

Fortitude

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BOOK I
SCAW HOUSE

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO COURAGE

I

"'TISN'T life that matters! 'Tis the courage you bring to it" . . . this from old Frosted Moses in the warm corner by the door. There might have been an answer, but Dicky Tasset, the Town Idiot, filled in the pause with the tale that he was telling Mother Figgis. "And I ran—a mile or more with the stars dotted all over the ground for yer pickin', as yer might say . . ."

A little boy, Peter Westcott, heard what old Frosted Moses had said, and turned it over in his mind. He was twelve years old, was short and thick-necked, and just now looked very small because he was perched on so high a chair. It was one of the four ancient chairs that Sam Figgis always kept in the great kitchen behind the tap-room. He kept them there partly because they were so very old and partly because they fell in so pleasantly with the ancient colour and strength of the black smoky rafters. The four ancient chairs were carved up the legs with faces and arms and strange crawling animals and their backs were twisted into the oddest shapes and were uncomfortable to lean against, but Peter Westcott sat up very straight with his little legs dangling in front of him and his grey eyes all over the room at once. He could not see all of the room because there were depths that the darkness seized and filled, and the great fiery place, with its black-stained settle, was full of mysterious shadows. A huge fire was burning and leaping in the fastnesses of that stone cavity, and it was by the light of this alone that the room was illumined—and this had the effect as Peter noticed, of making certain people, like Mother Figgis and Jane Clewer, quite monstrous, and fantastic with their skirts and hair and their shadows on the wall. Before Frosted

Moses had said that sentence about Courage, Peter had been taking the room in. Because he had been there very often before he knew every flagstone in the floor and every rafter in the roof and all the sporting pictures on the walls, and the long shining row of mugs and coloured plates by the fire-place and the cured hams hanging from the ceiling . . . but to-night was Christmas Eve and a very especial occasion, and he was sure to be beaten when he got home, and so must make the very most of his time. He watched the door also for Stephen Brant, who was late, but might arrive at any moment. Had it not been for Stephen Brant Peter knew that he would not have been allowed there at all. The Order of the Kitchen was jealously guarded and Sam Figgis, the Inn-keeper, would have considered so small a child a nuisance, but Stephen was the most popular man in the county, and he had promised that Peter would be quiet—and he *was* quiet, even at that age; no one could be so quiet as Peter when he chose. And then they liked the boy after a time. He was never in the way, and he was wonderfully wise for his years: he was a strong kid, too, and had muscles . . .

So Peter crept there when he could, although it very often meant a beating afterwards, but the Kitchen was worth a good many beatings, and he would have gone through Hell—and did indeed go through his own special Hell on many occasions—to be in Stephen's company. They were all nice to him even when Stephen wasn't there, but there were other reasons, besides the people, that drew Peter to the place.

It was partly perhaps because The Bending Mule was built right out into the sea, being surrounded on three sides by water. This was all twenty years ago, and I believe that now the Inn has been turned into an Arts Club, and there are tea-parties and weekly fashion papers where there had once been those bloody fights and Mother Figgis sitting like some witch over the fire; but it is no matter. Trellis is changed, of course, and so is the world, and there are politeness and sentiment where once there were oaths and ferocity, and there is much soap instead of grimy hands and unwashed faces . . . and the fishing

is sadly on the decline, but there are good drapers' shops in the town.

For Peter the charm of the place was that "he was out at sea." One could hear quite distinctly the lap of the waves against the walls and on stormy nights the water screamed and fought and raged outside and rolled in thundering echoes along the shore. To-night everything was still, and the snow was falling heavily, solemnly over the town.

The snow, and the black sea, and the lights that rose tier on tier like crowds at a circus, could be seen through the uncurtained windows.

The snow and quiet of the world "out-along" made the lights and warmth of the room the more comforting and exciting, and Sam Figgis had hung holly about the walls and dangled a huge bunch of mistletoe from the middle beam and poor Jane Clewer was always walking under it accidentally and waiting a little, but nobody kissed her. These things Peter noticed; he also noticed that Dicky the Idiot was allowed to be present as a very great favour because it was Christmas Eve and snowing so hard, that the room was more crowded than he had ever seen it, and that Mother Figgis, with her round face and her gnarled and knotted hands, was at her very merriest and in the best of tempers. All these things Peter had noticed before Frosted Moses (so called because of his long white beard and wonderful age) made his remark about Courage, but as soon as that remark was made Peter's thoughts were on to it as the hounds are on to a fox.

"'Tisn't life that matters, but the Courage yer bring to it . . ."

That, of course, at once explained everything. It explained his own father and his home, it explained poor Mrs. Prothero and her two sons who were drowned, it explained Stephen's cousin who was never free from the most painful rheumatics, and it explained Stephen himself who was never afraid of any one or anything. Peter stared at Frosted Moses, whose white beard was shining in the fire-place and his boots were like large black boats; but the old man was drawing at his pipe, and had made his

remark apparently in connection with nothing at all. Peter was also disappointed to see that the room at large had paid no attention to the declaration.

Courage. That was what they were all there for, and soon, later in the evening, he would take his beating like a man, and would not cry out as he had done the last time. And then, at the thought of the beating, he shivered a little on his tall chair and his two short legs in their black stockings beat against the wooden bars, and wished that he might have stayed in some dark corner of The Bending Mule during the rest of the night and not go home until the morning—or, indeed, a very much better and happier thing, never go home again at all. He would get a worse beating for staying out so late, but it was something of a comfort to reflect that he would have been beaten in any case; old Simon Parlow, who taught him mathematics and Latin, with a little geography and history during six days of the week, had given him that morning a letter to his father directed in the old man's most beautiful handwriting to the effect that Master Westcott had made no progress at all in his sums during the last fortnight, had indeed made no attempt at progress, and had given William Daffoll, the rector's son, a bleeding nose last Wednesday when he ought to have been adding, dividing, and subtracting. Old Parlow had shown him the letter so that Peter knew that there was no escape, unless indeed Peter destroyed the paper, and that only meant that punishment was deferred.

Yes, it meant a beating, and Peter had hung about the town and the shore all the afternoon and evening because he was afraid. This fact of his fear puzzled him and he had often considered the matter. He was not, in any other way, a coward, and he had done, on many occasions, things that other friends of his own age had hung back from, but the thought of his father made him quite sick with fear somewhere in the middle of his stomach. He considered the matter very carefully and he decided at last (and he was very young for so terrible a discovery) that it was because his father liked beating him that he was afraid. He knew that his father liked it because he

had watched his mouth and had heard the noise that came through his lips. And this, again, was rather strange because his father did not look as though he would like it; he had a cold face like a stone and was always in black clothes, but he did not, as a rule, show that he was pleased or angry or sorry—he never showed things.

Now these words of Frosted Moses explained everything. It was because his father knew that it was Courage that mattered that he liked to beat Peter . . . it was good for Peter to learn Courage.

"'Tisn't life that matters" . . . it isn't a beating that matters . . .

Frosted Moses was a great deal wiser than old Simon Parlow, who, in spite of his knowing so much about sums, knew nothing whatever about life. He knew nothing whatever about Courage either and shook like a leaf when his sister, Miss Jessel Parlow, was angry with him, as she very often had reason to be. Peter despised the old man with his long yellow tooth that hung over his lower lip, and his dirty grey hair that strayed from under his greasy black velvet cap (like wisps of hay). Peter never cared anything for the words or the deeds of old Parlow. . . . But Frosted Moses! . . . he had lived for ever, and people said that he could never die. Peter had heard that he had been in the Ark with Noah, and he had often wished to ask him questions about that interesting period, about Ham, Shem and Japheth, and about the animals. Of course, therefore, he knew everything about Life, and this remark of his about Courage was worth considering. Peter watched him very solemnly and noticed how his white beard shone in the fire-light, how there was a red handkerchief falling out of one enormous pocket, and how there was a big silver ring on one brown and bony finger . . . and then the crowd of sailors at the door parted, and Stephen Brant came in.

II

Stephen Brant, the most wonderful person in the world! Always, through life, Peter must have his most wonderful person, and sometimes those Heroes knew of it and

lived up to his worshipping and sometimes they knew of it and could not live up to it, but most frequently they never knew because Peter did not let them see. This Hero worship is at the back of a great deal that happened to Peter, of a great deal of his sorrow, and of all of his joy, and he would not have been Peter without it; very often these Heroes, poor things, came tumbling from their pedestals, often they came, in very shame, down of their own accord, and perhaps of them all Stephen only was worthy of his elevation, and he never knew that he was elevated.

He knew now, of course, that Peter loved him; but Peter was a little boy, and was taken by persons who were strong and liked a laugh and were kind in little ways. Stephen knew that when Peter grew older he must love other and wiser people. He was a very large man, six foot three and broad, with a brown beard, and grey eyes like Peter's. He had been a fisherman, but now he was a farmer, because it paid better—he had an old mother, one enemy, and very many friends; he had loved a girl, and she had been engaged to him for two years, but another man had taken her away and married her—and that is why he had an enemy. He greeted his friends and kissed poor Jane Clewer under the mistletoe, and then kissed old Mother Figgis, who pushed him away with a laugh and “Coom up there—where are yer at?”—and Peter watched him until his turn also should come. His legs were beating the wooden bars again with excitement, but he would not say anything. He saw Stephen as something very much larger and more stupendous than any one else in the room. There were men there bigger of body perhaps, and men who were richer—Stephen had only four cows on his farm and he never did much with his hay—but there was no one who could change a room simply by entering it as Stephen could.

At last the moment came—Stephen turned round—“Why, boy!”

Peter was glad that the rest of the room was busied once more with its talking, laughing, and drinking, and some old man (sitting on a table and his nose coming

through the tobacco-smoke like a rat through a hole in the wall) had struck up a tune on a fiddle. Peter was glad, because no one watched them together. He liked to meet Stephen in private. He buried his small hand in the brown depths of Stephen's large one, and then as Stephen looked uncertainly round the room, he whispered: "Steve—my chair, and me sitting on you—please."

It was a piece of impertinence to call him "Steve," of course, and when other people were there it was "Mr. Brant," but in their own privacy it was their own affair. Peter slipped down from his chair, and Stephen sat down on it, and then Peter was lifted up and leant his head back somewhere against the middle button of Stephen's waist-coat, just where his heart was noisiest, and he could feel the hard outline of Stephen's enormous silver watch that his family had had, so Stephen said, for a hundred years. Now was the blissful time, the perfect moment. The rest of the world was busied with life—the window showed the dull and then suddenly shining flakes of snow, the lights and the limitless sea—the room showed the sanded floor, the crowd of fishermen drinking, their feet moving already to the tune of the fiddle, the fisher girls with their coloured shawls, the great, swinging smoky lamp, the huge fire, Dicky the fool, Mother Figgis, fat Sam the host, old Frosted Moses . . . the gay romantic world—and these two in their corner, and Peter so happy that no beatings in the world could terrify.

"But, boy," says Stephen, bending down so that the end of his beard tickles Peter's neck, "what are yer doing here so late? Your father . . . ?"

"I'm going back to be beaten, of course."

"If yer go now perhaps yer won't be beaten so bad?"

"Oh, Steve! . . . I'm staying . . . like this . . . always."

But Peter knew, in spite of the way that the big brown hand pressed his white one in sympathy, that Stephen was worried and that he was thinking of something. He knew, although he could not see, that Stephen's eyes were staring right across the room and that they were looking, in the

way that they had, past walls and windows and streets—somewhere for something . . .

Peter knew a little about Stephen's trouble. He did not understand it altogether, but he had seen the change in Stephen, and he knew that he was often very sad, and that moods came upon him when he could do nothing but think and watch and wait—and then his face grew very grey and his eyes very hard, and his hands were clenched. Peter knew that Stephen had an enemy, and that one day he would meet him.

Some of the men and girls were dancing now in the middle of the room. The floor and the walls shook a little with the noise that the heavy boots of the fishermen made and the smoky lamp swung from side to side. The heat was great and some one opened the window and the snow came swirling, in little waves and eddies, in and out, blown by the breeze—dark and heavy outside against the clouded sky, white and delicate and swiftly vanishing in the room. Dicky the Fool came across the floor and talked to Stephen in his smiling, rambling way. People pitied Dicky and shook their heads when his name was mentioned, but Peter never could understand this because the Fool seemed always to be happy and cheerful, and he saw so many things that other people never saw at all. It was only when he was drunk that he was unhappy, and he was pleased with such very little things, and he told such *wonderful* stories.

Stephen was always kind to the Fool, and the Fool worshipped him, but to-night Peter saw that he was paying no heed to the Fool's talk. The Fool had a story about three stars that he had seen rolling down the Grey Hill, and behold, when they got to the bottom—"little bright nickety things, like new saxpennies—it was suddenly so dark that Dicky had to light his lantern and grope his way home with that, and all the frogs began croaking down in the marsh 'something terrible'—now what was the meaning of that?"

But Stephen was paying no attention. His eyes were set on the open window and the drifting snow. Men came in stamping their great boots on the floor and rubbing

their hands together—the fiddle was playing *mōre* madly than ever—and at every moment some couple would stop under the mistletoe and the girl would scream and laugh, and the man's kiss could be heard all over the room; through the open window came the sound of church bells.

Stephen bent down and whispered in the boy's ear: "Yer'd best be going now, Peter, lad. 'Tis half-past nine and, chance, if yer go back now yer lickin' 'ull not be so bad."

But Peter whispered back: "Not yet, Stephen—a little while longer."

Peter was tremendously excited. He could never remember being quite so excited before. It was all very thrilling, of course, with the dancing and the music and the lights, but there was more than that in it. Stephen was so unlike himself, but then possibly Christmas made him sad, because he would be thinking of last Christmas and the happy time that he had had because his girl had been with him—but there was more than that in it. Then, suddenly, a curious thing happened to Peter. He was not asleep, he was not even drowsy—he was sitting with his eyes wide open, staring at the window. He saw the window with its dark frame, and he saw the snow . . . and then, in an instant, the room, the people, the music, the tramping of feet, the roar of voices, these things were all swept away, and instead there was absolute stillness, only the noise that a little wind makes when it rustles through the blades of grass, and above him rose the Grey Hill with its funny sugar-loaf top and against it heavy black clouds were driving—outlined sharply against the sky was the straight stone pillar that stood in the summit of the Grey Hill and was called by the people the Giant's Finger. He could hear some sheep crying in the distance and the tinkling of their bells. Then suddenly the picture was swept away, and the room and the people and the dancing were before him and around him once more. He was not surprised by this—it had happened to him before at the most curious times, he had seen, in the same way, the Grey Hill and the Giant's Finger and he had felt the cold wind about his neck, and always something had happened.

"Stephen," he whispered, "Stephen—"

But Stephen's hand was crushing his hand like an iron glove, and Stephen's eyes were staring, like the eyes of a wild animal, at the door. A man, a short, square man with a muffler round his throat, and a little mouth and little ears, had come in and was standing by the door, looking round the room.

Stephen whispered gently in Peter's ear: "Run home, Peter boy," and he kissed him very softly on the cheek—then he put him down on the floor.

Stephen rose from his chair and stood for an instant staring at the door. Then he walked across the room, brushing the people aside, and tapped the little man with the muffler on the shoulder:

"Samuel Burstead," he said, "good evenin' to yer."

III

All the room seemed to cease moving and talking at the moment when Stephen Brant said that. They stood where they were like the people in the *Sleeping Beauty*, and Peter climbed up on to his chair again to see what was going to happen. He pulled up his stockings, and then sat forward in his chair with his eyes gazing at Stephen and his hands very tightly clenched. When, afterwards, he grew up and thought at all about his childhood, this scene always remained, over and beyond all the others. He wondered sometimes why it was that he remembered it all so clearly, that he had it so dramatically and forcibly before him, when many more recent happenings were clouded and dull, but when he was older he knew that it was because it stood for so much of his life, it was because that Christmas Eve in those dim days was really the beginning of everything, and in the later interpretation of it so much might be understood.

But, to a boy of that age, the things that stood out were not, of necessity, the right things and any unreality that it might have had was due perhaps to his fastening on the incidental, fantastic things that a small child notices, always more vividly than a grown person. In the very

first instant of Stephen's speaking to the man with the muffler it was Dicky the Fool's open mouth and staring eyes that showed Peter how important it was. The Fool had risen from his chair and was standing leaning forward, his back black against the blazing fire, his silly mouth agape and great terror in his eyes. Being odd in his mind, he felt perhaps something in the air that the others did not feel, and Peter seemed to catch fright from his staring eyes.

The man at the door had turned round when Stephen Brant spoke to him, and had pushed his way out of the crowd of men and stood alone fingering his neck.

"I'm here, Stephen Brant, if yer want me."

Sam Figgis came forward then and said something to Stephen, and then shrugged his shoulders and went back to his wife. He seemed to feel that no one could interfere between the two men—it was too late for interference. Then things happened very quickly. Peter saw that they had all—men and women—crowded back against the benches and the wall and were watching, very silently and with great excitement. He found it very difficult to see, but he bent his head and peered through the legs of a big fisherman in front of him. He was shaking all over his body. Stephen had never before appeared so terrible to him; he had seen him when he was very angry and when he was cross and ill-tempered, but now he was very ominous in his quiet way, and his eyes seemed to have changed colour. The small boy could only see the middle of the floor and pieces of legs and skirts and trousers, but he knew by the feeling in the room that Stephen and the little man were going to fight. Then he moved his head round and saw between two shoulders, and he saw that the two men were stripping to the waist. The centre of the room was cleared, and Sam Figgis came forward to speak to Stephen again, and this time there was more noise, and the people began to shout out loud and the men grew more and more excited. There had often been fights in that room before, and Peter had witnessed one or two, but there had never been this solemnity and ceremony—every one was very grave. It did not occur to Peter that

It was odd that it should be allowed; no one thought of policemen twenty years ago in Treliss and Sam Figgis was more of a monarch in *The Bending Mule* than Queen Victoria. And now two of the famous old chairs were placed at opposite corners, and quite silently two men, with serious faces, as though this were the most important hour of their life, stood behind them. Stephen and the other man, stripped to their short woollen drawers, came into the middle of the room. Stephen had hair all over his chest, and his arms and his neck were tremendous; and Peter as he looked at him thought that he must be the strongest man in the world. His enemy was smooth and shiny, but he seemed very strong, and you could see the muscles of his arms and legs move under his skin. Some one had marked a circle with chalk, and all the men and women, quite silent now, made a dark line along the wall. The lamp in the middle of the room was still swinging a little, and they had forgotten to close the window, so that the snow, which was falling more lightly now, came in little clouds with breaths of wind, into the room—and the bells were yet pealing and could be heard very plainly against the silence.

Then Sam Figgis, who was standing with his legs wide apart, said something that Peter could not catch, and a little sigh of excitement went up all round the room. Peter, who was clutching his chair with both hands, and choking, very painfully, in his throat, knew, although he had no reason for his knowledge, that the little man with the shining chest meant to kill Stephen if he could.

The two men moved round the circle very slowly with their fists clenched and their eyes watching every movement—then, suddenly, they closed. At once Peter saw that the little man was very clever, cleverer than Stephen. He moved with amazing quickness. Stephen's blows came like sledge-hammers, and sometimes they fell with a dull heavy sound on the other man's face and on his chest, but more often they missed altogether. The man seemed to be everywhere at once, and although the blows that he gave Stephen seemed to have little effect yet he got past the other's defence again and again.

Then, again, the figures in front of Peter closed in and he saw nothing. He stood on his chair—no one noticed him now—but he could not see. His face was very white, and his stockings had fallen down over his boots, but with every movement he was growing more afraid. He caught an instant's vision of Stephen's face, and he saw that it was white and that he was breathing hard. The room seemed to be ominously silent, and then men would break out into strange threatening sounds, and Peter could see one woman—a young girl—with a red shawl about her shoulders, her back against the wall, staring with a white face.

He could not see—he could not see . . .

He murmured once very politely—he thought he said it aloud but it was really under his breath: "Please, please—would you mind—if you stood aside—just a little . . ." but the man in front of him was absorbed and heard nothing. Then he knew that there was a pause, he caught a glimpse of the brick floor and he saw that Stephen was sitting back in his chair—his face was white, and blood was trickling out from the corner of his mouth on to his beard. Then Peter remembered old Frosted Moses' words: "The courage you bring to it . . ." and he sat back in his chair again and, with hands clenched, waited. He would be brave, braver than he had ever been before, and perhaps in some strange way his bravery would help Stephen. He determined with all the power that he had to be brave. They had begun again, he heard the sound of the blows, the movement of the men's feet on the rough brick of the floor; people cried out, the man in front of him pressed forward and he had a sudden view. Stephen was on one knee and his head was down and the other man was standing over him. It was all over—Stephen was beaten—Stephen would be killed, and in another minute Peter would have pushed past the people and run into the middle of the room, but Sam Figgis had again come forward, and the two men were in their chairs again. There followed another terrible time when Peter could see nothing. He waited—he could hear them moving again, the noise of their breathing and of their feet, the

men in the crowd were pressing nearer, but there was no word spoken.

He must see—at all costs he must see. And he climbed down from his chair, and crept unnoticed towards the front. Nobody saw him or realised him. . . . Stephen was bending back, he seemed to be slowly sinking down. The other man, from whose face blood was now streaming, was pressing on to him. Peter knew that it was all over and that there was no hope; there was a dreadful cold, hard pain in his throat, and he could scarcely see. Courage! he must have it for Stephen. With every bit of his soul and his mind and his body he was brave. He stood taut—his little legs stiff beneath him and flung defiance at the world. He and Stephen were fighting that shiny man together—both of them—now. Courage! Stephen's head lifted a little, and then slowly Peter saw him pulling his body together—he grew rigid, he raised his head, and, as a tree falls, his fist crashed into his enemy's face. The man dropped without a word and lay motionless. It was over. Stephen gravely watched for a moment the senseless body and then sat back in his chair, his head bowed on his chest.

The fight had not, perhaps, been like that—there must have been many other things that happened, but that was always how Peter remembered it. And now there was confusion—a great deal of noise and people talking very loudly, but Stephen said nothing at all. He did not look at the body again, but when he had recovered a little, still without a word to any one and with his eyes grave and without expression, he moved to the corner where his clothes lay.

“'E's not dead.”

“No—give 'im room there, he's moving,” and from the back of the crowd the Fool's silly face, peering over . . .

Peter crept unnoticed to the door. The clocks were striking ten, and some one in the street was singing. He pulled up his stockings and fastened his garters, then he slipped out into the snow and saw that the sky was full of stars and that the storm had passed.