

HALF-PAST SEVEN STORIES



3. The Jolly Roger

Marmaduke thought he knew now what it meant to be in jail. For three whole days he had had to stay in the house. For three whole days and nights, too, it had rained— “rained pitchforks.” That is what Father said, but Marmaduke could see nothing but prongs. There were thousands of them, coming down through the air. Where were the handles? He looked a long time, thinking that perhaps they had gotten loose from the prongs and would come down afterwards, but never a handle came.

They must be having haying time, the folks in the sky, to use so many forks, he decided, and the sun must be shining for them, way up above the clouds, or they wouldn't have haying weather. But maybe, after all, it was wet there, too, and they had just grown disgusted, and were throwing their forks away, every last one of them.

Yes, it was pretty lonesome and dull, staying in the house like this. To be sure, once in a while, when the rain slackened a little and the pitchforks didn't come down so fast, he could put on his rubber boots and go out to the barn. But for most of the time he had been a prisoner—in jail.

He looked out at the Pond. So much water had fallen in it that it was swelling up like a pouter pigeon, or like the bowl that held the Chinese Lily, when he dropped pebbles in it.

My, how Duckie the Stepchild must like this weather! There he was now, and his father and his mother and all his relatives. All just letting the water run off their backs and having a grand time. But Father Wyandotte and all his family were sticking pretty close to the coops. Funny how ducks liked water and chickens didn't, all but the Gold Rooster on the top of the barn. He never seemed to mind it a bit. Marmaduke looked for him up in the sky, but he was almost hidden by the rain and the gray mist, and stood there on his high perch, swinging from East to North, and back again.

But he grew tired of watching the Gold Rooster, and looked up the pasture for his friend, the Brook. It wasn't hard to find, for it had grown so big and stretched almost to the fence-rails now, and was racing along towards the Pond, growing wider and wider every minute—just like Marmaduke's eyes.

“Crackey! Sposin' there should be a flood!” exclaimed Jehosophat.

“Wouldn't that be fine!” said Marmaduke.

“Fine!” Jehosophat cried. “What would you do? It might rise an' rise till the barnyard'd be covered, an' the road an' all the country an' the whole world.”

“Like Noah's flood, you mean?”

“Yes, just like Noah's, only he isn't here to build any ole ark for you to get on.”

“I don't care,” said Marmaduke stoutly.

“You don't care!” cried his brother. “Why, you'd drown, that's what you'd do!”

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“No, I wouldn’t either—” Marmaduke seemed very sure about this— “‘cause,” he started to explain.

“‘Cause what?”

“‘Cause the Toyman is as good as ole Noah any day,” replied the little boy. “He could build an ark as big as a house, as big as the Church, an’ the ducks’d get on an’ the cows an’ the horses an’—”

“Yes,” interrupted his brother, “but don’t you remember—there were only two of each kind. Now Hal an’ Teddy could get on, but White Boots an’ Ole Methusaleh’d have to stay off, an’ Rover an’ Brownie could go, but Wienerwurst couldn’t—see?”

Marmaduke looked frightened at this—at the very thought of Wienerwurst, his little doggie, trying to swim around in a terrible flood.

“I’d hide him under my coat,” he declared.

“You couldn’t get on yourself,” Jehosophat insisted, “I tell you an ark only takes two of each sort of people an’ animals an’ chickens and things. Now Mother and Father could go—that’s two grown-ups, an’ Hepzebiah an’ me, but you an’ Wienie would have to swim around in the water just as long as you could, then go under—way under, too,” he added.

Perhaps he was only teasing, but Marmaduke didn’t take it quite that way. It seemed very serious. Then suddenly he had a bright idea.

“You forgot the Toyman,” he shouted, “and that makes another two, for the Toyman an’ I are just alike. Didn’t Mother say,—‘He’s nothing but a boy.’ So I’d sneak Wienie under my coat—if it was ol’ Noah’s ark—an’ if it was the Toyman’s, why he’d let me in anyway.”

Jehosophat had no answer at all for this, and all they could do now was to watch the rain and the Pond and the Brook, but Marmaduke was very happy picturing to himself the big Ark which the Toyman would build, and how he would help, and the fine time, too, he and all the animals would have, living together under the very same roof.

Of course, the rain had to stop some time. It always does in the end. And on the sixth day the Sun came out jolly and warm again, and the boys put on their rubber boots and went out to the Pond. They couldn’t get quite as near it as usual, for the edge was almost at the Ducks’ house now, and not so very far from the house of the White Wyandottes, who seemed to think the end of the world had come, and looked very sad with their draggled feathers.

For a little while the boys threw sticks in the water. When the dogs had fetched the sticks they would shake the water from their coats and over the boys, just like shower baths. It was all very jolly, and I don’t know which the children enjoyed more, throwing the sticks or the nice cool showers.

But after a while they tired of this, too, and walked up the pasture to see the Brook.

There it was, racing and romping and tearing along for dear life. It wasn’t clear and silvery now, but muddy and brown as if a thousand cups of coffee had been spilled in it. And on it floated many strange things,—branches of trees and a fence-rail, the roof of a pig-pen, an old shoe, and one poor drowned sheep.

“Maybe,” said Jehosophat, “maybe, if we watch long enough, some pirates’ll come sailin’

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along with big hats an' swords an'—”

“An' knives in their mouths,” Marmaduke suggested.

“But that’s not the best thing,” Jehosophat went on, “they’ll have a flag with a skull an’ dead men’s bones painted on it.”

“Crackey!” exclaimed his brother, just like the big boys. It was a fine word, too, but only to be used on special occasions. And pirates and skulls and dead men’s bones certainly made a “special occasion.”

Jehosophat seemed to think so, too, for he was singing in high glee,

“Yo, ho, ho,

And a bottle of bay rum.”

As these last dread words died on the air, they thought they heard a sound behind them. It was something like a laugh—more, perhaps, like a chuckle. They turned and saw nothing but the high board fence of the cowyard, and, over by the barn, the Toyman, walking very swiftly towards his workshop. Now usually they would have wondered about that; tried to guess what he “would make,” but this morning there were other, very grave, things taking their attention.

“Guess it was pirates—ssshhh!” whispered Jehosophat, “they may have disembarked an’ be hidin’ in the bushes.”

But a way of escape was open. It was coming down the stream.

Jehosophat spied it.

“The very thing!” he cried.

It was a big gate which had been carried off by the flood; and it was tossed first to this side and then to the other by the brown water.

“I hope it catches on something an’ stops,” cried Marmaduke. And they hurried down the Brook towards the Pond. They had to walk pretty fast, too, almost run, to keep up with the gate.

Jehosophat looked ahead.

“Those big roots of the walnut tree might stop it,” he said.

And sure enough the gate was caught by the roots and swung in under the branches. The water was more quiet here than out in the stream and it made a fine harbor for the ship. For, you see, after all, it was not a gate but a ship!

But they must make sure of their prize. So Jehosophat ran to the barn and fetched some rope. With this he made the ship fast to the trunk of the tree, that is, to the wharf in Walnut Harbour.

But there was more work to be done, for the ship had been damaged by the storm.

“You stand watch an’ keep off all pirates,” ordered Jehosophat. “I’ll be back in three shakes of a lamb’s tail.”

It was rather a scary thing to stand guard all alone with pirates around, but Marmaduke stuck by the ship and Jehosophat went on his errand.

As he entered the door, the Toyman hid something, quite hurriedly, under a sack. Now that was very mysterious, but the messenger only said to himself, “Guess he’s making some-

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thing for my birthday,” then asked aloud,—

“Please, may I have some boards and some nails?”

“To be sure, Mr. Ship’s Carpenter.”

It was fine to be called that, though Jehosophat wondered how the Toyman knew what he was, when they hadn’t told a soul. But then the Toyman knew most everything, all their plans as soon as made.

It didn’t take long to mend that ship. Soon the boards were nailed across and the deck was ready for the crew.

“All aboard!” shouted Jehosophat, and then even more loudly,—

“All ashore that’s goin’ ashore!”

Having said this very splendidly, he turned to his brother.

“I’m Captain Kidd,” he told him.

“And what’s me?” shouted back Marmaduke excitedly, and excitement is always bad for grammar.

“Oh, you! You’re my slave,” his brother informed him—in a very grand manner.

This didn’t seem to suit Marmaduke, and he tried hard to remember a name Reddy Toms had told him, out of a book of Reddy’s, all about pirates and things. But he couldn’t think of it at all.

Just then a voice shouted,—

“What ho, Dick Deadeye!”

It was the Toyman, who had been standing in the doorway watching them.

“Dick Deadeye—whew!” Marmaduke rolled the name under his tongue like something that tasted very nice. He was completely satisfied now.

Then something still nicer happened, for, when their backs were turned, something whistled through the air and fell at their feet. Real swords! One for each of them! Now we said they were real swords, and they were, though they were made of wood. They could do a lot of damage. The pirates would find that out soon enough. And there was a flag, too, with bones and a skull on it, just as Jehosophat had said.

“Why, it’s the Jolly Roger,” he told his brother, “that’s what they call this flag.”

But where did they come from? Marmaduke sort of suspected the Toyman, but he had disappeared, and Jehosophat said,—

“They must have dropped from Heaven an’ were sent us to ‘venge the people the pirates have killed. It’s a sign. Guess we’re not pirates after all, but just good sailors an’ we’ll scrunch those pirates.”

Then he thought for a moment.

“But I guess we’ll keep this flag anyway, even if it is the pirates’.”

And they kept their names as well. They were far too fine to give up.

But just as they were about to go aboard, the Toyman came to the shore.

“What ho!” he said, then again, “what ho!”

That sounded exciting—not like a game at all, but like real life! And he was “saying some more,”—

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“Avast, me hearties, what’s in the wind?”

This last was a very odd question, for whatever could be in the wind, when you can see right through it and it can’t hold anything at all. Strange talk it was, to be sure, and the neighbors would never have understood it. Still, folks never understood the Toyman and his language anyway, but they did, and Marmaduke called,— “Come ‘n, Toyman,” when Captain Kidd corrected him.

“Pshaw! That’s not the way to say it. You just listen to me.”

Then he raised his hands to his mouth like a trumpet and called,—

“Ho, there, you landlubber, will you ship with us?”

The Toyman touched his hat.

“Thankee kindly, Cap’n, but I’ve killed many a pirate in my time. Now it’s your chance. But it’s blowin’ great guns an’ ye’d better cruise near shore.”

“Ay, ay, sir,” shouted the captain as a last farewell, then they set sail. They made quite a voyage of it and had some trouble, for the waves were rough and the seas were high, but they reached port safely at last.

They hadn’t seen anything of the pirates yet, and they decided to make another try for it when Hepzebiah came to the wharf. She wanted to sail too, but the Captain only said, very thoughtfully,—

“It’s not safe for the women an’ children.”

However, she cried so hard that they just had to let her on board.

“But if you come, you’ll have to be my slave,” the Captain told her.

Perhaps that is the reason why he let her sail at all. He wanted a slave very much and since Marmaduke wouldn’t be one and was Dick Deadeye anyway, why, the little girl would have to do. Still she didn’t care what she was called as long as she could sail on that fine ship.

So they sailed and they sailed, the white flag with the skull and the dead men’s bones floating merrily in the breeze. And at last Dick Deadeye called,—

“Cracky! Look where we are! You’d better go back. Remember what the Toyman told us.”

But Captain Jehosophat Kidd knew better.

“Pshaw! It isn’t deep at all. It wouldn’t drown a rat—not even a little mouse.”

Then there was trouble.

They heard shouts along the shore, and, looking back, saw Fatty Hamm, Reddy Toms, and Sammy Soapstone, jumping around like wild Indians. They looked again—sharply this time—and saw that it wasn’t boys after all, but pirates, wicked, cruel, bloodthirsty pirates! And that was bad enough!

“They’re trying to capture us,” shouted brave Captain Kidd, then, forgetting that his ship was a full-rigged ship and went by sail, he called,

“Row, brothers, row, The stream runs fast.”

You see, he remembered that from a poetry book he had read once and thought it would just suit.

And all the time the crew of the “Jolly Roger” looked angrily back at shore.

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“Splash!”

A big stone fell near them. No, it wasn't a stone. It was a—cannon ball! The pirates on shore were trying to knock holes in their ship!

“You're awful shots,” the Captain jeered fearlessly. “We're coming ashore to capture your cannon.” He was very brave through all these trying times—and so were the crew. And they just turned their ship around and headed straight for the shore, though the cannon balls fell all around them.

But now a more terrible danger threatened. For the rascals on shore had seized long poles and were reaching out over the water, trying to smash holes in the ship, to stove in its hull.

“They're grapplin' irons and marlin spikes,” explained the Captain, “and very terrible weapons.” He must have been right, for he knew the ways of the sea.

Meantime the ship was beginning to rock. The crew looked around for rescue, but none was in sight.

“We'll sink your ole ship,” shouted Pirate Fatty. “You're awful sailors.”

And all the time, up and down, and down and up, went the poor little ship. Would they drown? Far off, Dick Deadeye saw the Toyman running, running as fast as he could towards shore. And Rover, too. He was barking for all he was worth, seeming to think it fun. But Rover was only a dog, and couldn't realize the danger at all.

At last the big fat pirate's pole hit the ship a terrible crack, and overboard Slave Hepzebiah fell.

Dick Deadeye reached for her, but his hand only touched her uniform, and over he fell, too, down in the coffee-colored waves.

It was way over his head. Down, down, he sank. He was terribly frightened, with water all around him and in his eyes and his nose and mouth. He was choking, but all he thought of, even then, was his little sister, the poor slave.

The first thing he knew, he felt a strong hand on his shoulder and heard the Toyman's voice saying,—

“Hold on, Sonny, you're all right—just grab on to me.”

He had always liked to be held close in the Toyman's arms, especially at night before the fire when he told them stories, but never had those arms felt as safe as now.

Then, all-of-a-sudden he thought—!

“Stop!” he tried to shout, but his mouth was almost too full of water to say anything, “get—bllllllloooo—Hep-ze-bbbllllloo”—and then he had to stop.

But the Toyman laughed as he pulled him safe on the shore.

“Look there,” he said.

And Marmaduke did look, and there was Rover dragging his little sister out of the sea by the back of her dress.

The Toyman patted the brave dog on the head.

“He's the hero,” he said, “good old Rover!”

Then something fine happened. At least Marmaduke and Jehosophat thought so. And we'll leave it to you to decide whether it was fine or not.

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Now the pirates had started to run, but their chief, the big fat one, just before he reached the road, slipped in the mud. And down over the banks into the sea he fell, and the Toyman didn't trouble to fish him out, either. Of course, it wasn't very deep, but Fatty tumbled flat on his back, and the water covered him—all but his stomach, which stuck out above the water like the fat rump of a whale. He got up at last. And a pretty sight he was, not like a bold pirate, but a great big “booby,” Mother said, with the mud all over his clothes, and the water going slippity slop in his shoes, and he shouting, “Bbbbbbblllllllllooooooo—splutter—gerchoo!” worse even than Marmaduke.

Quick as a wink the Toyman lifted Marmaduke on one shoulder, the little girl on the other, as he always carried them, and took them into the house.

And soon their clothes were off, and dry ones on, and—best of all—some nice warm lemonade was trickling down just where the muddy water had been—down the Red Lane.

He felt greatly contented, did Marmaduke, for hadn't they beaten the “ol' pirates,” and driven them away? And after that they had heaped coals of fire on their heads, as the minister used to say. Yes sir, they invited the big, fat chief of the pirates into their kitchen, though he didn't deserve it, and gave him some dry clothes, too, though he didn't deserve that, either, and some lemonade into the bargain.

Altogether, it was a very successful day.