Peter.

She had not long to wait. In the cabin he had found the thing for which he had gone in search: the key that would free the children of their manacles; and now they all stole forth, armed with such weapons as they could find. First signing to them to hide, Peter cut Wendy’s bonds, and then nothing could have been easier than for them all to fly off together; but one thing barred the way, an oath, “Hook or me this time.” So when he had freed Wendy, he whispered to her to conceal herself with the others, and himself took her place by the mast, her cloak around him so that he should pass for her. Then he took a great breath and crowed.

To the pirates it was a voice crying that all the boys lay slain in the cabin; and they were panic-stricken. Hook tried to hearten them; but like the dogs he had made them they showed him their fangs, and he knew that if he took his eyes off them now they would leap at him.

“Lads,” he said, ready to cajole or strike as need be, but never quailing for an instant, “I’ve thought it out. There’s a Jonah abroad.”

“Ay,” they snarled, “a man wi’ a hook.”

“No, lads, no, it’s the girl. Never was luck on a pirate ship wi’ a woman on board. We’ll right the ship when she’s gone.”

Some of them remembered that this had been a saying of Flint’s. “It’s worth trying,” they said doubtfully.