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## *Author's Note*

This is a story about a little boy who finds himself swept up into all kinds of strange (and occasionally rather scary) adventures. When, therefore, I came to look for an illustrator, I decided that I needed someone who was an expert on handling dangers of all kinds.

My problem was quickly solved. Who better, I thought, than Alexander, my five-year-old grandson? After all, if I were ever to find myself surrounded by fierce wild animals, or set upon by masked robbers, I could wish for no sturdier defender than Alexander: armed with no more than a stick plucked from a nearby hedge he could easily out-fence a whole horde of sword-wielding villains. Even the lack of a suitable stick would not deter this young Arthurian – as I know from experience, he also packs a mean karate kick.

One might think that the hand that wields the sword would find the pencil too delicate an instrument, but Alexander gives the lie to that. His drawings show an assurance of line that established artists will immediately recognise as the mark of the born illustrator. I am delighted that, with this little book, I have been able to bring such budding talent to the attention of what I have no doubt will be an admiring world.

Neil Johnson  
*Over Kellet, 2009*

## *Yellowbeard*

When seven-year-old Peter and his four-year-old sister Sally were told by their mum and dad that the whole family would be spending a few days with Auntie Joan and Uncle Maurice, they were not very happy about it.

‘Oh, mum,’ Peter moaned. ‘There’s nothing to do in Manchester. I *hate* big towns.’

Peter’s mum smiled. ‘Uncle Maurice has a new job,’ she said, ‘and he and Auntie Joan have moved away from Manchester. They’ve bought a lovely new house right out in the countryside.’

To Peter (who was, it must be admitted, sometimes rather difficult to please), that sounded even worse. The countryside was nothing but trees, fields, cows, and muddy lanes.

‘This,’ he whispered to Sally, ‘is going to be a really *boring* holiday.’

But how wrong he was!

Buttercup Cottage turned out to be a lovely old house with a thatched roof and a front garden full of flowers.

Auntie Joan and Uncle Maurice met the family at the front door and took them inside.

‘It’s going to take quite a lot of work to get the house as we want it,’ Auntie Joan said, ‘and the back garden is terribly overgrown.’

Peter thought that a wild and untidy garden sounded quite interesting. Peering out of a window he saw a high stone wall enclosing a very large area that was filled with bushes and tall grass, and he could tell at once that it was a perfect place to explore.

Who knew what might be hidden in all that grass? What was behind the bushes?

There was even an old shed, its door hanging off its hinges, that would almost certainly contain all kinds of treasure – swords, perhaps, or at least things that would serve as swords.

‘Wow!’ he said. ‘Can I go and look around the back garden, Auntie Joan?’

‘Yes, of course,’ Auntie Joan replied, ‘but do be careful, won’t you? There may be rusty old tools lying about. I wouldn’t want you to cut yourself.’

‘I haven’t had time to clear out that old shed,’ Uncle Maurice added, ‘so don’t go in there. It’s falling to bits anyway, and the whole thing could drop on your head at any moment.’

Peter ran out into the garden, followed closely by Sally who was clutching her favourite doll.

The long grass, which was still a little damp from the rain that had fallen the day before, pulled at their legs, and Sally wasn’t very happy about it. Every now and then she put her foot on something soft and slippery.

‘Do you think there are things in the grass?’ she asked.

‘What kind of things?’ said Peter.

‘Horrid things. Things that *wriggle*,’ Sally replied.

‘Bound to be,’ said Peter. ‘Frogs and toads,

probably. And snakes,' he added.

'There aren't any snakes in England,' said Sally.

'There are, too,' said Peter. 'I saw it on the telly.'

The garden was much bigger than it had appeared when Peter had seen it through the window, and it took them quite a long time to get near to the old stone wall. Eventually, they found their way barred by several large clumps of very tall grass which towered above their heads.

Peter picked up a stick and poked at the clumps.

'Elephant grass,' he announced. 'That's what this is.'

'Elephant grass!' snorted Sally. 'Elephants don't eat grass.'

'Then why is it called elephant grass?' asked Peter, and Sally had no answer to that. She looked around nervously. That there might be snakes in the grass was bad enough, but the

possibility of coming across an elephant was just too much.

‘I’m going back to the house,’ she announced, and ran off, lifting her legs as high as possible to avoid any wriggly things in the grass.

Peter, however, was not paying any attention to Sally. Picking up a stick, and using it to hack a way through the clumps of tall grass, he found himself, to his surprise, standing before a door set into the stone wall.

The door was obviously very old. At one time it must have been painted green, but the paint was now so chipped and scratched that parts of it had turned brown. Two large rusty hinges held the door to the wall, and sticking out of a large, black iron lock was an even larger key.

Peter went up to the door and tried to turn the key, but the lock was full of rust and at first nothing happened. Puffing with the effort, Peter twisted the key as hard as he could and, all at once, the key turned and the door swung open. Behind it, Peter could see a dark tunnel.



‘That’s very odd,’ he thought. ‘The wall doesn’t look thick enough for there to be a tunnel in it.’

He peered inside, but it was too dark to see very much. The walls just inside the tunnel were wet and rather slimy. Peter thought, however, that he could detect a slight glimmer of light coming from a few yards down the tunnel and so, thinking that there was probably another door leading out on the other side of the wall, he took a couple of steps inside.

No sooner had he done so, than the door shut behind him with a loud crash and Peter found himself in darkness. With a cry he turned and tried to push the door open, but it was no use. The door refused to budge. He was locked inside the tunnel!

There was only one thing to be done. Peter groped around until his hand touched the cold, slimy wall, and slowly, following the line of the wall, he moved further and further into the tunnel, heading towards the thin sliver of light

he had seen when he had stood at the tunnel's entrance.

After what seemed to be an age, he reached another door at the end of the tunnel. Desperately, he pushed against it, thinking that it would be rusted shut like the first door. It flew open easily, however, and Peter tumbled through the doorway and out of the tunnel.

The sunlight was so bright that, for a while, it blinded him. Then, blinking his eyes until he could see, he realised that he was looking at a huge expanse of water. A calm blue sea stretched out in front of him right up to the horizon!

How was that possible? Buttercup Cottage was right in the middle of the countryside, and miles and miles from the sea.

Well, thought Peter, peculiar though it all was, there was no point in his standing here and worrying about it – somehow or other he had to get back into the garden.

Looking down, he saw that he was standing on a short wooden jetty that protruded out into

the water. To either side of the jetty the sea came right up to the wall.

Peter realised that he was stuck. He couldn't go back through the tunnel because the door at the entrance was jammed. To his right and to his left there was deep water. He considered trying to climb up the wall, but on this side it was quite smooth, and he would almost certainly fall off it and into the sea.

Then, walking a little way down the wooden jetty, Peter spotted a rope tied to a post and, at the other end of the rope, bobbing gently up and down on the water, a small canoe with a paddle in the stern.

With a cry of relief, Peter ran to the canoe and stepped carefully into it. Only a few weeks previously his dad had taught him a bit about canoeing, and although Peter was far from being an expert at it, he felt that he probably knew enough to manage to paddle the canoe to safety.

He untied the rope, and then grasped the paddle and prepared to take the canoe ... where?

He looked along the wall. It appeared to go on for ever in both directions. It certainly hadn't seemed to be such a long wall when he had looked at it from the other side! It was all *very* odd.

Using his hand to shade his eyes against the glare of the sun, Peter looked out across the sea. The water shimmered in the heat.

Suddenly, Peter spotted something in the far distance.

What was it? He stared harder. It *seemed* to be ... Yes! It *was*! Almost on the horizon there was a small island. It was much too far away for Peter to make out any detail, and it might turn out to be nothing more than a bare rock, but there just might be people there who could help him. It was his only chance.

Plunging the paddle into the water, first on one side of the canoe and then on the other, Peter drove the little craft forward in the direction of the island.

Progress was slow, and after a while Peter's

arms ached terribly, but he knew that he had to keep going.

Gradually, the island grew larger and larger, and Peter thought he could see a hill in the middle, and, on the hill, a few trees.

At last, the bottom of the canoe scraped on the island's sandy beach. Peter jumped out, and pulled the canoe right up out of the water, dropping the paddle into the canoe.

Then he set off and headed towards the hill in the centre of the island. From the top, he would be able to get a better idea of the size of the island, and perhaps would be able to tell whether or not there were any people living there.

The hill was steeper than it had appeared from the sea, and it took Peter a good ten minutes to get to the top, where he found himself surrounded by tall trees. There was very little wind, and everything was quiet.

Then, faintly, Peter heard voices. He couldn't make out what was being said, but there seemed

to be a lot of laughing and shouting.

Running through the trees in the direction of the voices, he eventually found himself on the top of a low cliff, at the foot of which was a broad beach. Peter realised that he must have come right across the island to the other side.

What really took his attention, though, was the group of four or five men who had dug a deep hole in the sand and were about to push a large wooden chest into it.

The men were dressed very oddly. Their highly coloured shirts were torn and tattered, and their trousers ended just below their knees. They were barefoot, and wore bright scarves knotted around their heads. Every one of them had a broad leather belt, and in every belt there was a long, wicked-looking sword.

*Pirates!*

Peter had read enough about pirates to know that it was best to keep well clear of them, and so he edged slowly back into the cover of the trees before he could be spotted.

‘Gosh,’ he said to himself in relief, when he was safely out of sight of the pirates. ‘*That* was close!’ Then, because he was curious to know what the pirates were up to, he crawled forward quietly until he could just peep over the edge of the cliff.

Suddenly, a large, gloved hand fell heavily on his shoulder and Peter found himself being hauled to his feet.

‘And just what may ee be lookin’ at, me boy?’ said a deep, rough voice.

Whirling round, Peter found himself face to face with the fiercest-looking pirate he had ever seen (and he had seen *lots* in picture books and in films!).

The man pushed his face close to Peter’s, his thick, black, bristly beard almost touching Peter’s nose.

‘Spyin’ on me friends, are yer?’ the pirate snarled. ‘Wantin’ to get yer ’ands on the treasure, I’ll be bound. Well, matey, I’m Billy Crush and I’ve caught yer red-’anded. Yers comin’ with *me*

now. We'll see what Cap'n Yellowbeard has to say about this.'

Billy Crush marched Peter down a steep path to the foot of the cliff. The other pirates were very angry when they learned that they had been seen burying their treasure. Dragging Peter roughly to a rowing boat, they threw him into it. Then they all climbed into the boat after him and began to row out to sea.

After a long time, they reached a large sailing ship, from the central mast of which flew the skull-and-cross-bones flag. A rope ladder was flung down from the side of the ship, and up it the pirates clambered, pushing Peter up before them.

Peter was taken by Billy Crush across the deck, which was dirty and rather smelly, and forced down a flight of wooden steps. A door at the bottom was opened and Peter was pushed into the room beyond.

Behind a rough wooden table sat the pirate captain. A big man, he was no cleaner than the



ship. He wore a funny three-cornered hat with a tattered feather in it, and a fancy coat that had once been red and gold, but which was now so dusty it was almost grey. What Peter noticed most about him, though, was his bright yellow beard.



*Captain Yellowbeard, who was not very clean,  
wore a three-cornered hat with a  
tattered feather in it*

‘This is Cap’n Yellowbeard,’ said Billy Crush, and he explained to the captain how Peter had been caught spying on them while they had been burying the treasure.

Peter (whose legs were shaking just a little bit) looked at the captain, and said: ‘Hello, Mr Yellowbeard, Sir. I’m Peter. I wasn’t spying on your men – *really* I wasn’t. I was just ....’

‘*Quiet!*’ roared the captain. ‘I don’t care *what* you were doing.’ He looked Peter up and down and, grinning with a mouth full of broken, yellow teeth, added: ‘Well, now! You’re *just* the kind of fellow I’ve been looking for.’

Then he shouted, ‘Charlie! Charlie! Get in here, you idle creature.’

The door opened behind Peter, and a boy about Peter’s age came into the captain’s cabin.

Captain Yellowbeard seized the lad by the ear. ‘This little scoundrel is Charlie,’ he said. ‘He’s supposed to be my cabin-boy, but he’s completely *useless*. He’s as lazy as a toad, and – even worse – he can’t make a decent cup of tea.’

He pushed Charlie away, and grinned again at Peter. 'So I'm kicking him off my ship, and making *you* my cabin-boy instead.'

'Me?' yelled Peter. 'I can't be your cabin-boy. I've got to get home. My mum and dad will wonder where I am.' Tears welled up into his eyes.

Now, although Captain Yellowbeard was beastly, he was not *quite* as beastly as he liked people to think he was, and at the sight of Peter's tears he felt just a little bit sorry for him. From his coat pocket he fished out a disgusting old handkerchief.

'Here,' he said, offering the rag to Peter. 'Come on. There's no need for tears, lad. Dry your eyes on this.'

Peter, being a polite little boy, accepted the handkerchief (but held it at arms length and made quite sure it didn't go anywhere near his face!).

'Look,' said Captain Yellowbeard, 'you'd better get used to the idea that, like it or not,

you're stuck on my ship, and that you're going to be my cabin-boy. But don't worry – you'll be well paid.' And he tossed a coin to Peter who caught it in his right hand.

'It's a Spanish gold doubloon,' said Captain Yellowbeard, 'from a galleon we captured a week ago. Your wages will be one doubloon a day. When you've earned a thousand of them, I'll let you go.'

'A *thousand*,' cried Peter. 'It's going to take me years and years to earn that many.'

But Captain Yellowbeard wasn't listening. He turned to Billy Crush, and then pointed at Charlie. 'You can take that creature away,' he said to the pirate. 'He's no more use to me. Throw him overboard!'

'No!' Peter shouted. 'You can't do *that*!'

'Oh, *can't* I?' replied Captain Yellowbeard, no longer grinning. 'Well, just you watch!'

## *The Hunter*

Charlie, who up to this point had said nothing, suddenly let out the most tremendous yell. Captain Yellowbeard was so startled by this that he fell backwards off his chair, and Billy Crush rushed behind the table to help the captain to his feet.

In the confusion, Charlie made a dash for the door, shot through it, and hared up the stairs to the deck.

'After him!' shouted Captain Yellowbeard to Billy Crush, and the pair of them charged out of the cabin, followed closely by Peter.

On deck, there was complete chaos. Charlie was running around, slipping between the legs of pirates and tripping some of them up. Billy Crush made a grab for the boy, but missed.

So nimble was Charlie that the pirates were soon puffing and panting, and most of them

were completely dizzy. It was no surprise therefore that none of them noticed Charlie diving behind a barrel, where he crouched silently, out of sight.

Peter, however, had seen everything and he, too, quietly slipped behind the barrel.

‘What are *you* doing here?’ asked Charlie in a whisper. ‘Old Yellowbeard will be furious when he finds you’ve tried to escape.’

‘I’m trying to save you,’ Peter replied. ‘I don’t want you to be thrown overboard. Look, if you can help me to get off this ship, Captain Yellowbeard will have no-one to be his cabin-boy, and he’ll be forced to give you your job back. That means he wouldn’t make you walk the plank.’

Charlie thought about it for a moment. Then he grinned. ‘Right!’ he said, ‘I’ve got an idea. You’re going to have to take a big chance, but my scheme might just work.’

‘OK,’ said Peter, ‘what’s the plan?’

Charlie tapped the barrel that they were

hiding behind. 'Listen to that,' he said. 'That's the sound of an empty barrel. All you have to do is to climb inside the barrel, and then I'll roll it across the deck and push it over the side of the ship.'

Peter stared open-mouthed at Charlie. 'That's *it*?' he gurgled. 'That's your great plan? You want to dump me in the sea?'

'Well,' said Charlie, shrugging, 'if you've got a better idea, let's have it. Anyway, you'll not be in the *sea*. You'll be in a *barrel*. Look,' he grasped Peter's arm and spoke urgently. 'It's your *only* chance.'

Peter, however, was very far from happy about the idea, but Charlie continued. 'It's not as risky as it sounds,' he said. 'There are some strong currents in this part of the sea, and they'll soon sweep the barrel well away from the ship. In no time at all, you'll find yourself being washed up on a beach.'

Peter realised that Charlie was right, and that this was indeed the only way he'd ever get off

the pirate ship. He nodded.

‘All right,’ he said, ‘I’ll do it.’

Peering out of his hiding place to make sure there were no pirates watching, he quickly hopped inside the barrel.

‘Phew!’ he said, ‘It smells *awful* in here. What’s been in this barrel?’

‘Grog,’ said Charlie. ‘Some kind of stuff the pirates drink. It makes them all wobbly and then they fall over.’

‘I don’t think I can stand the smell,’ said Peter, but before he could utter another word he felt the barrel being tipped over. Then he found himself being turned over and over as Charlie pushed the barrel towards the side of the boat.

Suddenly, there was a shout. ‘Hey! What do you think you’re doing!’

Billy Crush had spotted what was happening, and he was running over the deck towards them. He had almost reached them when Charlie gave a mighty heave and the barrel wobbled on the side of the ship, where it teetered for a moment



before plunging downwards into the sea.

Quite a lot of seawater got into the barrel, and a good deal of that got into Peter's eyes and mouth, but eventually the barrel turned the right way up and bobbed about on the waves.

Standing up, Peter could just peek over the edge of the barrel, and he was relieved to see that the strong currents that Charlie had spoken about had already borne the barrel far from the ship.

Peter sat down in the bottom of the barrel and closed his eyes. He felt very tired, and soon he fell fast asleep.

He was woken by a loud grinding sound, and he felt the barrel bumping and banging on something hard. Peering out, Peter saw that they had arrived at a rocky shore, and quickly he clambered out and jumped from one wet rock to another until he had reached a thin strip of sand.

Well, he'd escaped from the pirates, and he'd made it to dry land without being drowned – but where exactly *was* he?

The shore soon gave way to a line of trees and shrubs that Peter didn't recognise.

'Wherever I am, it's not England,' he thought.

He made his way up the beach and pushed between the shrubs and into the jungle beyond. Although occasional shafts of sunlight found their way between the trees, the jungle floor was mainly dark.



*The barrel was washed up onto a rocky shore beyond which were trees that Peter didn't recognise.*

A few brightly coloured birds flitted about, their sudden squawks startling Peter. Sometimes he caught sight of monkeys scampering about in the high branches, and once or twice he jumped as something big and hairy ran over his foot.

Soon, he became aware of snarling and roaring sounds coming from all around, and he could hear the crashing of large animals moving through the undergrowth.

This isn't turning out to be much fun, Peter thought, and he began to wonder whether leaving the safety of the pirate ship had been such a good idea after all.

There was no point in turning back, however. By now, the barrel would either have been smashed to bits on the rocks, or swept back out to sea again. He'd just have to carry on.

After a while, the jungle seemed to become lighter and lighter. The spaces between the trees widened, and the undergrowth became less dense. Peter suddenly found himself looking on

a wide grassy plain, on which a few clumps of trees could be seen here and there.

In the distance there was the glint of water – a river, perhaps, or maybe a lake. It seemed a good place to head for, because where there was water there might be homes and people. So Peter set out to walk in that direction.

He had not gone very far, however, when he became aware of a low growling sound. He stopped and listened carefully.

There it was again.

It seemed to be coming from a group of trees in front of him. What could it be?

Whatever it was, it certainly didn't sound very friendly. Peter looked around to see how he could avoid the trees.

The land to the right of him was wet and marshy, and he didn't want to get stuck in a swamp. To his left there were some sharp rocks, and Peter's shoes would be cut to ribbons if he tried to go that way. He could see no way to avoid going through the trees.

Nervously, he crept forward, very, very slowly.

Suddenly, from between the trees there emerged the biggest lion Peter had ever seen in all his life (and he'd seen *lots* of them in the zoo).

The lion stopped and looked at Peter.

Peter stopped and looked at the lion.

The lion swished its long tail from side to side, and if Peter had had a tail he would probably have done the same.

Peter realised that there was no point in turning and running. He was tired after the long trek through the jungle, and even if he hadn't been, the lion was able to run much more quickly than he was.

The lion, still snarling and growling, began to walk forward, slowly getting closer and closer to Peter, fixing him with its yellow eyes.

Peter stood as though frozen. The fearsome beast, now only a few feet away, was obviously in a bad mood. Its huge mouth was open, and long, sharp teeth were clearly visible.

When the lion was only a few feet away it stopped and crouched. At any moment it was going to spring, and Peter knew that there was absolutely nothing he could do about it.

What rotten luck, he thought, to have come all this way across the sea and through the jungle, just to provide lunch for what was really just an overgrown cat.

Then the lion sprang!

Peter half closed his eyes and waited for the huge beast to land on him – but it never happened.

He heard a sharp crack – rather like the sound of someone pulling a very large Christmas cracker – and then the lion seemed to hang for a moment in mid-air before plunging to the ground with a heavy thud, its immense claws only inches from Peter's feet.

From between the trees stepped a man dressed like a hunter. He wore a floppy kind of hat on his head, and was carrying a rifle in one hand. He walked up to Peter.

Peter looked at the gun and then down at the lion.

‘Hey!’ he shouted at the hunter. ‘Why did you do *that*?’

‘To stop him from eating you!’ the hunter replied, ‘I thought you might be just a teeny weeny bit pleased about that.’

He smiled, and held his hand out to Peter. ‘Anyway’, he said, ‘I’m delighted to meet you, though I must say I’m rather surprised to see a boy of your age wandering around in such a dangerous place.’

Peter shook the man’s hand. ‘I’m Peter,’ he said. ‘I didn’t *intend* to come here, but I’ve just escaped from pirates.’ Then he added: ‘In a barrel.’

The hunter smiled. ‘Well, I’ve always thought that getting into a barrel is probably one of the very best ways of escaping from pirates. Now that I’ve met someone who’s actually done it, I shall be sure to bear it in mind if I ever find myself in the same situation. My name’s Tom



*The lion thudded to the ground, its immense claws only inches from Peter's feet.*



Maitland, by the way. But please call me Tom; all my friends do.'

Peter looked again at the lion. 'It's such a beautiful animal,' he said sadly. 'Of course, I'm grateful to you for saving my life, but I'm really sorry you had to kill it.'

'Kill it?' said Tom in surprise. 'Oh, I didn't kill it. Look.' He reached down and plucked a small, feathered dart from the lion's side, and handed it to Peter. 'I just put it to sleep for a little while. This dart has a special kind of stuff on its tip – we call it an *anaesthetic* – that causes an animal to become unconscious as soon as the tip enters the animal's skin.'

'Why would you want to do that?' asked Peter, relieved that the lion was not dead after all.

Tom lifted the lion's front leg and pointed to a scar just above the animal's enormous paw. 'This old fellow was injured quite badly a few weeks ago. As soon as I found out about it I tracked him down and knocked him out with one of my darts so that I could clean the wound

and sew it up. I've now been tracking him again, just to check that the wound has healed properly. It's jolly lucky for you that I caught up with him just as he was about to have you as his mid-day snack.'

Peter looked carefully at the dart. 'Is it safe for me to hold this?' he asked.

'Oh yes,' Tom replied. 'It's quite harmless now. All the drug has gone into the lion: there's none left on that dart. You can keep it, if you like.'

'How long will he be asleep for?' asked Peter, noticing that the lion's legs were beginning to twitch.

'Oh, only another minute or two,' said Tom, 'so I think we'd best be off. Come on, my Land Rover's just on the other side of the trees.'

The pair of them trotted away quickly. Peter turned just as they reached the trees, and saw the lion getting to its feet and standing there looking a bit groggy.

When they reached the old-fashioned Land

Rover, Tom sat Peter in the front passenger seat and then climbed into the vehicle himself.

Starting the engine, Tom turned to Peter. 'Where to?' he asked.

Peter shook his head. 'I've no idea,' he said, 'I don't know where I am. I'm completely lost. I must be a thousand miles from my mum and dad.'

Once again, the thought of his parents, and of Sally, brought the tears to his eyes.

'Never mind, old chap,' said Tom, kindly, patting Peter on the arm 'I happen to know just the man to help you get home.'

'You *do*?' said Peter in surprise. 'Who's that?'

'My brother,' Tom replied. 'I'll take you to see him now. I'm sure you'll like him. And you can be certain of one thing – there's nothing, absolutely *nothing*, that Jim Maitland can't fix.'