

away?”

“Ay, ay.”

“Then hoist them up.”

The wretched prisoners were dragged from the hold, all except Wendy, and ranged in line in front of him. For a time he seemed unconscious of their presence. He lolled at his ease, humming, not unmelodiously, snatches of a rude song, and fingering a pack of cards. Ever and anon the light from his cigar gave a touch of colour to his face.

“Now then, bullies,” he said briskly, “six of you walk the plank tonight, but I have room for two cabin boys. Which of you is it to be?”

“Don’t irritate him unnecessarily,” had been Wendy’s instructions in the hold; so Tootles stepped forward politely. Tootles hated the idea of signing under such a man, but an instinct told him that it would be prudent to lay the responsibility on an absent person; and though a somewhat silly boy, he knew that mothers alone are always willing to be the buffer. All children know this about mothers, and despise them for it, but make constant use of it.

So Tootles explained prudently, “You see, sir, I don’t think my mother would like me to be a pirate. Would your mother like you to be a pirate, Slightly?”

He winked at Slightly, who said mournfully, “I don’t think so,” as if he wished things had been otherwise. “Would your mother like you to be a pirate, Twin?”

“I don’t think so,” said the first twin, as clever as the others. “Nibs, would—”

“Stow this gab,” roared Hook, and the spokesmen were dragged back. “You, boy,” he said, addressing John, “you look as if you had a little pluck in you. Didst never want to be a pirate, my hearty?”

Now John had sometimes experienced this hankering at maths. prep.; and he was struck by Hook’s picking him out.

“I once thought of calling myself ‘Red-Handed Jack,’” he said diffidently.

“And a good name too. We’ll call you that here, bully, if you join.”

“What do you think, Michael?” asked John.

“What would you call me if I join?” Michael demanded.

“‘Blackbeard Joe.’”