

Ship-in-a-Bottle



By P. SCHUYLER MILLER

I REMEMBERED the place at once. I was nearly ten when I first saw it. I was with my father, on one of our exploring trips into the old part of town, down by the river. In his own boyhood it had still been a respectable if run-down district of small shops and rickety old frame houses. He had worked there for a ship chandler until he had money enough to go to college, and on our rambles we would often meet old men and draggled, slatternly women who remembered him. Many is the Saturday afternoon I have spent in the dark

corner of some fly-blown bar, a violently colored soft drink untouched in the thick mug before me, while I listened to the entrancing flow of memories these strange acquaintances could draw up out of my father's past.

It was on one of these excursions, shortly before my tenth birthday, that we came upon a street which even he had never seen before. It was little more than a slit between two crumbling warehouses, with a dim gas-lamp halfway down its crooked length. It came out, as we discovered, near the end of

Heading by MATT FOX

There were many grimy little shops on those squalid back streets but none so strange as this

the alley which runs behind the Portuguese section along Walnut Street. One side was a solid brick wall, warehouse joined to warehouse for perhaps a hundred yards. On the other was a narrow sidewalk of cracked flagstones, and the windows of a row of shabby shops, most of them empty.

We might have passed it, for we were on our way to the little triangular plot of grass under the old chestnut, where Grand and Beekman come down to the river, and the chess-players meet to squabble amicably over their pipes and their beer of a Saturday night. But as we passed its river end the lamp came on, and its sudden glow in the depths of that black crevice caught my eye. I pulled at my father's coat, and we stopped to look. I wonder now, sometimes, how and by whom that lamp was lit.

The shop door was directly under the light. We might not have seen it otherwise, although I have a feeling it was meant to be seen. Even in the dark it would have had a way of standing out. The flags in front of its door were clean, and the little square panes in its low front window shone. It had a scrubbed look, which grew even more apparent as we hurried toward it past the broken stoops and dingy plate glass of its neighbors.

It was my discovery, and by the rules of the game I was the first to open the door. But I stopped first to look at it, for it was a strange place to find in those surroundings. The street was old, but most of the buildings dated from the turn of the century, before the warehouses had gone up. They had the seedy straightness of the mauve era, corrupted now by the dry rot of poverty and neglect, but this place had a jolly brown look about it that went straight back into my picture-memories of Dickens' London. It was like the stern of a galleon crowded between grimy barges. Its window, as I have said, was low and wide with many little square panes of heavy greenish glass set in lead. The flagstones in front of it were spotless, and the granite curbing with its carved numerals and even the cobbles out to the center of the lane had been scrubbed until they shone.

That, as we saw it first, was Number 52 Manderly Lane.

The street-lamp shone down on its door-

step, but a warmer, mellower light was shining through the wavery old glass of its queer window. I think it was the first oil light that I had ever seen. I know I pressed my nose against the clearest of the little panes to peer inside before I opened the great oaken door. And what I saw was enchantment.

IN THE four years since my mother died and my aunt came to live with us, I had sat with my father in many a grimy little shop on these squalid back streets, and their dirt and stench and meanness no longer concerned me. I had come to expect it and to understand it. It was a part of the setting in which these pinched and tired people lived out their lives. A few of them had come up in the world, as he had, chiefly through political maneuvering or other even more questionable methods, but not many of them had lost the lean, wolfish look of hunger and suspicion which had become a part of them, ingrained as children and nurtured in youth. Those who had it least were among my father's warmest friends.

But this place was different. That was faery. It was the Old Curiosity Shop—it was the shop of Stockton's Magic Egg—it was all the wonderful places I had found in the dark old books in my father's library, rolled up into one and brought alive. It was deep, and broader than seemed possible from outside, with a wide oak counter running from front to back along the left hand side, and a great dim tapestry, full of rich color and magic life, hung on the right hand wall next the door.

The floor was of wide pine planks, sanded white. The ceiling was low and ribbed with heavy beams. And the scent of pine and oak were part of the wonderful rich odor which welled up around me as I opened the big door and stepped inside.

It was a faery odor as the shop was a faery shop. It had all the spices of the Orient in it, and sandalwood, and myrrh. It had mint and thyme and lavender. It had worn leather and burnished copper, and the sharp, clean smell of bright steel. It had things a boy of nine could remember only from his dreams.

Behind the broad counter were cupboards with small-paned glass doors through which

I could dimly make out more wonders than were heaped upon the worn red oak. Three ship's lamps hung from the ceiling, and their yellow light and the light of a thick candle which stood in a huge hammered iron stick on the counter, were all that lighted the place. Their mellow glow flowed over the sleek bales of heavy silk and swatches of brocade and crimson velvet, picking out the fantastic patterns of deep-piled carpets heaped against the wall under the tapestry, and caressing the smooth curves of gloriously shaped porcelains in ox-blood and deep jade. They half hid, half showed me the infinite marvels of an intricately carved screen in ebony and ivory which closed off the rear of the store, and the grotesque drollery of the figures on a massive chest which stood before it, of a family of trollish marionettes dangling against it, and of a set of chessmen which stood, set out for play, on a little taboret of inlay and enamel.

These chessmen my father saw, and went to them at once while I was still moving in sheer wonder from one thing to another, drawing the scent of the place into my lungs, letting my hungry fingers stray over all the strangeness spread out for their enchantment. The men were of ivory, black and red, and of Persian workmanship. I have them yet, and men who should know say that they are very old and fine.

Have I said that as I pushed open the great door a silver bell tinkled somewhere in the depths of the shop? I forgot it at once in the marvels of the place, so it was with a thrill almost of panic that I realized that the proprietor was watching us.

I don't know what I had imagined he would be like. A wizened dwarf, perhaps, wrinkled over with the years and full of memories. A sleek Eurasian or a Chinese with a beautiful half-caste girl for his slave. Or a bearded gnome of a man as jolly as his shop front and as full of sly magic as its interior. We read much the same sort of thing then that children do now, although my taste in melodrama may have been a bit old-fashioned.

INSTEAD this was a huge man, a brown man with the puckered line of an old scar slashing across his throat and cheek, a man weathered by sea and wind, who would

make two of my father and have room enough left for a boy as big as myself. He was of uncertain age—not old certainly, for his shock of hair was wiry and black, and not young either—and dressed in sun-bleached clothes with a pair of rope sandals on his bare feet.

My father looked him over, sizing him up as I had seen him gauge other strangers in these parts before opening conversation. He was satisfied, apparently, for he inquired the price of the chessmen and in doing so brought another surprise.

I suppose that I expected a rolling bass from so big a man—a man so obviously a sailor, and one who from his bearing had been an officer, accustomed to bellowing his commands above the roar of wind and sea. But it was small and soft and rasping, as if he had swallowed it and could not bring it up again. It made my backbone creep.

"They are not for sale," he whispered.

I had heard that gambit used before, and was rather surprised when my father did not follow it up in the traditional way, but he turned instead to survey the contents of the counter and the shelves behind it. The shopkeeper lifted the iron candlestick and followed as he stooped to examine a curious footstool made from an elephant's foot, or fingered a creamy bit of lace.

"The boy has a birthday soon," my father said casually. I was listening, you may be sure, with all my ears. "Perhaps you have something that he'll like."

The man looked at me. He had black eyes—hard eyes, like some of the bits of carved stone on his shelves. His face was cut by hard lines that made deep-bitten gutters from his hooked nose to the corners of his wide, cruel mouth. But his voice was as soft and rustling as his own fine silk.

"Let him look for himself," he said. "Here's a candle for him. And while he looks I'll play you for the men."

If my father was startled, he never showed it. He had learned control of his face and tongue as he had been taught control of his quick, hard body, of necessity and long ago in these very streets. "Good," he said, and drew from his vest pocket the gold piece he carried for luck. It was a Greek coin, I think, or even older. "Call for white."

The coin spun in the lamplight, and I

heard the man's half-whisper: "Heads." It fell on the wooden floor, and my father let him pick it up. "Heads," he said softly, "but I have a liking for the black."

THEY drew up chairs beside the little table, and I on my part soon forgot them in the wonders which the candlelight revealed. I stood for a long time, I remember, examining the tapestry which stretched all the length of the farther wall—its fabric darkened by age, but full of life and color depicting a history of a mythology which I could not and still cannot place. I grew tired of it, and had a moment's fright as I caught the empty eyes of a row of leering masks watching me from the rafters above it, then I turned back to the clutter on the long counter and began to rummage through it for whatever I might find. The cupboards tempted me, but it was with a queer sensation that I heard the proprietor's husky voice: "Go on, boy—open them."

It was a long game, I think. I was so full of the strangeness of everything, and so desirous of making exactly the right choice in all that mass of untold wonders, that I might never in my life have decided what thing I wanted most. And then I found the ship.

I am sure now it was chance—pure chance—or if it was fate, a fate more far-reaching than anything we know. I had opened cupboard after cupboard, holding the heavy candlestick high to see or setting it down on the counter behind me to fondle and explore. There were deep drawers under the cupboards, and more under the counter, and I hunted through those, finding new wonders every moment—trays in which gaudy butterflies had been inlaid in tropic woods, trinkets of gold so soft and fine that I could scar it with my nail, jewels of a hundred sorts, and the mummies of strange small animals. One cupboard seemed to stick, and when I pulled it open the whole wall came with it, leaving a paneled niche almost five feet deep. In it, set in an iron cradle, was a great glass bottle—a perfect sphere of thin green glass—and in it was the ship.

It was an old ship, a square-rigger, perfect in every detail. Most ship models that I had seen in the waterfront shops were small and rather crude, stuffed into rum bottles or

casual flasks which had happened to come the maker's way, with more ingenuity than pride of craftsmanship. This ship was different. Where the routine ship-in-a-bottle bowled along under full sail, heeling a bit with the force of the imaginary gale that stretched its starched or varnished canvas, this ship lay becalmed with her sails slack and the sun beating down on her naked decks. There was not a ripple in the glassy sea in which she lay. The tiny figures of seamen, no bigger than the nail of my little finger, stood morosely at their tasks, and on the bridge a midget captain stared up at me and shook in my face a threatening arm which ended in a tiny, shining hook.

I knew then that I wanted that ship more than I had ever wanted anything in all my life before. It wasn't the flawless craftsmanship of the thing, or the cunning art which had sealed it within that seemingly flawless globe of glass. It was because—and I say this after thirty years—it was because I had deep in my child's soul the conviction that this ship was somehow real, that she sailed somewhere in a real sea, and that if only she were mine I could somehow find a way of getting aboard her and sailing away to adventures beyond the dreams of any boy in all the world.

I turned to call my father. The game was over, and he stood, an oddly thoughtful expression on his lean face, staring down at the final pattern of men. For he had won. The chessmen were his. But the shopkeeper was looking not at him but at me, and although the light was behind him I did not like at all what I thought was in his face.

I stepped quickly backward. The candle tilted and hot grease splashed my wrist. I think my elbow hit the open cupboard door as I jerked it back, for I felt it give and heard it close. Then with tigerish speed the brown man was across the shop, leaning across the counter. He pulled it open—and there was no ship there.

I thought there was a threat in his strange hushed voice. "Well, boy," he whispered, "your father's beaten me. What do you want?"

I set the candle down between us and backed away. I wanted nothing more at that moment than to get out into the street again, where there were lights and people and my

father. All the wonder of the place was swept away in an emotion that was as much guilt as fear, as though I had pried into forbidden things—for that was in his voice.

"N-nothing, sir!" I told him. "Nothing at all."

"Nothing?" It was my father. "Non-sense, Tom. Don't be a fool. This is a wonderful place. I've done this gentleman out of some very valuable chessmen, and we must give him his chance at us. Now—what do you want?"

It was queer how his being there changed everything. There was no more fear and there was no reason at all for feeling guilty. A kind of defiance grew up in me in their stead, and I looked straight into those hard black eyes and answered.

"I'd like a ship, I think—a ship in a bottle."

That's almost all, except that I got a ship. I had asked for one, and my father, feeling rather odd at having won so valuable a prize, insisted that I choose. I made a long business of it, hunting over all the shelves and through all the cupboards, and at last I chose a frigate that as I realize now was a masterpiece for all its lifeless, straining sails and plaster wake. But there was no becalmed clipper with sun-drenched crew, hung in a green bubble as broad as my arms could span. And for a good many years, after we had moved to another town and I had found a new school and new friends, and eventually work, I wondered why . . .

I KNEW the street at once when I saw it again.

I had been looking for it, as a matter of fact—not actively, but in a casual sort of way as I walked the old streets along which I had trotted with my father thirty years before. They still played chess of a summer night in the little park where Beekman meets the river, but the players I had known were gone. People in those parts do not forget so easily, though, and I bought a drink here, and two or three in another place, and talked of old times and agreed that the new ones were decadent and drab. It was near midnight of a glorious night full of stars, so I turned naturally to the river front and strolled along the empty street with only my shadow for company, listening to the

slow echo of my footsteps and thinking of nothing at all but the night.

The street lamp threw a band of light across my way, a little brighter than the starlight. At the same moment I stepped down from the curb and felt uneven cobbles underfoot, and somehow the two combined to break through my revery and bring a memory up through the veil of years. I looked up, and it was there.

In thirty years the lane had grown dingier and darker, and the patch of scrubbed flagging stood out even brighter than it had that night when I was nearly ten. One of the warehouses had burned some years before, and the brick escarpment which walled the alley on the left was crumbling and broken with the black bones of charred timbers standing up against the night. The houses I passed were dead and boarded up; the shop fronts were broken, and the doors of three or four sagged open. But as I came to Number 52 it was as though nothing had changed. Nothing—in thirty years.

There was the same big window of heavy, leaded panes so old and flawed that it was hard to see through them. There was the same mellow lamplight shining out into the street, and the same great door with its massive iron latch. And as I had thirty years before, I opened it and stepped into the shop.

The little bell tinkled as the door opened—a silver bell, it seemed, deep inside the shop. My footsteps rang on the scrubbed pine floor, and the light of the three ship's lamps shone on the great tapestry that covered the right-hand wall, and on the counter and the cupboards to the left.

Under the center lamp, close beside the counter, was a little table of inlay and red enamel, and on it were a chessboard and men—ivory, black and red. I looked up from them, as I had thirty years before, and he stood there.

I think he knew me. I resemble my father, and it may have been that, but I think he knew me. As it happens I am not my father, and the game we played that night was a very different one.

"You are looking for something, sir?" It was the same soft voice, small and husky, trapped in his scarred throat. I had heard it often in my dreams during those thirty

years. And he was the same, even to the clothes he wore. I could swear to it.

He repeated his question, and it was as though those thirty years had dissolved and it was a boy of nine-going-on-ten who stood half frightened, half defiant, and answered him: "I'd like to see a ship, I think. A ship in a bottle."

He might have been carved out of wood like one of his own fetishes. But his voice was not quite so soft and ingratiating as I remembered it. "I am sorry, sir. We have no ships."

I had changed the opening of the game, and the play was changing too. Very well; it was my move. "I'll look around, if you don't mind. I may see something that I like."

He took up the iron candlestick from the counter beside the little table. It looked smaller than I remembered, but then I had been smaller thirty years before. "Do you play chess, sir?" he inquired softly. "I have some very unusual men here—very old. Very fine. Will you look at them?"

THERE seemed to be a kind of pressure in the atmosphere, a web of intangible forces gathering round me, trying to push me back into the pattern of a generation before. I found myself standing over the table, holding one of the ivory men. So far as I could tell they were identical with those my father had won. I had them still at home, all but one knight which had been lost.

"Thank you," I said. "I have a very fine set of my own—much like these of yours. They are Persian, I've been told."

I am not sure that he heard me. He stood holding the candlestick over his head, watching my face with those stony eyes. "I will play you for these men," he whispered.

"You must be confident," I said. "They are valuable."

He tried to smile, a quick grimace of that hard, thin mouth and a puckering of the scar across his jowl. "I trust my skill, sir," he replied. "Will you risk yours?"

I looked at him then, long and hard. That square brown face was no older than it had been thirty years before; the eyes were as bright and hard and—ageless. I began to wonder then, as I think my father wondered suddenly as he rose the winner, what might

be my forfeit if I should lose. But it was the defiant boy of ten who blurted out: "Yes—I'll play you. But not for these chessmen. I'll play you for a ship."

"There is no ship here," he repeated. "But if there is something else . . . ?"

"I'll see," I said. I turned to the counter and glanced over the hodge-podge of curios which littered it. They were less wonderful than they had seemed to a child who was not quite ten, trash mingled with fine workmanship and beautiful materials. I opened the door of a cupboard, and it seemed to me that the objects on the shelves were exactly as I had replaced them thirty years before. I pulled open a drawer, and the same colors and patterns of grotesque shells and gaudy butterflies came welling up in my memory.

I turned to him then and took the iron candlestick. It seemed to complete a kind of circuit in me—to drop a missing piece into the jigsaw that was shaping in my mind. Time melted away around me, and I was moving down the line of cupboards, opening one after another, touching the things in them quickly with my fingers as I held the candle high. This time the brown man was close beside me. And then I knew suddenly that this was it. I tugged at the cupboard door, and it stuck. I tugged again, and I thought that he had stopped breathing. And then something—chance, was it, or a kind of fate?—something gave me the trick, the little twist to the handle as I pulled, and the cupboard swung out on noiseless hinges exposing the alcove—and the ship.

It was the same—and it was not the same. The listless sails seemed browner and some of them were furled as though the captain had given up hope of wind. The deck was bleached whiter by the tropic sun, and the paint had chipped and blistered on the trim hull. The garments which the tiny crewmen wore were worn and shabby, and there were fewer men than I remembered. But the midget captain stood on his bridge as he had stood thirty years before, eyes fixed grimly on the empty sky, staring at me and through me. This time his hands were clasped behind his back, left fist clasped on his right wrist just above the shining hook. This time he seemed a little less erect, a little older than before.

I had a firm grip on the iron candlestick

as I turned to the proprietor, for I did not like what was in his face. It was gone in an instant. "I had forgotten this, sir," he said. "I will play."

AND then it seemed that there was another hand on mine, pushing my fingers down into the pocket of my vest, bringing out the same uneven little disc of gold which my father had tossed to call the play on another night.

His eyes went down to it, then back to mine. "If you are agreeable, sir," he said, "I am accustomed to the black."

I am not a great player, or even a very good one. As I set out the red men on the squares of the board, the same question rose again in the back of my mind. What was the price of my defeat? What was the prize he coveted, which I could give him—him, whose choice was always black?

I think that two of us played the white game that night. I think he knew it, for his seamed brown face was pale as he bent over the board. The game went quickly; there was never any doubt in my mind of the next move, and there seemed a grim certainty about his. I cannot tell you now what moves we made, or what the end-play was, but I knew suddenly that his king was trapped, and he knew too, for as I reached out to touch my queen his face was murderous.

Board and men went over on the floor as he lunged to his feet, but I was watching him and I sprang back over my toppled chair, sweeping up the heavy candlestick.

As he lurched toward me, I hurled it at his head.

Was there a web of unseen forces spun around us, drawing us together after those thirty years? Was it chance, or fate? I could hardly have missed, but I did, and the iron stick crashed past him into the great green bubble with its imprisoned ship.

For one endless moment his iron fingers tore at my throat. For one moment I was beating blindly at his face with both fists, struggling to break away. For one moment he raged down at me, his face contorted with fear and rage, hissing strange syllables in that husky whisper. Then there welled up all around us the surge and roar of the sea, and I heard wind strumming through taut cordage, and the creak of straining blocks, and the snap of filling sails. I heard a great roaring voice shouting orders, and the answering cries of men. And something vast and black rushed past me through the gloom, the smell of the sea was rank in my nostrils, and the lights went out in a howl of rising wind—and the pressure of iron fingers on my throat was gone.

When I could breathe again I found my matches and lit the ship's lamp which hung from the beam overhead. The green glass globe was powder. The ship was gone. And the thing that lay sprawled at my feet among the scattered chessmen, its clothes in tatters and its flesh raked as if by the barnacles of a ship's bottom—its throat ripped as if by one slashing blow of a steel claw—that thing had been too long undersea to be wholly human.

