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The Magic Jacket

When, that May Day morning, Admiral Rumbold stepped out of his four-wheeled cab at the corner of Pall Mall, he was carrying a small brown-paper parcel. Why he had not told his cabman who—hunched up on his box—looked older even than his horse, to take him on to exactly where he wanted to go, he hardly knew. He paid the old man his fare; and he added an extra sixpence.

'Thank'ee,' he said with a curt nod, then turned to continue on his way. Admiral Rumbold was not exactly a stout man, but in his navy-blue clothes, his neat boots, and brown billycock hat, he looked rather tightly packed. His broad face shone almost as red as a tomato above his white linen collar and blue-and-white spotted silk sailor's knot. He clasped his neat little brown-paper parcel closely under his elbow, and at a good round pace proceeded along Pall Mall.

He glanced neither to right nor left of him, but kept his sea-bleached blue eyes fixed steadily ahead. Nor did he show the least sign of recognition when he caught sight of an old friend brandishing a silver-headed cane in his direction from under the hood of a hansom-cab. On this particular morning—and the houses and shops looked sparkingly gay in the spring sunshine—Admiral Rumbold wished to be alone. He marched straight on, his eyes fixed, his mouth tight-shut, almost as if he were walking in his sleep.

He turned sharply up St. James's Street, past the saddler's with the jockey caps and jackets behind the glass, past the little bow-windowed snuff-and-tobacco shop, and so into King Street. From King Street he turned off into Duke Street, and then on into Great St. Ann's. After the bustle and traffic now behind him, the quiet sunshine and shadow of Little St. Ann's beyond it was like port after stormy seas.

Now a few paces past the hatter's shop that stood at the corner of Little St. Ann's lay a wide smooth stretch of flat paving-stones under a high old brick wall. It was here that a screever or pavement artist had made his pitch; and here in the sunshine Admiral Rumbold came to a halt and looked about him.

The street was still, and, at this early hour of the morning, almost deserted. For a while, firm as a rock, he continued so to stand. But having failed to catch a glimpse of what he was after, he began to survey a little vacantly the pictures chalked on the stones at his feet.

The first of them was of a ship with bare masts and lanky spars, tossing on an indigo sea, its waves yeastily crested with spray. Next to this there was a windmill in a gaudy country green, the miller himself standing up like Shem, Ham, and Japhet at the little rounded door above the wide wooden ladder. Next, there was a gaping brace of rainbow-coloured, rather flabby-looking mackerel. Next, a loaf of bread, a cut cheese, and a neat little long-tailed mouse at her supper. And last—and best of all to some tastes—there stood a lonely country mansion among its wintry trees, a wild full moon gleaming down on its walls. Scrawled beneath this picture, in a flowery lettering, was the one word, 'HORNTED'.

Admiral Rumbold had taken a good long look at these pictures only the evening before. They showed a little livelier in the morning sunshine. Still, he had come back not to have another look at them, but to have a word with the young artist. Few street chalkers, the Admiral had noticed in his walks abroad, are much less than forty. The one he now had in mind could not be more than fourteen. The Admiral had taken a liking to him at first sight, had often watched him at his work, and had dropped many a tuppence into the old cloth cap that usually lay (as if with its mouth wide open) beside the pictures. Now he wished to speak to him.

To an old gentleman with a temper as peppery as the Admiral's it was therefore an unpleasant jar to find that when he wanted the boy he was nowhere to be seen. Besides, he was anxious to get rid of the brown-paper parcel under his arm. He had a dislike to carrying anything at all—even an umbrella so massive that it looked more like a war-club. On the other hand he was a man who, having once made up his mind, kept it made up.

He crossed the street, and spent the next few minutes pacing solemnly up and down, glancing ever and again as he did so down the area railings or up at the upper windows of the houses on that side of it, in order to pretend to himself that he

was not being kept waiting. And every time he turned smartly on his heel, he glared first up the street, then down the street, and then into the deep-blue empty sky.

At last he had his reward. Shuffling along close to the railings from out of a neighbouring alley, in shoes that even at this distance looked a good deal more roomy than comfortable, appeared the boy the Admiral was in wait for. A coat that was at least two sizes too large for its present wearer hung down from his bony shoulders. But he had turned the cuffs up over the sleeves, so that his claw-like hands came out free from beneath them.

His odd, almost ugly face was pale and not too clean. His brown hair was lank and tousled. But as the Admiral had noticed before, the skull beneath the hair was nut-shaped and compact, clear over the forehead and wide towards the back. It looked as if it closely fitted something valuable inside it. Besides which, the boy had a pair of eyes in the pinched face looking out from under that skull, which once seen were not easily forgotten.

Admiral Rumbold, at sight of him, had slipped in under the carved shell-shaped porch of one of the neighbouring houses. From here he could see without being seen.

First, the boy glanced into his cap, then took it up, turned it upside down, shook it, and replaced it on the pavement. He then drew a large dingy rag out of his pocket, that might once have been the flap of a man's shirt or a woman's petticoat. With both hands he waved this to and fro above his pictures to waft away the dust and straw and soot-smuts. He then pushed the rag into his pocket again, and had a steady look at the pictures, as if he had never seen them before and could not make up his mind whether or not to give himself a penny. He then sighed—a sigh that in the morning quietness was clearly audible. At this Admiral Rumbold stepped out of his hiding-place, crossed the road, and accosted him.

'Good morning, my boy,' was his greeting. 'How's business?'

The boy looked up into the round red face of the old gentleman, with its small beak-like nose and sky-blue eyes, and a timid smile passed over his own as he shook his head.

'So, so!' said Admiral Rumbold bluffly. 'Nothing much, eh? There's a bit of east in the wind this morning, and perhaps that keeps folk moving. Or perhaps.... Well, there we are! Had any breakfast? No? Good! I want a word with 'ee. Is there a place handy where we can sit and talk?'

The boy coloured, glanced swiftly from right to left, and told the Admiral of a coffee-shop near at hand where he sometimes went himself. Then he looked up at the old Admiral again, became redder than ever, and broke off.

'Full steam ahead, then,' said his friend. 'And do you lead the way.'

The boy buttoned his coat: away they went together; and in a minute or two the pair of them were sitting face to face on two benches between wooden partitions—like the high pews in old churches—and on either side of a table in an eating-house half-way up the neighbouring alley. The Admiral asked the boy what he would take. He said a mug of thick.

At this the Admiral cocked one of his bright blue eyes, and enquired if he would like anything to eat with it. The boy hesitated, and suggested a doorstep.

'H'm!' said the Admiral, 'and anything for a sweet tooth to follow?'

The boy said he would like a cat's-eye. Whereupon Admiral Rumbold rapped smartly on the table. A man with greasy black hair, of a dark face, and wearing a rather dingy apron, appeared from his den behind the shop.

'Good morning,' said the Admiral. 'Two mugs of thick, a door-step, and a cat's-eye.' And he said the words as if he had been used to them all his life and knew exactly what they meant.

The mugs of thick proved to be cocoa; the door-step a slab of bread with a scrimp of butter; and the cat's-eye was a large yellow bun with a burnt raisin stuck in its crown. And while the two of them sipped their thick, and the boy from nibbling went on to munching at his door-step, Admiral Rumbold explained what he was after.

But first he asked him a little about himself and his work. He learned that the boy was pretty well alone in the world. His father, who had been a carriage painter, had died when he was six. His own business was fair in fine weather, but it was hard to find a pitch where there were neither too many passers-by nor too few. 'And then there's the bobbies,' said the boy. Summer was better than winter, but up to the last week or two there had been too much rain for any business at all.

'Ay, ay,' said the Admiral, looking at him over the thick brim of his mug as he took another sip of cocoa, 'a fine-weather trade, I take it.' And he asked him what his name was. It was Mike.

'Well now, Mike,' said Admiral Rumbold at last, 'I've been keeping an eye on you for some little time. I've been *wanting* to keep an eye on someone of your age and looks for a good deal longer. I like your pictures; in fact, I *admire* them. If I were to sit down under that wall with every scrap of chalk you've got and do my level best with them, rain or no rain, I warrant my takings wouldn't be fourpence a month. It's the knack you want. And it's the knack, my lad, you have.

'Not, mind you,' he went on, 'that I know any more about pictures than what I *like*. I leave the rest to them that do. But I've lived a good many years in the world now, and my belief is that every walk in life begins with a steepish bit of hill. When I was a boy—and we're not concerned just now with where *my* walk's led *me*—I had to face mine. And in this parcel here is—well, what helped me in the climbing of it.

'*Here*,' repeated the Admiral and said no more for the moment. For he had brought his square solid hand down on the parcel beside his mug with such a thump that the man in the apron came hurrying up to see what more was wanted.

'I'll have,' said the Admiral promptly, 'another mug of thick and another couple of door-steps. And this time put in a slice or two more of beef and bacon by way of cement.'

The sandwiches that followed were almost as much meat as bread, and Mike's eyes fairly watered as they were handed over to him.

'In this parcel, as I was saying,' continued the Admiral, 'is the *story* of what I've been telling you. A yarn, you'll understand. Tell me, can you *read*?' Mike nodded violently; his mouth was full.

'Good!' said the Admiral. 'All I want you to do is to read it—it's about a *jacket*—what might be called a slice out of my early days, just as that bacon there maybe a slice out of the early days of the pig it came from. There's no hurry—' he glanced at the clock and then at his gold repeater—'it's seventeen and a half minutes past ten. Sit here quietly and read as much of it as you can. When you have finished, come along to me. At eleven sharp I'll be waiting near the pitch.

'Mind ye,' he ended as he rose to his feet, 'there's no shadow of *must* in that package whatsoever. Nor do I vouch for anything beyond what's written—and I've had it printed out on one of those new-fangled machines so that it can be read plain and easy. Take it quietly; ask for anything you want while I'm away; and in half an hour we meet again.'

He put down half-a-crown on the table for the door-steps, *etc.*, laid his hand an instant on Mike's shoulder, and looked him hard but friendly in the eye. Then he instantly flung open the swing-door of the coffee-shop and went out into the street.

To judge from his face, the old gentleman was very well pleased with himself at this moment. He returned to the pictures, and spent the next half-hour, as cautiously as before, in pacing to and fro along the street. Whenever he passed them he paused to look at them, dropped a copper or two into the cap, and went on. At this, some curious passer-by would also stop and glance over Mike's gallery. And, maybe, he too would fling in a penny to join the Admiral's—and, maybe, not.

Meanwhile, Mike, left to himself and now the only customer in the coffee-shop, took a good long swig of his mug of cocoa and a munch at his sandwich before setting to work on the Admiral's story. And this was what he read:—

'Coming down to facts at once, I was born all but seventy years ago, in a town in Shropshire of the name of P——. My father was a grocer—retail. His shop wasn't much to look at from outside, but there was

little that his customers wanted in the way of groceries that couldn't be found even then on his shelves.

'My father was a man of about forty when I came into the world. My mother was a good deal younger; and mightily pleased they were to have me. No doubt about that. They christened me Andrew and called me Sandy, there being Scotch blood on my father's side. And if hard work and steady is a short cut to success, that was my father's way.

'At first, my father and mother were content to live over the shop—three rooms in all, not including one not much bigger than a bandbox, which was called the nursery. When I was six, things were going so well with the business that they decided to let the rooms above the shop, and to move into a small but comfortable, high and (what they call) semi-detached house, half a mile or so out of the town. We had a good strip of garden there—a few apple and plum trees, some currant and gooseberry bushes, and old country flowers.

'My mother loved that garden, and spent all the time she could spare from the house in it, with me beside her, or digging away at a patch of soil, three yards by one, with scallop shells round the border, which she let me have to do what I pleased with. That was *my* garden. *Sandy-land*, she called it. Candytuft, Virginia stock, and Sweet Williams were my own particular crops.

'My mother, I remember, bless her soul, was a great talker. I don't mean by this that she talked too much, or talked to everybody, or never listened. I mean she was a great talker to me, though not so much to my father. What she and I chattered about when we went out shopping in the morning together, or when I used to help her make the beds, would fill a book. Everything under the sun, not to mention the other side of it.

'I don't know what there was about my mother—brown eyes, brown hair, and so on. But hanging up over the pianoforte in what was called our drawing-room was a portrait of her as a girl of eighteen or thereabouts which if I had been any kind of young man with an eye in his head I should have fallen in love with at first sight. But it wasn't her looks; it was her ways. How to put it I don't know, but she always seemed to be talking as if to somebody over her shoulder as well as to me myself.

'Never—and mine's a pretty long life now—never have I come across anyone with such a loving delight in birds, flowers, trees, clouds, stars, moss, butterflies, and all that. She knew them by heart. You might have thought she'd had a hand in their making. Words aren't my tools, and I must just get things down as straight as I *can*. But that was the way of it. To see her look at a toadstool, with some bright colour to its gills, or peep into a wren's or chaffinch's nest, or stand watching a bevy of long-tailed tits gossiping together for a minute or two in one of our tufted old apple-trees on their way to somebody else's, was like—well, I don't know what it wasn't like, except that it was like nothing on earth but my mother. She wasn't any *age* at all. We might have been a couple of brothers or sisters—old cronies, as you might say. We could hardly tell each other apart—except when my father was by.

'Now, I'm not going to say anything against *him*. He died when I was not much more than a quarter of the way up the ladder I was afterwards to set myself to climb. He did his best by me; and if it hadn't been for my own stubborn interference, he might have done better for me than I've done for myself. Can't say; don't *know*. What I wanted was to go my own way, as at last I went. And your own way is nobody else's way. It's a man's self—his *innards*, to speak abruptly—that counts. Not the stripes on his arm, or the cut of his jib, or the cash in his bank, or even what he's *done*.

'But enough of that. The truth is perhaps that being so much alone with my mother, and as contented in her company, at least in those first few years, as a butterfly with a flower, I became a bit of an apron-string child. She did not much care for going out, and she had a mighty small opinion of any young Two-Legs in the street except the one she herself had brought into the world, so I was only allowed to play with any small Tom, Dick, or Harry belonging to our neighbours provided I never went beyond view of her bedroom window. And that's not much of a playground for a healthy young sprat that ought to be learning

what the sea looks like.

'Alone with her, and at peace, I wanted nothing else and could chatter away like a grasshopper. Away from her, I was usually little better than a tongue-tied numskull, flushing up to the eyebrows at a word from a stranger, and looked too shy and timid to say Boh to a goose—even to the goose in my own looking-glass! Well, numskull is as numskull does; and as the old wooden-legged sailor said,

*When all you've got is a couple of stump,
There's nowt to do but go clump—clump—clump!*

'My father could not see it that way. He began to think I was stupid on purpose. There was not a sharper tradesman in the county, nor a more honest tradesman either, in spite of the "sharp". All his wits were at his finger-tips. He had a memory like a dictionary. He knew where everything was or ought to be. He could tell a bargain at first wag of its tail and a good customer before he opened his mouth. He lived long enough to make three fine shops of his poky first one—plate-glass windows, plenty of gold paint, three smart vans and about a dozen glossy-haired assistants in clean white aprons. And he stowed a handsomer show of tea-chests, sugar loaves, jam-jars and piccalilli pots behind those windows than any other grocer in the town. I owe him unspeakably more than the little fortune he left me.

'But being what he was, he was impatient with anything else, and particularly with me, his own son. *Now*, I understand it. *Then*, the moment I saw his black hat above the hedge, or heard his key in the lock, I would scuttle away like a frightened rabbit. If we were left alone together, I would sit as glum as a cold plum-duff pudding—without any plums in it! If he asked me a question, every word would fly out of my head, like rooks at a rattle. The mere look of me at such times—fumbling and stammering—made him angry. The more angry he grew the more tongue-tied and lumpish grew I, and that would set my poor mother weeping. And I have never yet met a father who enjoyed being told that he could not understand his own son. Not that he loved me a penny the less; far from it. But love, my boy, is like coal. You can burn it, and warm and comfort yourself with its light and heat. Or you can keep it in a cellar. My father kept his in a cellar—and it was I who helped him stack it up!

'With my mother, as I have said already, everything was different. We would gossip away together for hours. And when she wasn't with me I would talk to myself. I had plenty of books in my bedroom under the roof—books that had belonged to my mother's younger brother who died at sea. And I read like a limpet. When in those days I opened a book that seemed meant for me—travels, voyages, that kind of thing—it was like exploring another world. Fancy tales I never took to—except journeys to the moon, or the middle of the earth, and suchlike—nor could even my mother win me to rhymes.

'Maybe it was all this book-stuff and solitude and having nobody to play with that began this odd habit in me of talking to myself when I was alone. And it was this talking to myself that led on to the great discovery. One evening, I remember, I was reading about the supper to which Sir Francis Drake invited the officer on his ship who had been stirring up mutiny against him, and whom he hanged next morning. And as I was listening to myself talking like the officer and putting up as stiff a lip as I could at the prospect of so harsh a breakfast, I suddenly discovered that there was not *one* of me, so to say, but two. I discovered what's called a second self—though of course he must have been there all the time. To make things plain and ship-shape, let us call the first of these two selves, Sandy One; and the second of these two selves, Sandy Two.

'There was first the Sandy One that was my father's son, and stayed at home with his mother in the high, oblong box of a house, standing up high on the hill with its neighbours, all in a row. This was the nervous, timid, stuttering Sandy, the Sandy who did not know where he kept his own tongue, the skulker, the dunderhead whom my father could not make head or tail of. There was next the Sandy who when alone did more or less what he liked and went where he pleased—desert islands, Red Indians, lions and tigers,

castaways, cannibals, *bonum omens*—all that kind of thing. Ay, and the whole world over. *He* pined for freedom. He wanted to do and dare things. He wanted to eat his cake and chance the stale crusts afterwards. This happy-go-lucky, scatter-brained, dare-devil creature boxed up inside me was Sandy Two. We'll call him, as I say, Sandy Two: and, Here's good luck to him!—for he needed it!

'Now, do you see, my mother knew something of both Sandies, though more of One than Two. My father never so much as dreamt of Two and saw not much more of One than his worst. And Sandy Two, at his darndest and daringest, was at present inside my head and kept for myself and my books alone.

'Now Schooling...'

Mike took a long slow look at this word before going any further. He was already a little tired of reading. He wanted to get to the jacket. Still, he had promised the old gentleman, who seemed to be an old gentleman who expected his promises to be kept, that he would do his best, and he had had an *uncommonly* good breakfast. So he swallowed another gulp of his tepid cocoa, took another huge bite of his door-step, and plodded on.

'Now Schooling. Well, I went to school like most boys of my age. It was what is called a Private School, and the headmaster's name was Smiles; and his name was not only where his smiles began but also ended. From the instant my father led me into his stuffy back-room, this Mr. Smiles took me for a Dunce. One glance at my sheepish mottled face—Sandy One's—was enough for that. And as dunce he treated me almost until we parted. Dunce was his chief dish with me, from beginning to end—and plenty of cane sauce.

'I hated school. I hated learning. And as I was told to go straight home the moment my lessons were over, I was never much of a favourite with the other boys. They took me for a molly-coddle, and called me Tallow-candy. Which was true of course of Sandy One. And for some little time they never caught sight of Sandy Two. That came later. Still, whenever Sandy One warmed up so much in a scrap as to bring Sandy Two into it, it wasn't the other fellow that left off last!

'Well now, to make a long story short, my father's heart, as I have been saying, was in groceries. And you can take my word for it that there is one thing at least worse than a quick profit on pickles, and that is a dead loss on 'em. His business was growing; he pulled his weight wherever he went; he was soon to be Mayor; and having only one son, he hoped and meant that that son should go into groceries too, and perhaps some day *double* his fortune, keep a carriage, and become *Lord* Mayor. He wanted his son to "get on", and what father doesn't?

'So in the old days, just to polish my wits, he would ask me such questions as what raisins are, or where currants come from, or why peel is called candied; and then—with a flicker of his eyelids—who discovered the Macaroni Tree, or how much fresh there is to a pound of salt butter, or where the natives dig up nutmegs, or what is the temperature of Cayenne pepper, or what is the cost of a hogs-head of treacle at $2\frac{3}{4}d.$ an ounce. The point is, I never even *wanted* to know such things. And worse, I couldn't even laugh at them!

'If my father had asked me what kind of birds you'd be likely to see flitting about in the craters of the moon; or what the war-whoop and scalping habits of the Objibwas or the Cherokees were; or how many brothers riding on white asses Abimelech had; I believe Sandy Two would have consented to answer. But

Sandy Two (apart from toffee) had no interest whatever in Demerara or Barbados sugar; and Sandy One was no better than a block-head at any questions whatsoever, except when his mother asked them, or when he was alone.

'One Sunday morning, after I had first said I couldn't answer, and then refused to try to answer, some such questions as these, I looked up and told my father that I hated grocery shops. I said of all shops I hated grocery shops the most. I said I detested school, and that the only thing in the world I wanted was to run away to sea. Then I burst out crying. At this moment my mother came in, so I never got the thrashing I richly deserved.

'But my father must have thought things over; for after that, Dr. Smiles paid very particular attention to the *grocery* side of history, geography, arithmetic and dictation. Even of French: "Has your neighbour's gardener the oranges from Jaffa, the tapioca from Brazil, and the chicory for the coffee of his aunt?"—that kind of thing.

'Then one night I overheard my mother and father talking. Sandy Two had come stealing downstairs about half-past nine to see what he could find in the larder. The door of the drawing-room was ajar, and I heard my father say: "He is not only half-witted, but as limp and flabby as a rag doll—and what's more, here's that bladder-of-lard, schoolmaster Smiles, saying exactly the same thing. And yet *you*...." At these words Sandy One at once fled back to bed—taking Sandy Two with him. And I awoke next morning remembering what my father had said as distinctly as if it had been tattooed into my skin. For days together after that Sandy Two never so much as showed the tip of his nose in the house.

'Then, one afternoon, on my way home from school, I ventured down a shabby side-street, because at the far end of it I had caught the noise of a Punch-and-Judy Show. I could hear the children roaring with laughter, and the squeaking and the thumping and cockadoodle-ing of Mr. Punch. Sandy Two told Sandy One he would like to go and see it. So he went.

'Coming back, we passed a dingy little shop I had never noticed there before, and we stopped to look in at the window. *Marine Store* was printed up in white letters over the green front. There was some queer junk behind that window: old shoes and shawls and old hats, a ship in a bottle, a green glass rolling-pin, a telescope that must have belonged to Noah, a ship's compass, a brass cannon, a bed-warmer, a picture made of hummingbirds' feathers—such old curios as they call 'em as that. They looked as if they had been there for centuries—verdigris, mould, fluff, dust. Most of these articles had their prices marked on scraps of paper: "*Grate Bargain, 3s. 6d.*" and so on.

'And hanging up on a nail in a corner of the window and almost out of sight, was a kind of garment I couldn't quite put name to. But a piece of paper was pinned to it, and on that was scrawled the words: *Majick Jacket*. Just that and nothing more. But it was enough. I had already gloated on the telescope and the ship and the brass cannon. But those two words, *Majick Jacket*, fairly took my breath away. They stirred me up as if with a ladle—me myself, Sandy Two, and even Sandy One. At last I could bear the strain no longer.

'I pushed open the crack-paint little door—I can hear even now the jingle of its rusty bell—and in I went. The place smelt like an old cellar. It was as soundless as a vault. For what seemed hours nothing happened, except that I heard a far-away canary singing; then Sandy One began to be alarmed, and I tiptoed off towards the door.

'Just as I was about to whip it open and bolt out into the street again, an old man, with thick magnifying spectacles on his nose and a beard like a goat, came shuffling out of the back parts of the shop, and asked me what I wanted.

'I said would he please tell me the price of the brass cannon—though I knew it already. Then I asked to

see the ship in the bottle. And then, at last, with hardly any breath left in my body, I managed to point to the jacket.

"That," he said, looking first at it and then at me, "that's ten shillin'."

I got as red as a turkey-cock, coughed, turned about, and opened the door.

"I say! I say, Mister!" he called after me. "What are you running away for? Come back and *see* it. Come back and look at it—*feel* it. No harm in that!" He was already climbing up on to a stool. Then he thrust his head in among the rags and drabs in the window, brought down the jacket, and laid it on the counter. And close-to, like this, it was nothing much, I must say, to look at.

'It was made of some kind of foreign dark Chinese-looking stuff, with a faint wavy pattern on it, and it had flat stone buttons with green crocodiles curled round on them. The braid was frayed at the neck and cuffs. I looked hard at it on the counter, but didn't touch it. Then I blurted out: "Who made it?"

"Made it?" snapped the old man, "that's a *magic* jacket. That's come from Peking and Madagascar and Seringapatam and I don't know what, and if once you get inside of it you'll never want to get out again."

I swallowed. "Have *you* ever put it on?" I enquired.

"Me?" he almost bellowed at me. "Me! with all these old slops hanging round! Where should I be if I put 'em all on? Where's the *sale*?"

'Now I wanted that jacket with the crocodiles on the buttons more than anything else past, present or future in the whole wide world. But I had only two-and-ninepence in my pocket—and that was riches for *me*. To be on the safe side, I told the old man this. He stared at me through his rusting spectacles.

"See here!" he said, as if in a violent temper, and whisking out a piece of newspaper from under the counter: "See here now, snap it!" And he wrapped up the jacket in a flash. "Give me all you've got, and come back with the rest. There's a summat in your eye, young man, that never went with a cheat."

'Then I knew that the old man was charging me at least double what he had meant to ask for the jacket. But I gave him my two-and-ninepence all the same, and went out of the shop. Before his door bell had stopped clanging I had pushed the parcel up under my waistcoat, and walked off, keeping my stomach in, because I didn't want anybody to ask questions.

'Once safely home, I crept upstairs and slipped the parcel in at the back of a drawer, and for that night there it stayed. I didn't dare to meddle with it, partly for fear of what might happen, but mostly of what might *not*!

'All the next morning I was in torture. I was afraid my mother might find the jacket—and give it away to some tramp for a fern or a pot of geraniums. Every time I thought of it I could scarcely breathe, and that didn't help much in my school-work. I was kept in. And when I came home I told my mother I had a headache—which was true—but persuaded her at last to go out and leave me to myself. Then I stole up to my bedroom, shut the door, opened the drawer, and with my heart in my mouth, felt for the parcel. All safe! All *safe*! I took it out, undid the string, opened the paper, and there was the jacket—wavy pattern, crocodile buttons, frayed braid and all.

'With a last wild look towards the window I took off my own coat and put it on. I put it on. And nothing happened. Nothing whatever. At first blush, I mean. Except that I suddenly noticed that the room was full of sunshine and that a thrush was singing in a pear tree at the bottom of the garden. I noticed it because he sang so clear and shrill, and as though straight at *me*. If you could put sound for sight, it was as if I were listening to him through a telescope. I could see him, too, the speckles on his breast, and his bill opening and shutting—singing like an angel.

'And as I listened I noticed in the sunlight through the window the colours of my faded rose-patterned carpet and an old boot. It sounds silly, but I had never before seen an old boot look like that. I don't want to mince words, and maybe I didn't realise it then, but the fact of the matter is that that old boot on the carpet looked astonishingly *beautiful*—the light on the old leather, the tongue coming out, and the gleam of the metal eyelets. A landshark's word that—*beautiful*—but there you are.

'Well, I was soon a little impatient with all this—a new life seemed to have edged into things, or at least into me. Very peculiar. So, to get back to common sense again, I began Sandy One's *Physical Exercises*. Exercises! Why, it was as though all of a sudden I had become nothing but a twist of wire and catgut. I skipped through those jimminasticals as if I were half out of my senses. Then I tried tricks never so much as dreamt of before—hopping along my bedrail; standing on my head, first on the bedpost, then on my water-jug; balancing myself—two hands, then one hand—on the back of a chair. Whatever, within the bounds of reason, or thereabouts, I gave myself to do, I *did*—and with ease. Like the thrush singing. Nothing very much perhaps, but new to *me*! Mind you, I had never been quite the mollie my father thought me. And Sandy Two hadn't been idle, body or wits. But a little confidence, though not too much, is what you want. After a while I began to be a little bit alarmed at the effects of the jacket. I began, so to speak, to suspect my own company!

'So, hot and breathless, I sat down at the table where I always did (or didn't do) my homework, and began my "composition". The subject was the Battle of Trafalgar. Before I had finished I had written about fourteen pages on the Battle of Trafalgar! I had described how the *Victory* went to sea, and what Lord Nelson felt like—that last day coming, and why he kept his medals on, and all about Captain Hardy. And I put the weather in, and didn't forget old Froggy Villeneuve either—a gallant sailor and a bad end. When I looked up from page fourteen I could hardly see. It was as if I had come out of the heavenly Jerusalem! And then, almost at that moment, I heard my mother come in down below, and the front door shut.

'I felt like a keg of quicksilver, and yet dead beat. I undressed in less time than a lizard takes to slough its tail, and tumbled into bed, slipping my Chinese jacket in under the bedclothes.

'And no doubt I looked headachy enough when my mother came up to say good-night. She felt my forehead; it was burning hot. And she murmured faintly in a very small voice something about castor oil. Even Sandy One could put his foot down when it came to castor oil! But this time I didn't make the least fuss about it. I said, "Right you are. Warm the glass, mother, and put plenty of lemon juice in". I swigged it down, and even smacked my lips over it. Then I began to talk—so fast, and with such nonsense mixed up with the sense, that my mother was on the point of calling in the doctor. At that I sobered down again.

'The next day all was well, but I didn't go to school. The next day after that saw me back in my place again, though not in the magic jacket! But I had cut off one of the pale-green crocodile buttons to carry about in my waistcoat pocket for a kind of charm or amulet. I got a caning for the French I hadn't done, and another caning for the arithmetic which I had. Mr. Schoolmaster Smiles himself read my *Essay on the Battel of Trafalger* then and there. He hauled me out again before the class, and asked me what help I had had. I said none. He glared at me: "Are you positively sure, sir? Not even in the spelling?"

'I said, "No, sir; none, sir." What was queer, he believed me.

'Still, he had talked to me once or twice about the sea and the Navy. And I too had asked him questions, because while I was wrapped up in the thought of them, I wasn't so frightened of him. Besides, on looking back, I don't believe he really cottoned to groceries much more than I did. Anyhow, he gave me full marks and a bit over for my Trafalgar, but warned me another time I mustn't "spread" myself out like that.

'I went home feeling like a turkey-cock, marched straight upstairs, sat down at my open window, and—put on the jacket again. But I had hardly got my arms into the sleeves when I heard my mother calling me. I hustled on my own jacket over the top of the other—which was not difficult, because my Chinese one was

a very tight fit, especially at the armpits—and met her on the landing. She was as white as a sheet and could scarcely speak. She said my father wanted to see me at once, and that he had a friend with him, a Mr. Turner.

"And, oh, my dear," she implored me, "do try and answer your father's questions. Just *listen*, Sandy. Then perhaps you'll hear. And speak up to Mr. Turner, too, if he speaks to you. Think it's *me*. Don't be frightened; don't be *sulky*. Nobody can eat you. Fancy it's only just you and me talking. For my sake, Sandy."

I said, "Right, mother!" and slid from top to bottom down the banisters of the three flights of stairs almost before she had stirred foot to follow me. At the dining-room door I pulled myself together, and went in.

My father was sitting on the other side of the fireless hearth, talking to a stranger. I liked the look of this stranger. He was short and broad; his face was burnt with the sun; he had a fringe of reddish hair round his head, and wore thick-soled shoes. "Here he is," said my father to the stranger, then turned to me. "This gentleman is Mr. Turner, Andrew. If you want to know anything about the sea, he'll tell you." I put out my hand.

"I hear you've no stomach for dry goods," said Mr. Turner, staring at me, but in a friendly fashion. "Have a hankering after salt water, eh?"

"Yes," I said, "the Navy." Out of the corner of my eye I saw my father start at this. He had never before heard me answer so direct a question without stammering or flushing or just goggling like a red herring with its mouth open.

"And what do you know about the sea?" said Mr. Turner, looking at me steadily. "It's pretty deep!"

I looked back at him no less steadily. I liked him more and more, and thought I would try him with a few tit-bits out of my fourteen pages on the Battle of Trafalgar. There was a queer silence when I had finished. And I realised that my mother had at that moment stolen away after listening at the door. As for my father, he sat in his chair dumb with amazement. He shut his eyes for an instant and then began to explain that I was not perhaps so backward in some things as in others. But, apart from mere book-learning, did Mr. Turner think that I had the framework, the grit, the *health* for a life in the open? "You see, his mother...."

"He looks a bit pasty," said Mr. Turner, still quietly grinning at me. "But you can't always tell by the skin. What about those biceps, young man?"

I put out my arm, and he gripped it hard above the elbow, not noticing, perhaps, that I had two jackets on. And he said, "Pretty good. Do they drill you much at school? Or is it nothing but book-learning?" I nodded, and said, "Yes; and things at home, too."

"What do you do at home?" says he.

Now all this time I had been feeling like a bottle of ginger-beer before the cork pops out. So when he gave the word, so to speak, I upped with my heels and pretty nearly *trotted* across the room on the palms of my hands.

"Bravo," said Mr. Turner. "Try that on the table."

It was a circular solid old-fashioned mahogany table, made when Queen Victoria was a girl, and I circumnavigated it on my fingers and thumbs as nimbly as a cat. But now my blood was up. To give me room, a couple of tumblers, a bottle of water, and a decanter of whisky had been pushed into the middle of the table. Balancing myself on one hand, I poured out with the other a noggin of the water—for I couldn't quite venture on the whisky—into one of the tumblers, and singing out, "*Nelson, for ever!*" drank it off. Then, spluttering and half-choking, I got down from the table, and at last looked at my father.

'He was so pale as to be all but green. He looked as if he was sea-sick. He said, "Has your mother ever seen you do such things as that?" I shook my head. But Mr. Turner was laughing. What's more, he hadn't finished with me yet.

"Have you got such a thing as a stout piece of rope, William—say a dozen fathom?" he asked my father. There were few things my father was *not* possessor of. We went out into the garden, and as neat as ninepence Mr. Turner flung a bight of the rope over one of the upper branches of a fine shady sycamore that grew so close to the house that its leaves in summer actually brushed against its windows.

"Try that, young man," said my father's friend, Mr. Turner, when he had made it fast.

'Well, whether it was due to the devil in Sandy Two or only to the workings of the magic jacket, I don't know, but I shinned up that unknotted rope like a monkey up a palm tree. And when I reached the top, I edged along on my stomach till I was almost at the end of the bough. Then at arms' length I began to dandle on it—up and down, up and down, like a monkey on elastic. When it had given me enough swing and impetus—what's called *momentum*—I let go—and landed as pat as a pea-shooter through the open window on to the landing, the sill of which was some twelve feet from the ground.

'When I came down into the garden again, my father and Mr. Turner were having a close, earnest talk together, under the sycamore. My father looked at me as if I had just come back from the Andaman Islands.

'I said, "Was that all right, daddy?"

'But he made no answer; only patted me on the shoulder, turning his head away. And from that moment, and for ever after, we were the best of friends, my father and I; though he never had the ghost of a notion of what had caused Sandy Two—whom, mind you, he had never noticed before—to sprout like that!

'But then, that's how things go. And—to cut a long story short—by hook and by crook, by twisting and turning—chiefly my father's—which would take too long to put down in black and white, I won free of groceries at last for good and all. And the next spring I went to sea for a trial voyage. And after *that*, though it was pretty hard going—well, I got into the Navy.

'And now, here I am, for good and all on land again. Not much short of being an old man, but still, thank God, hale and hearty, and able and willing, I hope, to do a fellow creature a good turn at need. And this, my lad, is where *you* come in.

'The fact of the matter is, I had watched you scabbling away with your chalks at your pitch in Little St. Ann's a good many days before you knew it. And I came to two conclusions. First, that your pictures are proof that you can do good work. And second, that you could do much better. What I feel is you keep *yourself* back, do you see? It's the old story of Sandy One and Sandy Two. You haven't the confidence, the go, the guts (in a word), to forge clean ahead, *your* way.

'That's what I say. I see you setting to work in the morning like a young cockatrice, but presently you begin to waver, you become slack and dispirited. The least little mishap—a broken chalk, some oaf *walking* over the pictures, even a cloud floating up over the sun—shakes your nerve. At such times you don't seem to be sure even of what you want to do, let alone how to do it. You niggle at a picture first one way, then another, and at the end give it up in despair, the zest gone, and the fancy gone, and the spirit—what I call the innards—gone too. And when any stranger speaks to you, or drops a copper in your cap, you flush up, droop, go limp and dumb, and look as if butter wouldn't melt in your mouth.

'Now first, my boy, don't mind what I am saying. It is for your *sake*. I wouldn't be taking the trouble except only and solely in the hope and wish of doing you a small service. And remember this, I've been through it all before you—and may, when the end comes, again. I've known what it is to feel my bones melt in my body, to tremble like a jelly, my face like a plaster mask and my skull as empty as a hulk on a sandbank. In

two words, I know of old what it's like to be *Sandy One*. So, you see, it's because I'm morally certain there's a *Sandy Two* in *you*—and maybe one beyond anything I can conjecture—that I'm writing this now.

'I like the cut of your jib, and the way you stick to things in spite of all dispiritment and the dumps. I had my eye on him when you marked the mug (for good, I hope) of that suety butcher's boy the other day who spat on your Old Boney. I want to give you a hand *in your own line*, and see no better way of doing it than by just lending you my old Pekin jacket for a bit. Now what do you think about that?

'Maybe it won't work. Maybe its magic's gone. Maybe I imagine as much as I remember about it. But I can say *this*—the last time I squeezed into it before the toughest engagement I ever came out of alive I reckon it blew up the enemy's ship at least two hours before she'd have gone to the bottom in the usual way. Mind you, I haven't *often* used it. When I was your age, an hour or two of it tired me out for half the next week. A day or two of it might take a complete month to recover from. Besides, if you look at the matter by and large, and fair and square, you can see it wouldn't do. In the long run we have to trust to what we have in us that's constant and natural, so to speak, and work like a nigger at that. It's only in tight corners we need a little extra fire and frenzy. *Then* maybe Dame Fortune will see fit to lend a helping hand.

'So all I say is, give the jacket a trial. There is almost room for two of you in it—so if you don't want it to be noticeable, put it on under your own coat, and see how things go. And last, remember this, my boy; whatever happens, I shall still be keeping an eye on you. As my dear mother used to say, "There may be more than one way home, Sandy—but it's trudging does it." And here's good luck; God bless you; and *Finis!*'

It was the last page of Admiral Rumbold's 'yarn'. Mike turned it over, looked at the back, coughed, and drank down what was left of his cold cocoa. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and looked up as he did so at the round yellow face of the clock that hung on the wall at the further end of the shop. At that very moment, it seemed, it had begun to tick. The long hand stood at two minutes before the hour. The old gentleman must be expecting him now—this very minute! Had he meant him to open the parcel and put on the jacket inside it there and then? His face flushed, then paled—he couldn't make up his mind. His head was in a whirl; his heart thumping under his ribs; he broke out hot and damp all over.

While he was still debating what he should do, he noticed that the man who had brought him the food—with his long tallow-coloured face and pale grey eyes—was steadily though vacantly watching him. Mike got up in haste, pushed the remnants of his last door-step of beef and bacon into his pocket, hastily snatched up the Admiral's manuscript and brown-paper parcel, and left the eating-house.

Before actually turning the corner which would bring him in sight of his pitch, he peeped round to see if the old gentleman was anywhere to be seen. He certainly was. At this actual moment he was walking away from Mike—square compact shoulders, brown billycock hat, and firm rolling tread. When once more he returned to the pictures he paused, looked them over one by one, dropped something into the cap, and continued on his way. In less than a minute or so he was back again, had taken another look, and once more paid his fee.

It appeared as if Admiral Rumbold had been so engaged ever since he had left Mike in the coffee-shop; and there could be no doubt he had by this means attracted passers-by to follow his example and look at the pictures. Many, it is true, just glanced and passed on; but a few paid their coppers. The old gentleman was now approaching the street corner where Mike was in hiding, so Mike stepped out a little shamefacedly, and met him there and then.

'Aha!' cried Admiral Rumbold. 'So there you are! Good! And sharp to time. Did you finish it? Good! Have you got it on?'

Mike went red, then white. He said: 'I have read it, every page, sir, but the jacket's still in the paper, because——'

'Be dashed to "Because"!' cried the Admiral. 'Come a pace or two down that alley yonder. We'll soon put that right.'

So they went off together into the shelter of an alley near by, above which the green leaves of a plane tree showed over the glass-bottled wall; and Mike, having taken off his own old loose long coat, slipped into the Chinese jacket as easily as an eel, and then back into his own again on top of it. Admiral Rumbold, having crushed up the brown paper into a ball, tied the string round it, and lightly flung it over the wall. 'Good luck to it!' said he.

'Now,' he added, and looked at Mike—then paused. The boy stood motionless, as though he were frozen, yet he was trembling. His lips were moving. He seemed to be trying to say something for which he could not find the words. When at last he lifted his face and looked up, the old Admiral was astonished at the black-blue of his eyes in his pale face. It was the dark dazzling blue of deep seas. The Admiral could not for the life of him remember where he had seen eyes resembling them. They were unlike the eyes of boy or man or child or woman, and yet *somewhere* he had seen their like. Mike was smiling.

'The green crocodiles, sir,' he said, fingering one of the buttons. 'Most of them are not much bigger than ha'pennies, but you can feel all the horny parts, and even the eyes stickin' out of their heads.'

'Ay, ay,' said the Admiral. 'That's Chinese work. That's how *they* work—at least in times gone by. But how do you feel, how do you *feel*, my lad?'

Mike gazed up an instant at his old friend; then his glance roved on and upward towards the pale-green pentagonal plane leaves above his head and the patch of blue and sunny sky beyond. A smart north-west breeze was blowing, and a mountainous cloud was moving up into the heights of noonday.

'I'd like,' he answered huskily, 'to get back to the pitchers, sir.'

'Ay, ay!' cried the Admiral. And again, 'Ay, ay! Back we go.' So the two of them set off together.

And though to all outward appearance the old gentleman, whose face was all but as red as a pimento, was as cool as a cucumber when he came stumping along beside his young acquaintance, his excitement was intense. It was Mike who had now taken the lead. The Admiral was merely following in his wake. The boy seemed utterly changed, made over again. There was a look to him even as he walked that was as lively as a peal of bells. It was as if *his* bright and burning sun had suddenly shone out between clouds as cold as granite, lighting up the heavens. What was to happen next?

First, Mike took up his cap, and with not even a glance at what was inside it, emptied its contents into his coat pocket. He then paced slowly on from one picture to the next, until he had scrutinised the complete seven. From the pocket with the remains of the 'door-step' in it he then drew out his capacious strip of rag and hurried off to a dribbling water standard with a leopard's head on the spout about twenty-five yards away. There he wetted his rag through and through. He came back to his pictures, and in a few moments had completely rubbed every one of them out. No more than the faintest blur of pink and yellow was left to show that the paving-stones had ever lost their usual grey and in three minutes that was dowsed out too.

When he had finished this destruction, and the warm morning air had dried the stones again, he knelt down and set to work. He seemed to have forgotten the old Admiral, the Chinese jacket, everything that had happened that morning. He seemed to be wholly unaware of the passers-by, the dappling sunbeams, the clatter and stir of the street, and even who and where and what he was. Skinny and engrossed, he squatted on his hams there, huddled up under the wall, and *worked*.

Admiral Rumbold, as he watched him, became almost alarmed at the rapidity with which things were taking shape on the blank paving-stones. As if by magic and before his very eyes there had loomed into view a full-rigged ship, swimming buoyant as a swan on the blue of its waters, its masts tapering up into the heavens, its sails bellying like drifts of snow; while from its portholes pushed the metal mouths of such dogs as he himself had often heard bark, and seldom to no purpose.

It was not so much the resemblance of this picture to a real ship on a real sea under a real sky that drew out of his mouth

a grunted, 'Begad, begad!' but something in the look of the thing, some spirit living and lovely and everlasting behind it all, to which he could not have given name, but which reminded him of the eyes that had looked up at him a few minutes before under the plane leaves in the alley after their first intense glance at the crocodile buttons. Yes, and reminded him too of an evening long ago when he had made the circuit of his mother's mahogany dining-table on little more of his anatomy than his thumbs.

By this time a few other wayfarers had begun to collect and to watch the young street artist at his work. It did not seem to matter that he had forgotten to put back his cap in its customary place, that in fact it was on his head, for, oddly enough, when these idlers turned away, though every single one of them seemed to marvel at the quickness and skill of the boy, yet they all seemed *anxious* to be gone, and nobody gave him a ha'penny.

Admiral Rumbold could stand the strain no longer. He firmly placed a half-crown beside the little heap of coloured chinks, coughed loudly, paused an instant, and then, seeing that Mike had not noticed him, stole off and left him to his work.

The worst of the Admiral's anxieties were over. There could be no doubt in the world that the magic jacket had lost not one whit of its powers since first he had slipped into it himself all but sixty years ago. The only thing that troubled him was that not a single farthing had been bestowed on the young artist in the last quarter of an hour. Nevertheless, he thought he knew why.

'They're scared!' he muttered to himself. 'They don't know what to make of it. They see it's a marvel and a miracle—and beyond 'em. They don't like the smell of it. They think it's dangerous. They just watch and wonder and sneak away. Well, my dear Rumbold, why *not*? Have patience. Never mind that. Wait and see!'

He loaded himself up with coppers the next morning, and returned very early to the narrow terrace behind Great St. Ann's. The night before had been rainless; only the lightest of dews had fallen. It had been windless, too, and there was a moon; so that the row of pictures which Mike had left unfinished on the pavement must have faintly bloomed under her beams that whole night long, and now were as fresh as they were at the first making of them. Admiral Rumbold had sallied out at this unusual hour to steal a glance at them alone; but Mike had been up before him.

There he was—on his knees once more—deaf and blind it seemed to everything in the world outside him, and intent only on his pictures. His old friend didn't interrupt him, but left him to himself, and went off to get some breakfast at his club. When he returned the boy had vanished for the time being. Five pictures out of the customary seven were now complete.

The Admiral stared and stared at them, part in astonishment, part in inexpressible delight, and part in the utmost dismay. Two of them—the ship, 'The Old Victory' and the new 'Hornted'—were more vivid and astonishing things than (with French chinks and paving-stones) he had thought even possible. The rest he felt uneasily were beyond his comprehension. He could hardly make head or tail of them.

One was called 'Peepul at Sunset'. It reminded him of Shadrach, Meshech, and Abednego walking in the midst of the burning fiery furnace. Another was called 'The Blind Man'; it showed a chair, a table with a bowl of flowers, and a dish of fruit on it. There was an open window, too. It seemed to shimmer and glow and blaze like precious stones. But to the Admiral's eye the chair was all clumped and crooked, and the flowers looked queer—half human. He had never in all his born days seen a picture of a chair like that. Besides, there was not even a sign of a human being, let alone a blind man, to be seen! He stirred, coughed softly. He sighed; and glanced into the ragged cap. It was now a quarter to ten; the cap contained a French penny, a British ha'penny, and a three-penny bit with a hole in it. The Admiral lugged out of his pocket a handful of coppers, and added them to what was there. Off and on throughout the day he kept an eye on the young street artist. Of two things he was at last certain: first, that Mike was still wearing the jacket; and next, that he had made (apart from his own donations) practically no profit. For you cannot pick up coloured chinks in the gutter, or patch the knees of your old breeches with the empty air! The boy could hardly have taken an independent sixpence.

Admiral Rumbold began to be a little anxious as he thought this dark fact over, but decided not to interfere. Next day he knocked fairly early at the door of a lodging-house nearly opposite Mike's pitch.

'Good morning,' he said, as soon as it was opened. 'I'd like, if you please, to have the window again. Is it free?'

'Certainly, sir,' said the woman who had answered his knock. 'I'm glad you enjoy the view, sir. It's a pity there's so much wall.'

'It's not the bricks, ma'am, but the people,' replied the Admiral, as he followed her up a flight of stairs into a room which immediately overlooked the street.

There—behind the Brussels curtains at the window, and seated on a rather lumpy armchair—the Admiral spent most of his morning, watching all that went on in the street below, but especially the boy. And once more he came to two conclusions: first, that Mike was *not* now wearing the jacket, and next that he was making less money even than the day before. *Life* seemed to be gone out of him. He sat hunched up beside his chinks and his empty cap—his bony face as grey as ashes. He hardly dared even raise his eyes when anybody paused to examine his pictures. Now and again, however, he would glance anxiously up and down the street as if in search of somebody.

'He's looking for me,' muttered the Admiral to himself. 'He wants to return the jacket. God bless *me*! Still, steady does it; steady does it.'

He returned to his window in the early afternoon. The boy looked even more miserable and dejected than ever, but none the less he had begun to tinker a bit at his picture, 'The Old Victory'. On this occasion the Admiral had brought field-glasses with him. With these he could now watch his young friend at work so closely as almost to fancy he could hear him breathe. Indeed, he could see even a round-headed ant making its way along the crack between two paving-stones; and the tiny bits of chalk resembled coloured rocks.

Mike laboured on, now rubbing out, now chalking in, and the Admiral could follow every tint and line and stroke. At last—though by no means as if he were satisfied—the boy stood up and examined what he had done. At sight of it he seemed to droop and shrink. And no wonder. The Admiral almost wept aloud. The thing was ruined. There was the ship, there the sea, and there the sky; but where the lovely light and airiness, the romance, the wonder? Where the *picture*?

Admiral Rumbold was at his wits' end. The day was drawing on. He began to think that his intended kindness had ruined the boy for good and all. He sat back in his chair absolutely at a loss what to do next. One thing was certain. He must go soon and have a word with the boy—hearten and liven him up. He must give him a good square meal, put some 'beef into him, and—perhaps—take the jacket back. It had been little but a deceit and a failure. He must take the jacket back, then think things over.

He leant forward to rise from his chair, and as he did so cast a last desperate glance at the opposite side of the street. Then he paused. Fine weather was still in the heavens. The first colours of evening were beginning to stretch across London's skies—shafts of primrose, melted gold, and faint crimson lighting up the walls of the houses, flooding the streets with light. And Mike was no longer alone. He was still squatting tailor-fashion under his wall and as motionless as if he had been carved out of ebony, but a pace or so away stood an odd-looking old gentleman in a sort of long curry-coloured ulster. This old gentleman had a beard and wore a high conical black felt hat with a wide rim to it. An umbrella, less neat but more formidable in appearance even than the Admiral's, was tucked under his arm.

He was not merely looking at, he was intent on, 'lost' in the pictures. He stooped over them each in turn, spending at least two or three minutes over every one, except 'The Old Victory', at which he just glanced and went on.

When he found himself at the end of the row, he turned back and examined them all over again. Admiral Rumbold watched these proceedings with bated breath. The old man in the ulster had now turned to Mike, who at once scrambled to his feet, leaving his chinks, his cap, and a small newspaper parcel on the pavement. The two of them in the clear-coloured evening light were soon talking together almost as if they were father and son. They were talking about the pictures, too; for every now and again Mike's new acquaintance, bent almost double, would point with the stump of his umbrella at one of them, tracing out a line, or hovering over a patch of colour. At the same time, his beard turned over his shoulder towards Mike, he would seem to be praising, or criticising, or explaining, or asking questions. Once, indeed, he stooped, caught up a piece of chalk, and himself drew a few lines on the pavement as if to show the boy

exactly what he meant. 'So!' the Admiral heard him end, brushing his fingers.

There could be no doubt this eccentric old gentleman in the wide black hat was interested not only in the pictures but also in Mike. He looked as if in his excitement he might go on talking till midnight. But no; at this very moment he seemed to be making some kind of proposal to the boy. He had put his hand on his shoulder as if in encouragement. Mike hesitated; then cast a long look into the sky, as if to consult the weather. After that his mind seemed to be made up. He hastily took up his cap, his chinks, and his parcel, and the two of them set off down Little St. Ann's together.

At this Admiral Rumbold paused no longer. He seized his hard billycock hat, his field-glasses and his malacca cane, and clattered down the stairs out into the street. Keeping well behind them, he followed Mike and the old gentleman out of Little St. Ann's into Ashley Court, and so across into Jermyn Street. At this corner, so intent was he in his pursuit, that he barely escaped being run over by a two-horse grocery van.

Mike and the old gentleman were now so clearly in sight that the Admiral had time to pause and address a policeman.

'Good evening, constable,' he said. 'I want you to tell me if by any chance you happen to know the *name* of that old gentleman in the hat yonder, walking with that lad there?'

The policeman fixed his eyes on the pair.

'Well, sir, to tell you the truth, sir,' he said at last, 'I've *seen* him somewhere though I couldn't say rightly just where. I've even been told who he *is*. But bless me, if I can lay tongue to the name of him. I wish I could, sir. He looks as if it might be worth while.' Admiral Rumbold thanked the policeman and hastened on.

At the moment when he once more came within sight of the two of them a long-haired youngish young man in a dark, loose cape or cloak had but just met and passed them by. This young man was also wearing a black wide-brimmed hat. As soon as politeness permitted, he not only stopped dead, but stood intently watching the pair until Admiral Rumbold himself had come up with him. The Admiral glanced him over.

'You will excuse me, sir,' he said, 'but if I am not mistaken, you are as much interested in that old gentleman yonder as I am myself. A most impressive figure! Could you oblige me with his *name*?'

'His *name*, sir!' exclaimed the young man. 'Gracious heavens! why, that's old B——. That's "old B. in a Bonnet"!—the crankiest, craziest old creature in the British Isles. But make no mistake, sir. What that old boy doesn't know about pictures and painting isn't worth a tallow candle. He's a Master. Wait till he's dead, that's all. Then the whole world will be wagging with him.'

'You don't say *so*!' shouted the Admiral. 'A *Master! Painting!*—eh? I am very greatly obliged to 'ee—very greatly obliged. And you think if he's taken a fancy to that lad there—*sees* promise in him, I mean—well—that the lad's in luck's way?'

'Think?' replied the young man. 'Bless your heart, sir, I *know*.'

The Admiral detained him no longer. He saluted him and passed on. He could say no more. He was satisfied. All was well. The magic jacket, then, had *not* played him false; Mike's 'steepish bit of hill' was well begun. He found himself at the further end of Jermyn Street, and in the traffic of the Haymarket. The old man in the ulster had disappeared. But no, there he was—old B.—some little distance down on the opposite side of the street, and at the window of a print-seller's shop. He was talking to the boy at his side—pointing, gesticulating, his bushy beard wagging. And Mike was listening, gazing in, entranced. Admiral Rumbold turned on his heel. He had never professed to know much about pictures. Then why should he now suddenly feel downcast and depressed? He was tired, too, and extremely thirsty. It was almost as if he missed his jacket.

[End of *The Magic Jacket* by Walter de la Mare]