

The Pyrate Chronicles

Dream Chaser



Wayne Savage

The Pyrate Chronicles:
Dream Chaser by Wayne Savage

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Acknowledgements

This is a book in which *Black Sails* meets *Gulliver's Travels* with a dash of the authentic humour of that loveable pirate band *Ye Banished Privateers*. In fact, I'd like to thank the band, Björn „Bellows“ Malmros in particular, for allowing me to use the lyrics to their song *Capstan Shanty* from the excellent album *Hostis Humani Generis*. For those interested in learning more about the band check out their website at www.yebanishedprivateers.com.

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Finally, I have to thank the *Gold and Gunpowder* youtube channel with its treasure trove of valuable information on pirates and life at sea. It has been a great inspiration to me.

Although this book is primarily a fantasy novel, it is set to the true historical backdrop of the early 18th century. I have tried to keep the book as authentic as possible while also adhering to the principle of fantasy realism.

Prologue

London, August 1723

The tired-eyed man scratched his armpit as he cursed the vicious little creatures that had taken up residence in his shabby clothing. He cursed the dank, dark cell which had been his home for the last few weeks. He cursed the fat, pompous judge who had put him here, but most of all he cursed Lady Fortune for allowing him to be caught.

He knew there could be no redemption for his crimes. There could be no forgiveness for the villains of all nations. He knew it was just a matter of time before he would be sun-drying like a scarecrow down at Execution Dock. Resigned to his imminent end on this earth – yes, this earth, for he was now convinced that this was not the only one – his mind wandered nostalgically to the adventures he had experienced as a member of Captain Ironside's crew. He regretted the disagreement that had separated him from his old companions and the loss of untold wealth that had been within his grasp.

Scratching his crotch, he became aware of heavy footsteps in the cold corridor beyond the iron door which was keeping him in this living hell. Who could it be? It was too early for his supper of thin gruel and stale bread. Expectantly staring

at the food hatch, he was surprised to hear the key turning in the heavy lock. The door swung open to reveal the ugly face of the gaoler grinning at him, displaying a row of brown, rotting teeth.

“William Benton, you got a visitor,” hissed the squat man, his foetid breath blending with the odour of damp and urine which already permeated the cell.

The man called William Benton rose unsteadily to his feet towering some six inches over the unpleasant man at the door. His once moderately handsome face was now patched with dirt and sores; his stubbly chin now a matted tangle of thick, lice-ridden whiskers; his long, dark brown hair rudely shorn, leaving isolated clumps of hair mingled with unsightly scabs.

“Who wants to see me?” croaked William. “I’m expecting no one.”

“Some man in a fancy coat. Now, you goin’ to come with no trouble, or you want me t’put them nasty manacles on yer?”

“You’ll get no trouble from me, just as long as you keep that foul mouth of yours shut, Tom,” replied William sullenly.

The gaoler gave a low, porcine grunt, gesturing for the prisoner to follow him. William knew he could easily overpower this base creature, but he was also aware that he wouldn’t get very far – too many guards, too many iron bars. All the same, it might be worth making a dash for it, as ending his life on the point of a blade couldn’t be any worse than dancing the hempen jig, but his aching bones and weary heart dissuaded him from this coarse act. No, he would rather find out what this stranger in a fancy coat wanted of him.

After descending a gloomy stairwell he was led into a brighter room with a large worm-eaten oak table and two rickety chairs. A pitcher of water and two clay cups were the only objects on its scratched and defaced surface. The man who had been seated on one of the chairs rose as William

shuffled into the room. Tom didn't enter, but slammed the door shut and went grumpily about his business.

"So you're William Benton, are you?" inquired the man in an educated London accent.

"Aye, that I be, and who might you be?" answered William eyeing the other man suspiciously.

"I'm Nathaniel Bagshaw from *The Daily Courant*," said the other man, extending his hand in greeting, which he soon regretted when William's calloused, grubby appendage touched his own soft, clean hand. Registering the confused look on William's face, he continued. "*The Daily Courant* is the name of the newspaper I work for."

William looked the man up and down appraisingly before answering. Nathaniel Bagshaw was no longer wearing his long, fancy coat, which was draped neatly over the back of one of the chairs. He couldn't have been much older than thirty years old. His clothes were spotless and neatly pressed, his manner was confident. He had a comely face with a narrow nose, on which were perched a pair of copper-framed spectacles. His short, curly hair was neatly trimmed, as were the long sideburns on either side of his smooth face.

"Very interesting I'm sure, but what do you want me for?" asked William curtly.

"Please sit and I'll explain," replied Nathaniel amiably, gesturing to the chair without the coat on it. "Would you like some water?"

"I'd prefer something stronger."

"I might just be able to arrange that later, if you are willing to oblige me," smiled the reporter.

"There's no harm in listening to what you have to say, I s'pose."

"Well, as I already said, I work for a newspaper and knowing you are a convicted pirate I'm sure my readers would be interested in hearing your story. Tales about pirates are all the rage at present. I already know you were found by *HMS Deal Castle* drifting off the coast of Bermuda three

months past. I also know that the sloop you were found on was flying the yellow jack. I was informed that your ship was boarded after some initial reluctance and that you were the sole survivor on board. The bodies of twelve other men we found, all dead of scurvy. You were in a malnourished state but lacked the symptoms of this scourge of all sailors. How is it that you alone survived?"

"I believe it was due to me private stash of lovely fruit preserves," answered William cherishingly.

"Why didn't you share them with the others?"

"I didn't realise at the time that it was 'cos of the jam that I might of remained alive while the others didn't. Anyway, they drank the last of the hot chocolate without giving me any, so I wasn't about to share me favourite preserves with them, was I?"

"Hot chocolate? I thought all you pirates drank was rum," replied the surprised journalist.

"Rum, brandy, wine. We drinks it all, but there's nothing like a cup of fresh hot chocolate to calm the nerves, there isn't. That is if we managed to get our hands on a cargo of cocoa beans."

"Very interesting. Now it also seems you were the bosun on a larger pirate vessel."

"There's no proof of that, there isn't!" replied William frantically. "It's all lies and slander. They've got it in for me. They always have. "

"Maybe you're right, but the chief witness for the prosecution was sailing master of a ship you captured. He swears you led the plundering of his vessel and threatened to cut his ears off if he didn't tell you where his valuables were hidden. How do you explain that?"

William slumped back in his chair. "I guess there's no use denying it now, what with me up for being hanged. I told Captain Ironside we shouldn't of let him go after we took what we wanted, but he thinks he knows better. He always does. Should of sunk the bugger together with his ship

instead of letting him sail on his way. We did him a favour and he goes and accuses me of being a damned pirate in front of the whole world. That's bloody gratitude!"

"Well, I guess he sees it differently, but what's done is done. All that remains is for you to tell your story. In fact, I'm not only planning to write an article for the news sheet, but am also hoping to write a book on the subject of pirate adventures, and I believe you could be of great help to me there."

"A book about me?" asked William, weighing up any possible benefits for himself.

"Not only about you. You may not be aware, but a book is in the process of being written about known pirates such as Blackbeard, Stede Bonnet, and Ned Lowe. It's to be called *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the most notorious Pyrates*. I hope to publish my book, *A Detailed History of Opprobrious Pyrate Adventures in Lands lying far across the Sea*, first, if I can, but it must contain some stories that are less well known to the public to be a success. That is where you can help, as little is known of your Captain Ironside and what has happened to him."

"Who's this Ned Lowe character you mentioned?" inquired William.

"You don't know who Ned Lowe was?" asked the astonished reporter. "A cruel man of our own fair nation who started pirating in the year 1721. His fate is uncertain, but some claim he went down with his ship in a storm off the coast of Brazil."

"They tell me it is now the year seventeen hundred and twenty-three of our Lord. We were lost in strange lands from the summer of 1718 until they found me. That's probably why I've never heard of this Captain Lowe," answered William, scratching his unevenly shaven head.

"That would explain your lack of knowledge of current affairs," stated Nathaniel, taking a sip of water and quickly spitting it back into the cup and wrinkling his nose.

“You won’t get no decent food nor drink in here,” William laughed. “So tell me, Mr Bagshaw, what’s in it for me, if I cooperate?”

“Well, I can’t do anything about your sentence, but I can make your last days a little more bearable. For instance, I could grease the palms of that unsavoury fellow who brought you to me to see to it you get better nourishment and maybe more sanitary conditions.”

“I guess it won’t hurt to better me conditions til I share the fate of Captain Kidd down at the docks. You know he was hanged down in Wapping in 1701. They had to hang him twice, ‘cos the rope broke on the first attempt. I hope I gets a good clean hanging. No messing about like,” explained William sagely.

“Yes, I remember hearing about it, although I was only a child at the time. They say some in the crowd called for Kidd’s release, claiming the breaking of the rope was a sign from God, but they hanged him anyway. His body was gibbeted over the River Thames at Tilbury Point for three years as a warning to future would-be pirates,” replied Nathaniel earnestly. “Why don’t you start by telling me something of your background?”

William scratched his left armpit rigorously. “I started me career as a seaman on a merchantman out of Plymouth, and although the painstaking labour on that vessel didn’t agree with me, it was better than what came next.”

“And what was that?” inquired Nathaniel eagerly, reaching into his satchel to produce a steel dip pen, a bottle of ink, and a leather-bound note book.

“I was press-ganged into the Royal Navy when on shore leave in Dartmouth. Me own fault I guess. Shouldn’t of got myself so fuddled with drink. Woke up with a head like a bag of chisels and found meself on board a fifth-rater on me way out to sea. I went to hell and back on that ship. The second lieutenant didn’t like the cut of me jib, you see. I’m sad to say the cat o’ nine was a dear old friend of mine. Couldn’t keep

me mouth shut, you see. But after one dark day when the officer on deck flayed the skin off me neck,” William pulled down the collar of his filthy shirt, revealing the angry scars on his neck and upper back, “I decided it was time to jump ship in Jamaica, and I fled to the island’s interior, hanging out with a group of maroons until that infernal ship had left port. Then I managed to secure passage to Nassau where I joined Captain Ironside’s crew on *Dream Chaser* and, due to me experience, soon became his bosun.”

“Maroons, you say. By that do you mean men marooned after a shipwreck? I thought you had to be alone on an isolated island to count as being marooned.”

“No, maroons are escaped slaves and their descendants living in hidden communities,” sighed Benton. “Nice bunch when yer get to know ‘em.”

“Really? You learn something new everyday,” said Bagshaw, scribbling in his notepad. “And this *Dream Chaser* was last recorded leaving Nassau a few weeks before Governor Woodes Rogers arrived to enforce the King’s Pardon. What happened after that?” asked Nathaniel, dipping his steel pen into the ink.

“We chose not to accept King George’s clemency. Captain Ironside said the *King’s Proclamation for Suppressing of Pirates* revealed the Crown’s weakness. That they couldn’t overcome us by force alone, so they sought to divide us, and by God it worked. The lily-livered ones, such as Benjamin Hornigold and Henry Jennings, were all too ready to accept it. Ironside said we would be stronger if we held together, but I guess too many were tired of a pirating,” sighed William. “Most of those men of spirit who still desired liberty fled before English warships appeared in the bay.”

“But that still doesn’t answer my question. What happened next?” persisted Nathaniel with pen poised.

“Shiver me timbers! You’re not one for patience, are you? I was getting to that. As I said, we sailed out of Nassau and were planning to join up with Blackbeard on Ocracoke Island, but

first the Captain insisted on stopping off in Bermuda to drop his wife ashore. She had left Nassau with us and he feared for her at sea, so he decided to drop her off where she had family,” explained William, pausing to scratch the back pit of his right knee. “It was then we saw her.”

“Saw who?” ask Nathaniel, pausing his note taking and looking at the other man in anticipation.

“Sink me! None other than a Spanish treasure galleon. We couldn’t believe our luck. We’d have never dared attack the treasure fleet itself, what with its man-o-war escort and all that, but this ship must have got itself separated from the rest of the fleet during the storm that had raged ahead of us the previous night.”

“Blackbeard! A treasure galleon! This story is going to be more enthralling than I expected,” stammered the reporter. “You do know that Blackbeard sails the seas no longer, don’t you?”

“Strike me tops’! You mean old Ed Teach has gone to Davy Jones’s locker?” gasped the pirate.

“Yes, sadly for some, but not so sad for others. Lieutenant Maynard found the pirates anchored near Ocracoke Island on an evening in November of 1718. Apparently, Blackbeard was on the other side of the island entertaining guests and had not seen fit to set a lookout, which allowed the pirate hunter’s two sloops to get close. At first it seemed Maynard had bitten off more than he could chew after Teach managed to put one of his two sloops out of action with a broadside, but the lieutenant had presence of mind to keep most of his men below deck in anticipation of being boarded, telling them to prepare for close quarter fighting.

After the pirates’ grappling hooks hit their target and several grenades broke across the sloop’s deck, Teach led his men aboard, emboldened at the sight of Maynard’s apparently half-empty ship. It was then that the rest of Maynard’s men burst forth from the hold, shouting and firing. The plan to surprise Blackbeard and his crew had

worked! The pirates were taken aback by the sudden assault. I'm told that Teach fought his way across the blood-smeared deck, which was already slick with blood from those already killed or injured. Maynard and Teach fired their flintlocks at each other, then drew their cutlasses. They say Teach broke Maynard's cutlass at the hilt, but alas the pirates were pushed back towards the bow and Blackbeard was surrounded and isolated. Teach fought like a tiger, but to no avail, as he was soon overpowered and slain by several of Maynard's crew. On seeing their fearsome captain dead, the remaining pirates quickly surrendered. They say Maynard hung Edward Teach's severed head from his ship's bowsprit. They also say Teach had been shot five times and cut about twenty before he finally fell. Some say he was the Devil himself!"

"Well I'll be buggered! I knew him personally and a fine captain he was too. I'm lost for words," exclaimed the distraught pirate.

"Maybe you can tell me what happened after you sighted the treasure galleon," asked Nathaniel hopefully, perched on the edge of his chair.

William paused to scratch his balls before speaking. "Sure I'll tell yer. Here's what happened next ..."

Fog of War

The Atlantic Ocean, August 1718

The Mist

Somewhere between the Bahamas and Bermuda three ships were heading north under full sail. The largest of the three, *Dream Chaser*, was a three-masted, fully-rigged ship carrying a complement of thirty-two cannons. It had once seen service as a slaving ship until it was commandeered by its present crew. The second ship, *The Blood Rose*, the largest of the two consorts, was a two-masted, twelve-gun brigantine with a square foresail. The smallest vessel was a swift Bermuda sloop with only eight guns and was called *Vengeful Mermaid*.

Standing on the quarter-deck of *Dream Chaser* was a man in a long, brown coat which had seen better days. A red scarf sat on his long, slim head covering his short unkempt hair. His close-set, cool blue eyes worriedly scanned the horizon. The man was Björn Gunnarsson, known to his crew as Captain Ironside. He was no novice to the post of commanding a vessel, having once served as captain on a brig in the Swedish navy, that is, until he was dishonourably discharged through no fault of his own. Now his contempt

for the iron discipline in the navies of all nations knew no bounds, and he only reluctantly agreed to command *Dream Chaser* after he was unanimously elected to the position by the ship's current crew.

Although it was a fine day with a good wind, he couldn't suppress the uneasiness he felt inside. It wasn't that circumstances were so bad, rather they were unexpected. He had no regrets about turning down the King's pardon, but had realised it was becoming too dangerous to stay in Nassau with that madman Charles Vane, who had seized control of the settlement. He did regret that he had no real choice but to depart from the isle of New Providence, and having to bid farewell to many of his former companions pained him. He would even miss that turncoat Hornigold, who had only too readily accepted the pardon. What worried him now was that he would probably have to drastically change his plans. He had originally been planning to drop his wife, Cassandra, off in Bermuda before heading towards Topsail Inlet in North Carolina to join up with his old friend Edward Teach, but the recent sighting of the stray Spanish treasure galleon, which had been separated from the main treasure fleet by a storm, had awoken in the crew a fresh and keen thirst for gold. He feared they would not be swayed by his argument that their ship was in urgent need of careening, which he had planned to undertake when in the Carolinas. He could only hope that *Dream Chaser* and her consorts would quickly catch up with the Spanish vessel and take it with little effort, so he could then bring Cassandra to safety. The thought of engaging another ship with her on board provoked uneasiness in his guts. That which was worrying him even more was the thick sea mist into which the distant galleon had just disappeared, probably in an attempt to evade her pursuers. He hoped to use this to dissuade the crew from further pursuit, but didn't fancy his chances at success, and for that purpose he had ordered the sails to be trimmed, so the other two captains could board his vessel to discuss the issue. Suddenly, a rough

voice beside him tore him from his thoughts.

“The small council’s ready for yer, Cap’n,” said a man dressed in a long, shabby, grey coat with a long, black beard and blood-shot eyes standing beside him. It was Peter Thurlow, the quartermaster, also known as Powder Keg Pete after early one morning after a drunken binge he was discovered to be sleeping in the powder magazine atop a row of powder kegs, oblivious to any danger to his own person or to the ship. To the horror of the boatswain, who found him, his clay pipe, half-empty tobacco pouch, and tinder box lay not far from his prone body. It would have been cause to relieve him of his duty on any merchant or naval vessel, but the crew had seen the funny side of it and no sanctions were brought against him. The quartermaster stared at Ironside expectantly, scratching his broad, red nose.

“Call them up to the quarterdeck. I think it’d be better if we first discussed the matter out of earshot of the rest of the crew,” answered Ironside with the wisp of a Swedish accent.

“As ye wish, Cap’n,” answered Pete before trundling off to fetch the others.

A few moments later Pete returned with the few most trusted members of his crew and the captains of the other two ships close behind. The first was the boatswain, William Benton, a man in his mid-thirties with long, braided, dark brown hair and near-handsome features marked with days of stubble. The second was the coxswain, John Brownrigg, a tall man with a round, angry-looking face and long, greasy brown hair. He sported a short beard and wore a threadbare waistcoat with no shirt. Next came Faustus Quiddington, the ship’s surgeon, a man of about forty years whose thirst for knowledge was insatiable. His friendly face was topped by a brown tricorne which he had comically secured to his chin with a leather strap to stop it blowing away in the wind, having already lost three such hats in that way. Under his hat he wore a short grey wig, and a pair of brass-framed glasses perched on the bridge of his nose, both of which the man

felt made himself look more intelligent and respectable, but which were in fact the butt of endless jokes among the crew behind his back. Ironside had once tried on the surgeon's spectacles one time he had left them atop the binnacle and discovered that they contained nothing but normal glass with no benefits to one's vision, but he had tactfully chosen to keep this discovery to himself. After all, the man was knowledgeable on many subjects and spoke fluent Spanish, French, and Latin.

Close behind came the proud captain of *Vengeful Mermaid*, John Wolfenden, better known as Captain Wolf, his strong, lupine features even lending the appearance of his namesake creature. He kept his beard trim and tidy and his angular features were punctuated by a pair of mirthless brown eyes. He had once been the first mate on a merchantman out of Bristol, but after slaying the captain in a fit of temper, the rest of the crew elected him captain and voted for a life of roving and plundering. For some unknown reason, he chose to wear the fine attire of a Spanish officer, consisting of a blue coat with silver trim, a red waistcoat, and a tricorne with silver edging – some say out of mockery, others out of vanity. Finally, came by far the oldest of the three captains, Captain Callum Magee of *The Blood Rose*, an Irishman who stood out in contrast to Captain Wolf with his flabby, round face and ruddy complexion. He was content to wear a short white jacket, stained vest, and white headscarf. Not an ounce of ostentation could be found about his person.

Once they had all assembled around him, Captain Ironside opened the debate. "As you have seen, the galleon has disappeared into the mist and I ask if it would be a sensible act to continue to follow it not knowing its precise course."

"The mist will surely soon pass," growled Wolf. "The prey was last seen larboard on the bow, sailing free. If we quickly change tack, we'll be running before the wind, at least for a while. I estimate we can catch her in a matter of hours."

“But what if she changes course within the mist. If that fog persists, we won’t know about it until it’s too late,” countered Brownrigg abruptly.

“What say you, Ironside?” asked Captain Magee, wiping sweat from his brow with a well-used, silk kerchief.

“I say we continue the chase, but if we haven’t neared her by nightfall, I suggest breaking off the pursuit and resuming our original course for Bermuda,” answered Ironside, deciding that a compromise might be the best course of action. “Captains Wolf and Magee are, of course, free to choose their own course of action.

“But we’ll have little chance against that galleon without *Dream Chaser’s* guns. What choice do we have if you choose to leave us?” mumbled Magee.

“Anyway, the prize is too far ahead and out of sight, I says. What if we lose ourselves in that damned mist, or even worse, we encounter a British or Spanish warship when the mist disperses?” persisted the coxswain. “I says we give it up and sail to St. George’s Town as planned.”

“Only ‘cos you can’t wait to get to the brothel,” jeered William Benton. “We’ll find that ship. Leave it to me and me back staff, Johnny.”

“You can’t use your bloody back staff, if you can’t see the sun, Billy Boy,” responded Brownrigg, his face reddening.

“What do you know, blockhead? You just stick to sorting old rope and leave the important tasks to the men,” snapped William.

There was a moment of strained silence as rage consumed John Brownrigg’s ruddy face, and then, without a warning, he lunged at the cocky boatswain, grabbing him by the collar. Before anyone else could react, William had planted his right fist into his assailant’s belly, causing him to release his grip and double over. Quickly recovering from the crafty blow Brownrigg uprighted himself and took a swing at Benton, narrowly missing the man’s chin, but the moment William produced a small knife from his pocket, Captain Wolf saw fit

to intervene, firmly gripping the arm holding the offending item.

“That’s enough! We’ve no time for this foolishness. That galleon will be half way to Cádiz if we dilly-dally further,” he growled, glaring threateningly at *Dream Chaser’s* boatswain.

William grinned sheepishly as he pocketed the small weapon and Brownrigg turned and stormed off. “Do what you want! See if I care,” he grumbled to himself as he descended the steps to the main weather deck. After giving Benton a stern look, Ironside turned to the ship’s surgeon and spoke.

“You’ve not said anything yet, Mr. Quiddington. Do you think we have a chance?”

“I tend to agree with you, Captain. If we don’t find the Spaniard by dusk, we should abandon the chase,” answered Faustus, adjusting his spectacles.

“And what say you, Pete?”

“Oi says let the crew vote on it,” replied the quartermaster in a guttural voice.

“So be it. Pete will assemble the crew of this vessel while Wolf and Magee return to their own ships and consult with their people,” stated Ironside authoritatively. As the small group was dispersing Ironside placed a firm hand on Benton’s shoulder. “Not you, Billy Boy.”

“What is it, Cap’n?” asked the boatswain innocently.

“I’ll say this only once, William. If you ever pull a knife on another member of this crew again, you’re off this ship, and I don’t care if we’re in the middle of the ocean. Do you understand?” said the captain grimly.

“Aye, Aye, sir. Loud and clear. Can I go now?” he replied with a hint of insolence in his voice.

Captain Ironside stood for a moment shaking his head while he watched Benton leave the quarterdeck. He wondered again if he had made the right choice in appointing William Benton as boatswain. The man might prove to be more trouble than he was worth. He may be one of the most experienced

seamen aboard, but the man's penchant for antagonising the other crew members gave him cause for concern. He decided if the man caused any more trouble before they reached Bermuda, he would set him ashore once they arrived. He doubted the rest of the crew would object.

While the others were conferring, Ironside returned to his cabin, where his wife was anxiously awaiting the outcome of the discussion. On entering the shadowy interior of his own private space, a luxury only afforded to him on account of his wife's presence, he found his spouse cleaning the grubby stern windows.

"They'll let in more light if they're clean, Björn," said the slim woman without turning around.

"I'm sure they will, but I haven't had time to do it recently, have I?" he chuckled.

Cassandra Baines turned to face him and smiled. She had a slender face with high cheekbones; a face which seemed to smile even when it wasn't. Captain Ironside called her his African princess, despite the fact she was a free Bermudian who had never seen that far off continent. It was not something she minded, as she had always harboured a fondness for the land of her ancestors in her heart.

"So, what did they say?" she asked, wiping her hands on the front of her long, dark green cotton dress.

"They're voting on it now. If they vote to chase the prize, it'll be some time before we're in Bermuda and it worries me to have you aboard while taking a ship by force," frowned Ironside.

"Why? Because I'm a woman?" she answered teasingly.

"No, because you're my wife and I don't want you in harm's way," he replied, taking her in his arms.

"It is not the hunting down of that Spanish ship which concerns me, dear, but rather the sudden mist. I have a bad feeling about it. I feel it would be better to abandon the pursuit, for all our sakes."

"There's little I can do, if the crew vote in favour, short

of taking a jolly boat and rowing us both all the way to St. George's Town," he grinned.

Cassandra looked up at him seriously. "You have to stop them sailing into that mist, my love, or we may never see Bermuda again."

"And what shall I tell the crew? Shall I tell them my wife has a funny feeling about it? No, I can't. They'll laugh me off the ship and we'll have a new captain by daybreak tomorrow. Don't worry, it'll be all right. I promise," Ironside said consolingly.

A knock on the door interrupted the intimate conversation. The captain opened it to see the quartermaster grinning at him with his tobacco-stained teeth.

"The vote 'as been made, Cap'n."

"So what's it to be, Pete?" Ironside asked apprehensively.

"Three quarters of the crew voted to continue the chase and the other two ships've signalled us that they intend t'do the same," answered the quartermaster, retrieving his pipe from a long pocket.

"So be it. Order the men to raise the tops'ls. We've got a prize to catch."

Not long after, all three ships disappeared into the mysterious mist.

Captured

It took about an hour before the small fleet re-emerged from the mist. What greeted them was totally unexpected. The air resonated with the thundering of cannons and the screaming of men, for they had emerged in the midst of a raging sea battle in the mouth of a wide river estuary. Through the smoke and chaos Captain Ironside observed mighty men-o-war, first and second raters brimming with guns, pounding each other into oblivion. The flags they were flying were unrecognizable to him, some were white bearing a black eagle others red with golden eagle in the

centre. Beyond the harum-scarum scene he could see a coast brimming with stone parapets and bastions from which more guns were adding to the din of the battle. Ironside realised he would have to act swiftly if he was to avert disaster.

“Four points to starboard,” he shouted desperately at the panic-stricken helmsman, “and have a care of the lee-latch!”

“Four points to starboard, Cap’n!” repeated the man frantically as he tightly gripped the whip staff.

Benton and two other men rushed to aid the overstrained seaman just as an iron ball tore a gaping hole in the upper mizzen sail. “Coming round, sir!” Shouted the boatswain as they struggled with the long, wooden appendage, causing the vessel to momentarily tilt dangerously.

“Ready about!” shouted Ironside as he hurried down to the main deck where he encountered Powder Keg Pete and John Brownrigg already seeing to it that the sails were appropriately adjusted. Pete turned as the captain neared him.

“They’re bloody well firing on us now!” the black-bearded man cried out. As if to emphasis his words, another ball tore through the larboard shrouds narrowly missing the coxswain.

“She’s coming about too quickly. I just hope *Dream Chaser* can take the strain,” panted Ironside.

“Oi believe she can take it. Shall we man the guns?” inquired the quartermaster.

“No point. We’ll be blown out the water by those monsters and we don’t want to flood the ports. Only thing for it is to scarper and regroup.”

“Who are them buggers anyway?” asked the perplexed quartermaster.

“Damned if I know. They definitely aren’t British or Spanish though, maybe ...” answered the captain.

Pete didn’t wait for a reply, instead rushing off to help a fumbling crew member with one of the halliards. Ironside gripped the gunwale as the ship abruptly slanted leeward,

and supporting himself on the bulwark he spotted *The Blood Rose* half a league off the starboard quarter. He looked on in horror when he saw one of the large warships turning so its larboard cannons would soon be facing the smaller vessel. The hostile ship was flying the flag with a black eagle on a white background and must have been carrying more than ninety guns. The quartermaster joined him at the rail again, whistling in disbelief.

“*The Rose* is turning too slowly!” cried Ironside desperately. “If that bloody leviathan gives off a broadside, she’s done for.”

“They’re panickin’. The sails are all ahoo!” stated Pete anxiously. “She’ll land on her beam ends, if she’s not careful.”

“It won’t matter if that man-o-war discharges all her cannon at her.”

And it indeed came to pass. Moments later there was a deafening roar and a thick veil of smoke arose as all hell broke loose, the huge vessel hurling a broadside at the hapless brigantine. Captain Magee’s ship stood no chance. Dozens of iron balls thundered into the wooden sides of its target, sending lethal splinters in all directions, and both masts collapsing onto the deck, crushing men or smothering them with the fallen sails. A second broadside tore *The Blood Rose* apart, causing it to slowly founder.

“No one can have survived that,” groaned the horrified captain. “It seems they’ve mistaken us for the enemy. Raise the Union Jack! Surely the won’t fire if they think we’re a King’s ship. The Brits aren’t presently at war with anyone except us pirates, as far as I know.”

Once Pete had run off to carry out the task, Ironside scanned the scene of smoke and wreckage looking for *Vengeful Mermaid*. He was relieved to see she was as of yet unharmed. Captain Wolf had obviously seen the danger and was sailing away due west close to the wind – the opposite direction in which *Dream Chaser* was now heading. When he would see her again was uncertain, but at least she was in one piece. Fortunately, his own ship was making good speed

and the ship that had destroyed *The Blood Rose* was turning too slowly to be an immediate threat. They would be long gone before she came about.

They had put some distance between themselves and the sea battle when the wind started turning foul, forcing them gradually towards the rocky coastline. Looking from whence they had come, Ironside was surprised to see that the mist had completely lifted and only open ocean lay in that direction. The gravest danger now was any hidden reefs on this unknown coast. "Hale up the brails!" he shouted, instructing the men to adjust the sails. He also ordered for soundings to be taken. He wouldn't risk running aground, not after managing to escape that mayhem. On returning to the quarterdeck, he found Brownrigg sullenly awaiting him.

"What's goin' on, Captain? Where the hell are we?"

"I have no idea, John. This is all a mystery to me," shrugged the disconcerted pirate captain.

"We've got to get away from this shore with all haste," urged the coxswain shakily.

"We'll make too slow progress working to windward. I think we should follow the coastline and try to find a cove to shelter in until the wind changes in our favour," replied Ironside not sounding totally convinced by his own words. "You were right, John. It was a bad idea to follow that galleon into the mist."

"Aye, but not in the way I thought, Cap'n. It matters not. I'll see to it that we follow the coast." Brownrigg then descended to the main deck hoarsely shouting orders.

Ironside inhaled a deep breath of salty air to steady his nerves when he noticed the ship's surgeon ascending the stairs to speak with him.

"How goes it, Faustus?" he asked with forced cordiality.

"Bearing up, Captain, but I am somewhat confused to our whereabouts. Judging by the climate, we no longer appear to be anywhere near the Caribbean or the eastern seaboard of the Americas. In fact, if I didn't know better, I'd say we were

off the west coast of Ireland. At least, the landscape there bears many similarities to this one,” explained the physician nervously.

“Maybe we’ve drifted much farther north than anticipated,” ventured the captain, realising for the first time that the air had become somewhat cooler since they left the mist.

“So far north that the climate is completely different? In such a short time? I think not, Captain,” answered Faustus firmly. “I say something peculiar is afoot.”

“Sails ahoy!” came a sudden cry from atop the ship’s foremast.

The captain rushed to the bow, where Brownrigg was already standing, to get a better view and saw that a vessel was indeed rounding the headland ahead. Moments later a second and then a third appeared. They were much smaller than the huge warships previously encountered, nothing more than armed sloops carrying eight to ten guns, and they were flying a different flag to the one that had sunk *The Blood Rose* – the one with a golden eagle on a red background. *Dream Chaser* may be larger and better armed, but those smaller ships would be more nimble in this unfavourable wind.

“We’d do well to make ourselves scarce,” said Brownrigg soberly.

“Aye, if it were possible, but I fear we wouldn’t get very far in this traverse wind. Those sloops are more manoeuvrable. They could take us fore and aft,” frowned Ironside, unsure of the best course of action. On open sea under fair winds, he wouldn’t hesitate to put up a fight, but under these conditions he would be risking his ship and crew by taking evasive action. His only option was to continue straight ahead where they at least had a degree of wind to propel the ship onwards. He would find out what those ships wanted, but would be prepared for a fight, should their intentions be hostile.

“Bear down and beat to quarter!” shouted Ironside, ordering the men to prepare for battle.

“Wait!” cried out Brownrigg. “They’re signalling us.”

Shielding his eyes from the sun, Ironside could just make out a figure at the prow of the leading sloop waving a yellow flag in one hand and a blue one in the other.

“Belay that order!” bellowed the captain. Turning to the coxswain he asked, “I know not the meaning of such a signal. Do you know what they want from us, John?”

“No, those signals are foreign to me, but I suggest we find out rather than getting entangled in a conflict with those sloops. We don’t know how many more of them there might be around that bluff.”

“Aye, you’re right there. We’ll slow down, but not strike our sails, just in case,” replied Ironside. Turning he shouted, “Bring her to!”

Men scurried hectically around the deck arranging the sails so the ship would make no more progress. Ironside waved at the other ship in the hope they would see that *Dream Chaser’s* intentions weren’t belligerent.

“What’re ya doin’, Cap’n?” called out William Benton angrily, who was dashing towards him. “We can take ‘em. Why did you belay the order to fight? They’ll think we’re yellow.”

“First we’ll see what they want,” answered the captain firmly.

“But them dogs sunk *The Rose*. I say we stick it to ‘em,” persisted the irate boatswain.

“If you’d been paying attention, you would have noticed that they aren’t flying the same flag as the man-o-war which attacked us. In fact, they’re flying the flag of the opposing side to the one on that damn ship.”

“You know what they say, Billy Boy,” intervened Brownrigg. “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

“Suit yerselves!” snorted Benton, storming off towards amidships.

The entire crew of the now near stationary ship waited with nervous anticipation while crewmembers of the leading

sloop lowered a longboat and rowed slowly towards them. Ironside was aware that the other two vessels were using the time to manoeuvre themselves into more advantageous positions should the encounter turn sour. In the meantime, Ironside ordered the chief gunner, Frederick Sauer, to see to it that the guns would be ready to fire on his orders, should it become necessary. After quickly reassuring the sceptical Cassandra that all would be well, he made his way to the leeward side to await the new arrivals. Pete and William were already leaning on the gunwale watching the approaching boat.

“We’ll all be hanged,” the boatswain muttered. “It’d be craven not to resist.”

“We cud put a fight, but at what price,” snapped Pete. “I says the cap’n is right to parley first. You saw what ‘appened to *The Rose*.”

“We’d be hard put to take on three sloops, not knowing if reinforcements are lurking around the corner,” replied Ironside, ignoring William’s grunts of disapproval. “We’ll fight if we have to, though. I’ll not give up this ship so easily.”

The longboat soon reached *Dream chaser’s* larboard side and a man dressed in a smart green tunic with a red trim, spotless white breeches, and a black three-cornered hat clambered up the ship’s ladder. Pete helped the man, who was obviously an officer, over the gunwale. The young, clean-shaven, pale-faced man finally spoke after adjusting his hat.

“Herzliche Segensgrüße, meine Herren. Ich bin Kapitän Otto Krüger und bin hier im Auftrag der kaiserlichen Majestät Wilhelm Ludwig Friedrich der Prächtige. Würden Sie mir bitte sagen, wer Sie sind, woher Sie kommen, und was Sie in unserem Hoheitsgebiet zu suchen haben?”

“Speak English, man! We don’t understand your gibberish,” snorted William.

“Verstehen Sie kein alamannisch? Sind Sie aus dem Nordland?” continued the officer.

“I think he’s speaking German,” interjected Faustus. “Go

and fetch Woody or Frederick. They can translate for us.”

“Forget Frederick, his English is pretty weak,” said Ironside. “Bring Woody.”

The captain gave a signal for Kapitän Krüger to wait, which the smiling man seemed to understand. Moments later William returned with another slightly taller man dressed in green and white, loose-fitting trousers, a beige cotton shirt, and a leather skull cap. The man was from Hamburg and he was the ship’s carpenter, Hans Zimmermann, who the other crew members preferred to call Woody.

“What are you wanting, Captain?” asked Woody in a strong north German accent.

“I think we’ve encountered some of your countrymen and I want you to translate for us. Tell him we’ve veered off course and are unsure of our whereabouts,” said Ironside calmly.

“Aye, aye, sir,” replied the carpenter before turning to the visitor and addressing him in German. After a brief exchange of words Woody turned to the captain looking confused.

“He says he is not German and that he knows nothing of a land that is called Germany. He says we have entered the territory of East Holstein, which is presently at war with West Holstein. He seems to think we are North-landers, and because he does not recognize the British flag he thinks we must be coming from a more minor northern island. He is wanting to know why we are here. What do I tell him?” said the German seaman.

“Tell him we are English merchants, no, tell him we are merchants from the Northern Islands who were driven off our course by a storm,” answered the captain.

Woody relayed what Ironside had said. “He wants to know what we carry.”

Ironside thought for a moment. What did they still have in the hold? They had a few barrels of wine and vats of brandy they had plundered before learning the British were on their way to Nassau. There were also a couple of crates of tobacco and quite a bit of rope, not to mention the twenty

barrels of quality gunpowder they had stolen from a Spanish merchantman. "Tell him we're carrying a mixed cargo: wine, brandy, tobacco, and gunpowder."

Hans Zimmermann quickly translated. "He seemed especially interested in the gunpowder. He says we are welcome in the port of Steinburg, the capital of East Holstein, and that his ships will escort us there."

"Tell him we gratefully accept his offer," replied Ironside, deciding it was the best course of action if they wanted to find out where they were.

Kapitän Krüger seemed genuinely pleased that his offer had been accepted and quickly returned to his own ship. *Dream Chaser* made slow progress around the headland, escorted by the three more versatile sloops. On rounding the rocky bluff the entire crew marvelled at the sight which greeted their tired eyes. An enormous city spanned the coast to the east and west with a large harbour sheltered by a breakwater and protected by numerous forts. Captain Ironside scratched his chin while he wondered if he had made the right decision.

There were several merchant vessels anchored in the bay and yet more moored at the dockside. On the quay dockers were busily loading and unloading cargoes, and sailors were coming and going from the numerous taverns not far from the waterfront. As they neared the harbourside, the crew saw some small boats coming out to guide to them to their assigned mooring place. Some time later, Ironside was observing the men securing the stern and head lines to the wharf when he became aware of the sound of marching feet. Turning, he saw a tidy column of soldiers dressed in smart blue tunics with a red trim, wearing short wigs under their black tricorns, and resting their erect muskets on their left shoulders, marching towards the ship. The officer leading the soldiers ordered them to halt and to right face when they were level with *Dream Chaser*. Ironside realised there was nothing they could do should those troops try to storm his

ship. Even if he could get back into the bay, he would have to abandon the few men already on shore, and no doubt the guns of the forts would then take his ship apart. He only hoped their intentions weren't hostile; his only option being to tell the crew to remain calm.

"There must be two companies of soldiers down there," comment Brownrigg nervously. "What're we going to do?"

"Stay calm and cooperate, I would say," replied Ironside, his hand tightly gripping the gunwale. He waved Woody over and instructed him to find out what the soldiers wanted, and after some minutes the carpenter returned with a gloomy expression on his face.

"They say we must leave the ship and be escorted to our temporary quarters, and that we must leave all our weapons on board. He says it is a necessary precaution, because of the war with West Holstein. He says we have nothing to fear," reported Zimmermann glumly. "What will we do, Captain?"

"I guess we have no choice but to comply and hope for the best," shrugged Ironside. "Brownrigg, inform the crew to leave their weapons, but to take any concealable valuables with them."

The grumbling crew made their way down the gangplank one-by-one and fell in between the soldiers, who flanked them on both sides. Captain Ironside was, of course, the last to leave the ship together with his wife, looking back as he reached his disheartened men to see some of the soldiers boarding his beloved ship along with what looked like a group of customs officials. The motley procession was observed by crowds of intrigued dockworkers and sailors as it made its way along the wharf, finally stopping in front of a large warehouse into which the captives were ushered by the muzzles of muskets. The spacious interior contained stacks of old, empty crates and barrels. The only windows faced the street and were some fifteen feet above their heads, and not having been regularly cleaned let in little light. The stale air was tinged with the scent of old wood.

The soldiers didn't leave instantly, but waited outside the open main doors until Kapitän Krüger arrived. He informed them via Woody's translation that it was a necessary inconvenience and that they shouldn't view themselves as being prisoners despite the sentries who were to be posted outside. He also told them he had ordered some blankets, candles, food, and water for them, and that they weren't to leave the building unescorted, at least for the time being. Additionally, he informed them that their ship was safely under guard and that he had even instructed a sailmaker to patch the damaged sails as a sign of good will. When he was finished he left and the heavy doors closed behind him with a thud.

"Not prisoners, eh?" snarled William. The crew exchanged nervous glances. "We're all gonna hang, I tell ya, just because our captain wasn't willing to engage those sloops like I said we should."

"We have t'ry and escape," came a higher pitched voice with a strong Irish accent from among the crowd of crewmembers. The courageous words came from Niamh O' Malley, one of few women on *Dream Chaser*. Captain Wolf would never have let a woman serve aboard his ship, claiming it would bring bad luck, but Captain Ironside didn't hold with such superstitions; he claimed it was how capable a sailor a person was that mattered, and O'Malley was as efficient as any of the men, all be it a little hot-headed at times. With her broad face and rosy cheeks – topped by unkempt, curly, brown hair – some might even say she was pretty, if not for the seemingly permanent smudges of grease and other dirt on her face. The diminutive, hot-tempered woman from the west coast of Ireland, dressed in knee-length, patched breeches, grubby stockings, and a stained white shirt, stepped forward and repeated her statement of defiance.

"Now that would be foolhardy, me dear. You want to ask all those nice soldiers out there just to let us go, or do

you think we can overpower them without any weapons?" sneered William.

"Just 'cos you lack the courage to make a break for it, you t'ink we should give ourselves as beaten," snarled the Irish woman.

"You claim I'm lacking in courage, but I was the one who wanted to take on those sloops. At least we had a fighting chance then. My dear Neeve, it's about time you learned the difference between bravery and stupidity."

"Ya feckin' eejit, I'll have ya!" screeched O' Malley, lunging at the cocky boatswain.

Unruffled, Ironside stepped between the fiery woman and her target. "That's enough, Neeve. We're already in enough shit as it is, without you lot at each others throats." Turning to the smugly grinning boatswain. "And you'd do better to keep you're big mouth shut, if you can't speak reasonably, William Benton, or I'll tan your hide myself."

"Sorry, Captain Gunnarsson," replied O'Malley, giving the captain a mollifying smile. "I'll behave meself, but t'd be easier, if that gobshited stop acting the maggot."

"I know, Neeve," answered Ironside, biting his lower lip and giving the offending crew member a hard stare.

Benton laughed derisively as he made his way to the back of the warehouse and sat down on an old crate. O'Malley stepped back into the mass of men, from where she observed Captain Ironside admiringly.

"As much as it irks me, I have to admit that our bosun is right. I believe it would be better to wait and see what fate has in store for us before taking any rash action," said the captain, addressing all assembled.

"Aye, that be the best course, Cap'n," growled the quartermaster in agreement.

The crowd of a hundred and twenty demoralized seafarers dispersed into smaller groups, or sat alone on one of the crates contemplating their disquieting circumstances. Ironside sought out Cassandra near the main door and affectionately

took her hands in his.

"I have to admit you were right, my love," the Swede conceded, planting a soft kiss on her forehead.

"About what, my dear?" asked the woman with a loving smile.

"I should have heeded your instincts about sailing into the mist. I fear I may have doomed us all."

"It was not solely your decision, Björn, and it's not your burden to bear alone either," replied Cassandra, kissing her husband tenderly on the lips.

The General

It was early evening when the despondent crew members were roused from their apathy by the grating sound of the large doors being dragged open. The occupants welcomed a rush of cool evening breeze which drove out some of the stale, sweat-laden air from the warehouse. Standing at the door was Captain Otto Krüger accompanied by dozens of soldiers carrying crates and barrels. A handful of soldiers with fixed bayonets cleared the way for their comrades to be able to bring in the promised provisions unmolested, leaving quickly once their task was accomplished. The crew waited expectantly as Captain Ironside approached Krüger at the entrance, beckoning Hans Zimmermann to join them, where they were informed that the crates contained bread and apples, the barrels salted-pork, water, and small ale; more soldiers were on the way with blankets and candles for the night.

Ironside also learned that he had been summoned for an audience with one of the generals and was to come right away. He let the crew know that he intended to meet this general to find out more about where they were, and that Woody and Faustus would accompany him. After reassuring his wife that he would be all right, and retrieving his smartest tricorn, which he had especially brought with him from the

ship for just such an occasion, he left the dimly lit building with Krüger and an armed escort. As he left, he looked back through the doorway to see the seamen delving hungrily into the crates and thirstily pouring small ale into the few small, clay cups provided with the casks.

As they were led through the streets, which could have been located in any of the capitals of northern Europe, Ironside couldn't help notice the military overtones all around him. Infantry columns marched down the main thoroughfare; mounted lancers filled the central square; teams of workhorses dragged heavy artillery pieces to their destinations. Eventually, they arrived at a grand, majestic building at the foot of a tree-lined hill, its magnificent facade adorned with imposing columns and grandiose statues. Ironside covetously eyed a row of eighteen pounder cannons which stood either side of the gravel path leading to the main entrance, the largest on his ship being only eight pounders. Captain Krüger left the escort at the foot of the polished steps up to the entrance, which was flanked by two guards in colourful uniforms and rimmed helmets, stiffly holding eight foot halberds before them. They reminded him of pictures he had seen of soldiers from two centuries before. They then passed through lavish, oak-panelled corridors filled with operose officials and scurrying servants until they reached a set of ornate oak doors guarded by two more of the comical sentries, who shouldered their pole-arms and saluted when Krüger approached. The soldier rapped three times on the heavy door and a moment later it was opened by a thin-faced, clean shaven man wearing light-brown breeches, a dark-brown waistcoat, a long black jacket, a clean white wig and silver-rimmed spectacles.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he addressed Ironside and his companions in accented, but fluent English. Waving at Krüger he added, "Wegtreten, Kapitän Krüger. Ich bestelle Sie wieder, nachdem der General mit den Herren fertig ist."

"Jawohl, Herr Staatssekretär," barked the officer before

turning and smartly marching away.

“Please come in, gentleman,” bid the smartly dressed man, waving them into a finely decorated ante-chamber. Before entering the main room the official stopped and turned to face the three men. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Secretary of State Johan Wartenburg and will be present at your audience with the General.”

“How do you speak such good English, Mr. Wartenburg?” asked Ironside, relieved he wouldn’t have to rely on Woody’s shaky translation the whole evening.

“English? I’ve never heard it called that. I presume it’s a colloquial name for your tongue. I learned to speak Northumbrian, as we call it, during my time as a diplomat in the Northern Isles. I spent two years in Westminster, the capital of Albion, and another year in Oxmantown, the biggest city on Hibernia. Unfortunately, the General doesn’t speak a word of Northumbrian,” smiled Wartenburg. “And you, I have been told, are Captain Björn Gunnarsson, but who are these other two men you have brought with you?”

“This is Faustus Quiddington, the ship’s surgeon and a man of letters,” said Ironside, pointing to Faustus who attempted to look as intellectual as possible. Pointing at the scruffy seaman he continued, “The other is Hans Zimmermann, ships carpenter and Ger., I mean Alamannisch speaker. I thought I might need him to translate.”

“No need. He can wait here. The General won’t wish to have a common seaman in his presence. I’ll have a servant bring him some refreshments.”

Woody shrugged and planted his rear-end on an elegant, plushly cushioned chair. “It is in order with me, Captain.”

The remaining two men followed Secretary Wartenburg into a spacious, ostentatiously decorated room with gilded candelabras, polished oak panelling, and a huge, roaring fireplace with an intricately carved surrounding. A variety of antique weapons and massive paintings in gold frames lined the walls, and plush, exquisitely woven rugs partially covered

the smooth parquet floor. Seated behind a large, elegantly carved mahogany desk was the figure of an oversized, grandiose man in an extravagantly fine uniform, overladen with an array of medals and other decorations. Captain Ironside fought to suppress a smile on seeing the man's plump, round face, which sported a comical, bushy walrus moustache and was topped by a well-groomed, blue-tinted, long wig. This was obviously a man of high importance, or at least a man who deemed himself to be so, although the captain thought he looked more like a pompous, over-fed buffoon.

"Ich bin General Wilhelm Ferdinand von Pumpernickel. Willkommen, meine Herren. Bitte setzen Sie sich," commanded the seated man in a voice that seemed a little too high for his portly stature. "Möchten Sie ein Glas Wein, oder vielleicht einen kleinen Kognak?" The man's bulbous red nose betrayed his own love of the offered alcoholic beverages.

Wartenburg translated and both men politely accepted – Ironside a cognac, Faustus a glass of red wine. The general rang a small brass bell and instantly a servant dressed in a short, yellow tunic and tight, snow-white breeches scurried into the room. Moments later he brought the drinks on a shiny silver tray. Once everyone was seated comfortably the general addressed the two men before him.

"He wants to know exactly where you are from and what you are doing in East Holstein?" explained the Secretary of State.

"Tell him we are merchants from Great Britain looking to open trade relations, but unfortunately went astray in a thick fog and erred into a battle before the coast of this unknown land," replied Ironside, taking a sip from his glass and nodding in approval at the quality of the spirit.

Wartenburg translated and for a moment Ironside thought he might have said something to displease the pudgy senior officer, who at first gave a dissatisfied frown as he digested

what the Swede had just said, but moments later his wide mouth letting out a hearty guffaw, revealing an impressive row of gold teeth.

“The General says you North-landers are known for your keen sense of humour. He finds it hilarious that you claim to never have heard of the great kingdom of Holstein,” said Wartenburg, humouring his superior with a polite smile. “I told him you are really private traders from Albion, hence the unknown flag your ship was flying. You are lucky the General is in a good mood today, as he is known to be short-tempered when his gout is bothering him.”

“Yes, please tell him it was just my little joke and that you are right,” smiled Ironside nervously.

“In fact, Captain Ironside’s ship was chartered by the consortium, which I represent,” added Faustus quickly. “We were hoping to trade with East Holstein despite the ongoing war. The flag was designed especially for our syndicate before we left, combining the colours of the emblems of the participating families.”

“Why East Holstein?” asked Wartenburg after relating Faustus’s words to General von Pumpnickel.

Ironside looked hopefully at the surgeon, who answered without hesitating. “Our competitor chose West Holstein, but we would prefer to do business with the fairer East Holstein.”

“Die Scheißkerle!” exclaimed the general on hearing this. After the two Holsteiners briefly exchanged some more words, the Secretary of State turned to the two Europeans.

“The General says he’ll sink your competitors ships if he ever sees them, be they from Albion or not. He also said that although the northern lands are cold, wet, and uncultured, they are not our enemies, and he sees no reason to deny those from that land willing to support our emperor’s cause.”

“Tell him we are grateful for his understanding,” replied Ironside. “Unfortunately, one of our ships was destroyed in the sea battle that we inadvertently strayed into, and the whereabouts of our third ship is presently unknown.”

“The General apologizes that the West Holsteiners destroyed your ship, and wonders if your competitors had a hand in the dastardly deed. He says the West Holsteiners are callous and barbarous,” translated Wartenburg sombrelly.

“Please forgive my ignorance, but why are East and West Holstein at war?” inquired Ironside.

Von Pumpernickel broke out into a rant when Wartenburg posed the captain’s question to him, and the official waited patiently until the general had calmed down before giving his reply. “Some claim it is a civil war, others a war to suppress a rebellion, there are also those who call it a war of succession, but whatever you choose to call it, it is a conflict that has been raging for over forty years. Long ago, there existed just the one large city of Steinfelsenburg spanning the Jägerstrom river in the single, united kingdom of Holstein, but for many years it has been divided into East and West Holstein with two separate capitals – Steinburg and Felsenburg – the river acting as the border. Our beloved Emperor Wilhelm Ludwig Frederick von Holstein is the rightful heir to the throne, but his younger twin brother, the usurper Frederick Wilhelm Ludwig von Holstein claims it was rightfully left to him by their father Ludwig Frederick Wilhelm von Holstein.”

“Forty years seems a long time for a war. Why hasn’t peace been agreed upon yet? Surely it would be to the benefit of all,” asked the astounded surgeon.

“Yes, it would be for the best of the majority,” answered the Secretary of State, casting a furtive glance at his superior, “but it seems the military-industrial juggernaut has become too powerful and there are those dark interests that I fear have no desire for peace.”

“Wassagen Sie da, Herr Wartenburg?” snapped the general, not accustomed to being excluded from a conversation. The Secretary of State said a few quick words which seemed to reassure the general that they weren’t talking about him.

“But now to the reason why General von Pumpernickel has summoned you here. It does in fact have to do with the

war and the upcoming campaign, which the General assures me will be the mother of all battles,” said Wartenburg calmly. Faustus shifted nervously so he was perched on the edge of his seat and Ironside downed the rest of his cognac in one. “The generals have invested most of their manpower in the forthcoming assault and lack personnel to man all the guns on the ramparts overlooking the river across from Felsenburg. You have over a hundred men on your ship, many of whom I presume are experienced in gunnery, and the captain would like them to form a Geschützgruppe – sorry, but I’m not sure of the correct word in Northumbrian.”

“You want us to man your batteries?” exclaimed Ironside. “But this isn’t our war. What if we refuse?”

“I fear the General might see fit to change your status from that of guests to that of prisoners, possibly on charges of espionage, which would mean death by fusillading. I’m sorry, but in matters of war I have little influence,” answered Wartenburg with a genuinely apologetic expression on his face.

“I guess we have little choice,” said Faustus, looking at his captain.

“I guess not. Aye, we’ll do it, but then we want to be allowed to go on our way unmolested,” nodded Ironside.

“Certainly, Captain Gunnarsson. In fact, you’ll receive payment and be provided with any provisions you might need.”

The general seemed delighted when hearing of Ironside’s acceptance of his proposal. “The General is most grateful for your co-operation in the struggle against the evil usurper. He says you have made an honourable choice to fight on the side of justice and order against the pseudo-kaiser Frederick Wilhelm Ludwig.”

Shortly after General von Pumpernickel ended the audience, the three members of *Dream Chaser* were taken back to join the crew at the docks, escorted by Kapitän Otto Krüger and a platoon of smartly dressed infantrymen. Woody

seemed content with the refreshments he had received while awaiting the other two men and showed little interest in what had gone on behind the closed doors.

“I was impressed by your inventive story, Faustus. It seemed more plausible to them than the truth. I thank you for your quick thinking,” said Ironside as they were approaching the warehouse where the rest of the men were being held captive.

“A believable lie is more powerful than an unlikely truth,” smiled the surgeon sagely, adjusting his hat. “Let’s just hope this military campaign is over quickly, so we can be on our way again.”

A day out in Steinburg

The occupants of the warehouse were woken from their restless slumber by the heavy doors being dragged open once more, but this time, instead of musket-wielding soldiers, they were confronted by the solitary figure of Kapitän Krüger, who informed them all they had been granted the freedom to roam the city provided they returned by nightfall. After ravenously devouring the remainder of the bread and apples, the crew excitedly poured out of the large, stone building.

“Let’s find a decent tavern!” shouted Pete to numerous roars of approval.

“I’m off to find the nearest brothel. Who’s coming?” cried William enthusiastically.

“Make sure you cause no trouble!” Ironside cried out after the departing crew members. “I don’t want to have to haul any of your asses out of the local gaol. And be back by dusk!”

The crowd dispersed in various directions, some following the quartermaster, others the boatswain, yet others went off in smaller groups to explore the city. Only a handful, including the captain and his wife remained. Cassandra wanted to visit the markets to see what wares were on offer in this unknown land, and her husband and Faustus had

just agreed to accompany her when a thin, uniformed man approached them.

“Captain Gunnarsson?” asked the clean-shaven, narrow-faced man.

“Aye, that be me,” replied the Swede warily.

“I’m Leutnant Hertling. I’ve been sent to show you the batteries your men are to be manning,” he answered in accent-free English.

“You speak Eng ..., I mean Northumbrian very well, Leutnant,” said Cassandra.

Despite his evident surprise at being addressed by a woman, he answered politely. “Yes, my mother is from Albion. That’s why they sent me to show you around.”

“All right, my love, I’ll leave you to the dreary stuff,” smiled Cassandra, giving her husband a quick kiss on the cheek before heading off in the company of a small group who didn’t share their comrades propensity for boozing and whoring.

The only ones remaining with the captain were Faustus, and two other men. The first was the ship’s first gunner, Frederick Sauer, a taciturn ex-artilleryman from Königsberg in Kingdom of Prussia, better known to the crew as Sourface on account of his constant sullen expression which was made worse by the extensive scarring on his face from burns he had suffered as a result of an exploding cannon, which one of his men had failed to sponge out adequately. His faded blue coat and beige breeches were marked by powder stains and scorch marks, but the artilleryman’s white-edged tricorne, which he cherished lovingly, was surprisingly unsullied. The second man was the fearless Konishi Yukinaga – more commonly referred to as Yuki – a native of Japan, who claimed to be an exiled samurai from the Land of the Rising Sun. He had a face which could change from severe to jovial and vice versa in a matter of seconds, and although not tall in stature, he was of a robust sort. His attire consisted of a black, cotton kimono, and a pair of unusually wide, white trousers, which

he referred to as *hakana*; it was an outfit which was the source of much amusement to the European seamen, unaccustomed to such exotic garments, but which none dared ridicule to his face, the pair of razor-sharp and keenly polished Japanese swords – one long, one short – he normally always wore in his belt no doubt acting as a deterrent.

As it turned out, both men were only still standing in front of the warehouse because they had not really understood what was going on, both on account of their weak grasp of the English language, but in Sourface's case also because his hearing had been impaired by countless cannons discharging in his vicinity over the years.

"What is happens?" inquired the gunner in a deep voice.

"We are going to take a look at the guns. Why don't you come with us?" answered the captain slowly and deliberately.

"I come. I want see guns that they have," grinned the German, revealing his brown, gappy teeth.

"Good. And what about you, Yuki?"

"Come with Captain Ironside I will," replied the samurai, bowing courteously. "My swords with me I have not, but with my bare hands you I will protect."

"Thank you, but I hope that won't be necessary," chuckled Ironside, smiling at the surgeon. He then turned to the patiently waiting officer. "Please lead the way, Leutnant Hertling."

A little later the curious group was on its way through the crowded streets of Steinburg, attracting inquisitive looks from soldiers and civilians alike. It took half an hour of twisting and weaving through the busy throng before they reached the ramparts overlooking the river. The passing soldiers, who smartly saluted the lieutenant as they climbed the steep stairs up to the top of the great wall, failed to hide their incredulity at the sight of his companions. Eventually, they reached a large gun platform from which they looked disbelieving out over the battlements, where they could see the wide tidal river flowing far below.

“Impressive it is,” stated Yuki without the flicker of emotion.

The other men stared in silence at the vast array of crenellations, turrets, and gun emplacements on this side of the river as well as on the far bank, which they were informed was Felsenburg, the city ruled by the Emperor’s brother. Any army attempting to storm either side would be completely wiped out. The only vessels on the river were the numerous half-sunk wrecks of warships; the only way across was a gargantuan bridge, which was pocked with craters and strewn with debris where it had been hit by balls of iron in the countless attempts to assault the gates over the last forty years. It was wide enough to march a hundred men across side-by-side and seemed sturdy enough to withstand the rampages of another forty years of conflict. Ironside marvelled at the colossal, reinforced wood and iron gates at the opposing end of the bridge, and, although he couldn’t see it, presumed there would be a similar one this side too. As for the guns, there were a multitude mortar and rocket batteries, not to mention the wide assortment of cannons, ranging from the smaller twelve pounders to huge siege guns that must have weighed over five tons.

“Down there you can see the only way across the river for a hundred miles,” pointed out Hertling.

“Does it have a name?” asked Faustus, who was of the opinion that all great works should possess a name.

“Yes, it’s called the Verbindungsbrücke,” replied the Holsteiner.

“Oh, what does that mean?” inquired the surgeon, clearly impressed by such an important sounding name.

“It means the ‘connecting bridge’. It connects Steinburg to Felsenburg.”

“Oh,” responded Faustus, disappointed that such a strikingly monumental name could have such a mundane meaning. “I think I prefer Verbindungsbrücke.”

While they were talking, Frederick Sauer had wandered

over to a large, decorated cannon and was staring at it with intense interest.

“A Schmetterling,” he stated in wonder.

“That’s a fearsome name for a type of gun,” said Faustus, walking over to join the gunner.

“Nein, a Schmetterling,” repeated the man, lovingly pointing at the iron barrel.

To his surprise the surgeon saw a large, beautiful, black and red butterfly resting on the warm iron. “You mean that butterfly?”

“Ja, butterfly is Schmetterling in German,” answered Sauer, not taking his eyes off the insect.

“How can such a delicate thing have such a fear-inspiring name? Such a creature should be named according to its beauty. The French say papillon, the Spanish call it mariposa – appropriate names, don’t you think? But come off it, a Schmetterling? That’s ridiculous. That’s a name more suitable for a weapon of mass destruction.”

Faustus stood shaking his head as he realised his words were wasted on the half-deaf German, who simply continued to stare in awe at the butterfly. Meanwhile Captain Ironside was walking along the wide walkway together with Yuki.

“Impressive it is. Never anything like it in my life I have seen,” commented the Japanese man as they strolled towards a mortar emplacement.

“So, tell me, Yuki, I’ve been meaning to ask you how you ended up in the Caribbean, so far from home,” said Ironside, who had taken the man onboard after he had displayed an astounding lack of fear of heights and for his exceptional capabilities with the sword.

“My sister Ejima shamed she was, and victim of political intrigues her family became. Many arrests, some executions. In exile with my friend Ikushima Shingorō to island of Miyake-jima in Philippine Sea I went. For two years I was there, but life for me it was not,” replied Yuki, concentrating hard on selecting the correct words. “Fisherman’s life for

samurai honourable it is not, so passing Spanish ship to New Spain I took. Many jobs I had, but life of warrior I yearned. Of Nassau and pirates I heard and to that island my way I made.”

“To become a pirate?”

“To become warrior of sea. Captain Gunnarsson honourable man I heard, so him I sought. Now here I am and no regrets I have.”

In the meantime Faustus decided again to attempt to strike up a conversation with the laconic gunner, who had abandoned the butterfly and was now admiringly inspecting the guns. “They tell me you were an artilleryman in the Prussian army, Frederick,” he said, speaking loudly and clearly.

“It is true,” answered the Prussian, running his fingers down the side of the barrel of an eighteen pounder.

“Please tell me more,” persisted the physician.

“I fight in Spanish Succession War. I fight at battle of Blenheim – great victory for the Grand Alliance against Spain and Bavaria. I fight at the siege of Hagenau, but cannon explode, because I given inexperienced gun crew. Kill all but Frederick Sauer.”

“What happened next?” prompted Faustus when he noticed the German making his way towards a heavy mortar, seemingly believing he had spoken enough for one day.

“I survive, but burns bad. I don’t can fight for long time. When better I want not to be a soldier more, so I go to Hamburg and work in cannon foundry.”

“And then,” elicited the surgeon after a long silence.

“In seventeen hundred twelve there gives plague in Hamburg and I go from the city before I get sick also. I take job as gunner on a merchant ship. Ship is captured by pirates off the coast of South Carolina. Captain Burgess offer me position of head gunner on the pirate ship and I accept. Money and conditions bad on a merchant ship. Later, Captain Burgess take the King’s pardon, so I join Captain

Ironside's crew. He is a good man. Now that is enough. I must look at guns," replied Sauer with a finality that invited no further questions.

The captain and his men spent almost three hours on the wall assessing the guns and deciding which ones his men would operate, for there were far too many pieces of artillery for the pirates to man them all, and he learned that, except for a few aged veteran gunners, all available manpower was to be concentrated on the assault on Felsenburg across the river. After pausing to enjoy the fresh, salty breeze blowing in from the sea for a moment, he suggested they return to the docks to find out what the rest of the crew were up to. He sincerely hoped they had managed to behave themselves, but somehow he doubted it.

They were walking down the street towards the wharf, which housed numerous drinking establishments, when Ironside recognized one of his crew members, Sam Taylor, a swarthy, curly haired sailor from Portsmouth, slumped against the wall adjacent to a tavern door, clumsily trying to light his clay pipe. The rickety sign above the door bore the ominous name *Schwarzer Kater*.

"Have you seen the quartermaster, Sam?" inquired the captain with an uneasiness lingering in the pit of his stomach.

"Uh? The quartermashter? Yesh, he's inshide," slurred the seaman, spilling the contents of his pipe.

Ironside and Faustus warily entered the public house, but Yuki and Sauer preferred to stay outside, the latter helping the helpless, drunken sailor to light his smoking utensil. The quality of the air deteriorated within a matter of seconds as the two men stepped into the tavern. The intensely smoky atmosphere caused their eyes to water and Faustus excused himself when he was suddenly overcome by a fit of coughing. Ironside sighed as he took in the riotous scene before him. Many of the men, including Powder Keg Pete were already in an advanced state of inebriation, a couple of his men slumped comatose with their heads on the soggy, stained

tables. The harassed serving girls were struggling to keep pace with the orders for more ale; the chubby tavern keeper, who seemed more than happy to be doing such roaring business at this time of the day, urged them not to dally with encouraging shouts. In the middle of the throng he saw a red-nosed Brownrigg perched on a stool singing surprisingly melodically what was no doubt a Jacobite song at the top of his voice.

*Cam ye o'er frae France? Cam ye down by Lunnon?
Saw ye Geordie Whelps and his bonny woman?
Were ye at the place called the Kittle Housie?
Saw ye Geordie's grace riding on a goosie?*

A group of soldiers near the bar were growing increasingly agitated by the unknown song in an unfamiliar language.

"Singt auf Alamannisch!" cried out one of the soldiers gruffly. To the annoyance of the infantrymen Brownrigg simply sang the next verse considerably louder.

*Geordie, he's a man there is little doubt o't;
He's done a' he can, wha can do without it?
Down there came a blade linkin' like my lordie;
He wad drive a trade at the loom o' Geordie.*

The soldiers briefly exchanged some words and then they too started singing vociferously.

*Es waren drei Soldaten
es war ein junges Blut
sie hätten sich Eins begangen
der Marschall hätt sie gefangen
gefangen mußten sie sein*

As the drunken cacophony threatened to escalate into a bar room brawl, Ironside could bear no more, so he bellowed

until his lungs almost burst in a screech which transcended all language barriers. A sudden silence fell over the smokey, dimly lit room, and the captain was surrounded by the sheepish grins of both seaman and soldier alike.

“If anyone dares to antagonise the locals any further, I’ll see to it that the offending person receives a reduced share of the next plunder,” chastised Ironside. “Now, Woody, tell the soldiers that no offence was meant and the next round of drinks is on this lot.”

Despite the demurring groans from the men, they all settled down and the soldiers seemed appeased. Woody joined the uniformed men at the bar, glad of the chance to express himself in his mother tongue, as although he spoke the same language as Frederick Sauer, the gunner was not renowned for his conversational talents. Satisfied that the risk of disorderly conduct had abated, the Swede sat himself down next to a blurry-eyed Powder Keg Pete.

“Ave a drink, cap’n. They got rum and wine and cherry beer. Can yer believe it, cap’n – cherry beer. That’s beer wiv cherries. Never had the likes of it in me life. Cherry beer, cap’n, but they calls it Kirschbier. It tastes of cherries, it does. Can yer believe it, cap’n – cherry beer,” garbled the boozed up quartermaster.

“All right, Pete, you’ve made your point,” Ironside interrupted the overenthusiastic drinker. “I’ll try some, if it’ll make you happy.”

Pete grinned like a child on its birthday as he poured some reddish-brown liquid from a jug into a nearby tankard after pouring its previous contents onto the straw-covered floor, spilling a great deal of the beer on the already sticky, grimy table in the process.

“They also got a potent spirit made from ‘erbs called yay-ger-my-ster,” slobbered the quartermaster.

“I think I’ll pass on that. I’m going to try to find Cassandra after this one,” replied Ironside, wishing now that he’d stayed outside with Yuki and Frederick.

“Don’t want no aggro from yer better half, eh?” commented Pete knowingly, before downing the contents of his tankard in one.

It wasn’t long before the singing started up again, although this time most of those present joined in with the well-known sea shanty. The soldiers were not irritated any more, some even tapping their feet in time with the melody.

*The northern wind it blows
Oh, wherever Johnnie goes
Do another lap ‘round the capstan Johnnie
‘Round and ‘round she goes
The Highlands white with snow
And stowed away the plough
So do another lap ‘round the capstan Johnnie
‘Round and ‘round she goes*

On a table in a dark corner of the tavern Brownrigg, who’d had his fill of singing, was sat with Christof Andersen, a Danish seaman from Aarhus who had been on *Dream Chaser’s* crew for some time. He had an angular, sympathetic face topped by long, brown hair tied back in a pony tail. He had served on a British merchantman, but jumped ship in Jamaica after he had been flogged for being caught siphoning off some of the strictly rationed rum from a keg with a musket barrel after already polishing off his own daily ration for breakfast. He was a good humoured man known to be incredibly loyal to the captain.

“What was that song you were singing earlier, John?” asked the inquisitive Dane.

“It’s a Jacobite tune about that sausage-eating fool King George,” replied Brownrigg, viewing the other man through glassy eyes.

“I’ve heard about the Jacobites, but I cannot say I know much about them,” said Andersen, fiddling with the gold ring in his left ear.

“We’re the supporters of the exiled, true king of the British Isles – the second Stuart king with the name of James,” answered Brownrigg fervently.

“So you’re one of them?”

“I certainly am, as are many others on our ship. I had to flee for my part in the rebellion in 1715. I was a sailor on the privateer taking James from France to Peterhead in Scotland. We arrived too late for the disastrous battle of Preston in November of that year, and had no other choice but to flee to the Caribbean after dropping poor old James back off in France.”

“And that song you were singing. Although my English is not normally so lacking, I failed to understand a single word of it,” frowned the sailor.

“It doesn’t surprise me, as most Englishmen have difficulty understanding the Scottish dialect. In fact, I only understand it because most of my friends were from over the border,” chuckled the man from Newcastle.

“Who is Geordie Whelps?” asked the puzzled Dane.

“That’s King George. A whelp is a naughty child,” replied the grinning coxswain.

“And what is this place called the Kittle Housie?”

“That’s a brothel.”

“And why was King George riding on a goose there? Doesn’t sound very practical to me.”

“Goosie is the name we call the Duchess of Kendal, George’s mistress. In essence, it’s a song about the King’s marital problems. Among other things, he had to leave his wife Sophia imprisoned back in Germany after she had an embarrassing affair with a Swedish count. Now I need another drink,” stated Brownrigg, abruptly standing and walking over to join Captain Ironside, leaving the perplexed seaman to ponder what he’d learned about the new British monarch.

“Have you seen Cassandra, John?” inquired the captain when the coxswain planted himself down heavily on the

bench next to him.

"I believe she's back at the warehouse. Declined my offer to join us for a drink, she did," grinned Brownrigg.

"I don't blame her. A few hours with this rowdy bunch is more than any civilized person can take," replied the Swede only half in jest.

Ironside spent the next few minutes trying in vain to relate what he had seen on the city ramparts to the sloshed quartermaster, who was sitting, bleary eyed, across the table from him, but soon gave up when the only response he got was an inane grin from the unresponsive man, whose long beard was glistening with beer. In the meantime, Niamh O' Malley had sidled up close to him, smiling tipsily.

"Hey, cap'n, how's she cuttin'? I t'ink our quartermaster's completely flustered," chuckled the Irish woman.

"He indeed seems to be," agreed the captain regrettably.

"Hey, cap'n, you an' me ain't had a chance for a real chat since I been on board."

"No, it's doesn't seem we have," answered Ironside apprehensively.

"So tell me, cap'n, why's it t'ey call ya Ironside? I 'eard yer real name's Björn Gunnarsson," asked Niamh, staring at him attentively.

"That's because I was hit in the side by a musket ball during a sea engagement with the Danish fleet. Everyone thought I was a goner, but fortune must have been smiling on me that day, because my life was spared. I had just put the silver hip flask my father had left to me back in my breast pocket after taking a swig of brandy to calm my nerves. It saved my life by stopping the ball from entering my body, where it surely would have done for me. I came out of the battle unscathed – save for a nasty bruise and a ruined family heirloom," recounted the ex-naval officer, instinctively rubbing the spot which had been hit those many years ago. Reaching into his pocket he produced a battered and dented object. "I still keep it with me."

“As a lucky charm?”

“Partly, but also to remind me that death is always looking over our shoulders, especially when one has chosen a life on the open sea.”

“Aye, that’s so fecking true. So tell me, how does a naval officer end up as a pirate captain?” asked the sea-woman, eyeing him admiringly.

“Well, Neeve, it was never my intention, but fate saw to it that I became one. Originally, I was the captain of a Brig in the Swedish navy, but was discharged by Admiral Erik Johan after my ship exploded off the coast of Porvoo in southern Finland.”

“How did it happen? Was ya hit by cannons?” asked O’Malley eager to learn more.

“If that had been so, then I’d probably still hold my commission, but, alas, I don’t know how the explosion came about; the first I knew about the fire was when I heard cries of fire down below. Fortunately, most of the crew survived and they blamed it on a seaman they called Luckless Leif. They say it was the third ship he had been on which had caught fire. Sadly, he was one of the few who died in the explosion, so we’ll never really know what happened. Anyway, the Admiral held me personally responsible, and instead of assigning me another command he had me quietly pensioned out of the navy,” explained the captain, staring unseeingly ahead as his mind was enveloped by images of that fateful event.

“What a shithead that admiral was. His loss and our gain t’ough,” said the woman from the west of Ireland, placing a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

“I guess so, but I’d already had my fill of authority by that point, which I presume didn’t help my case, and at least it got me out of that ill-fated war against Russia and Denmark,” replied Ironside, snapping out of his gloomy reverie. “What about you, Neeve? How did you wind up so far from the Emerald Isle?”

“I ‘ad to flee the long arm of the law, on account of me

unlawful deeds,” replied the woman with a hint of pride.

“What were you? A cutpurse? A swindler?” asked Brownrigg, who had been eavesdropping the whole conversation with keen interest.

“No, John. I was a pirate even then. We used to sail off tē west coast of Ireland in a ketch belonging to me uncle, but the pickings were lean in that area. Me uncle never dared stray too far from home and it was only a matter of time before the British Navy caught up with us,” O’Malley cheerfully explained.

“So did the Royal Navy finally catch up with you, then?” asked Ironside.

“Yes, they feckin’ well did. One night, after successfully taking a small merchant vessel, we found ourselves trapped in a cove by a British frigate and me uncle struck sails without hesitating – we’d have not stood a chance with our four pounders – would’ve been like pissin’ into the wind. But I wasn’t about to let meself be taken so easily, was I? So before the Sassenachs had pulled alongside to board our vessel, I strips off all me clothes and springs into the sea.”

“You took off all your clothes?” inquired the astonished coxswain.

“Yes, everything. I was as naked as the day I was born, save the coins in a pouch around me neck. It was a long swim to tē shore and tē currents were sometimes known to be treacherous. I wasn’t going to let meself be slowed and dragged down by sodden wool and linen, was I?” replied O’Malley challengingly. “Bloody freezing it was and I t’inks me numb limbs’ll give out, but persevere I do. Stiff as a wooden board was I when I finally reached the pebbly beach, but I knew me life was at stake, so I crawls up tē beach and hide in tē trees until I’m able to safely be on me way. I creep towards an isolated cottage and borrows meself a dress from a washing line. I heads back to me village, but one of the crew must have snitched, ‘cos I was told by a dear old friend that the magistrate was searching for me. First I went into hiding

in the countryside, but then I heard that me uncle and the rest of the crew had been strung up. T'at's when I made me way to Cork and took the first ship I could get passage on – one which happened to be sailin' to Jamaica."

"Now that's a sight I'd have loved to have borne witness to," sneered a voice from behind. "Neeve O'Malley in the all together, what a delightful image it conjures up."

Looking around, they saw that William Benton had entered the smokey tavern followed by two other crewmembers. The boatswain was looking thoroughly pleased with himself.

"Scarlet for yer mother fer havin' ya, William Benton," screeched the irate Irish woman. "Ain't anyone ever told ya, it ain't polite to go earwiggging conversations yer not party to." Benton simply stood where he was grinning lecherously. "What are ya gawking at ya feckin' scut. Yer langered y'are, Billy Boy. Crackin' Jenny's teahouse not satisfy ya enough?"

"Oh, we're plenty satisfied, aren't we boys. A top brothel it was, albeit a little on the costly side," replied Benton giving a sly wink to the two shipmates who accompanied him, both of whom just stood there smirking libidiously. Without awaiting the inevitable scathing reply, William turned and staggered towards the bar, waving for his two cronies to follow.

"Loscadh is dó ort, William Benton!" the annoyed woman called after him.

"What did you just say to him, Neeve?" Brownrigg asked.

"I said I hoped that he may be burned and scorched, I did. The filthy sod deserves it, he does." Those at the table all laughed at O'Malley's harsh words.

Ironside emptied his mug and decided he would try to motivate his crew to return to the warehouse before things got out of hand again. Most reluctantly agreed to leave the drinking house, but it came as no surprise that Benton flatly refused, shouting about how he was a pirate and therefore a free man, and that no king nor captain would force him to do what he did not wish to do. Captain Ironside had to admit

the boatswain was right – he couldn't force anyone to leave against their will – so, shrugging, he left with the majority of the those crewmembers who held a least a small degree of respect for his position. As he left he glanced back at Benton, who now sat laughing with a handful of men who shared the troublesome boatswain's opinion.

On stepping out onto the cobbled street, he saw that Pete was already staggering down the middle of the road, supported by two shipmates, leading another rowdy verse of the crew's favourite shanty.

*So high the waves do roll
In this godforsaken hole
Do another lap 'round the capstan Johnnie
'Round and 'round she goes
But Lochaber's in bloom
In the bonny Highland June
So do another lap 'round the capstan Johnnie
'Round and 'round she goes*

As the captain briskly walked to catch up with the others, he noticed Faustus exiting a small teashop opposite. The surgeon waved to him with one hand while putting on his hat with the other.

"It seems you may have made the wiser choice in establishments, Mr. Quiddington," chuckled Ironside.

"Yes, a quiet and cosy little place. The owner's from Albion, so I could have a nice little chat with him and his friends," said the other man contentedly.

"Did you learn anything interesting?"

"Indeed I did, Björn," replied the surgeon lightly tapping the tips of his fingers together. "It seems that not everyone supports this infernal war. There are those who have been clandestinely working towards peace for many years only to find their plans thwarted again and again by powerful vested interests. They say the war is waged by tyrants on the backs

of the small folk.”

“They always are, Faustus,” answered the captain phlegmatically. “They always are.”

“It would seem that the ruling elite on both sides are as bad as each other, and my fear is that by manning those guns we’ll be aiding one despot against another.”

“Believe me, Faustus, if I could get us out of this mess I would, but our ship’s heavily guarded and our only way out of this damn land is to comply with the general’s demands,” explained Ironside remorsefully. “Anyway, our targets are only to be military ones. I’ve been informed we are to offer supporting fire and take out the enemy batteries that are able to shoot at those crossing the connecting bridge.”

“Enemies, you say. We, as sea robbers, have plenty of enemies – the Brits, the Spanish, the French – but this nation, wherever it may be located, isn’t yet one of them,” pointed out the surgeon.

“But it would be, if they knew who we really were,” responded Björn Gunnarsson assuredly. Seeing that they’d reached the warehouse he added. “We’ll speak about it again later. Now I want to find my wife.”

Captain Ironside was comforted to see Cassandra sitting on a crate near the entrance, enjoying the warming rays of sun. She stood with a relieved smile as he approached.

“There you are, my dear. I was worried you would return in a similar state to our quartermaster. I am so happy you are able to restrain yourself from such debauchery, unlike most of the crew,” she smiled.

“While they were indulging themselves in gluttony and fornication, I had the dreary task of assessing the gun emplacements, although I did partake in one tankard to please Pete.”

“Only to please Pete?” asked the tall woman, raising her eyebrows sceptically.

“Well, I must admit that being in the presence of that lot when they’re on a bender, caused me to require something to

calm my nerves,” grinned Ironside boyishly.

“That I can believe, my love.”

“Anyway, how was the market?” the captain inquired, desiring to change the subject.

“It was splendid. It had wares, many of which I have never seen before, from a multitude of lands, all of which I had never heard of. I even got you a present, although it cost a pretty penny,” said Cassandra, stooping to reach behind the barrel and retrieving a three-foot long bundle of rags.

“Thank you, my dear,” her husband replied, gingerly accepting the gift and carefully unwrapping it. “A telescope!” exclaimed the Swede, placing it to his right eye and looking out across the bay. “Wow, the image is so much clearer than to what I’m used to and it’s not half as heavy as it looks.”

“Yes, I thought it would be better than the cumbersome, four-foot thing you found on that French merchantman. Do you like it, dear?”

“I love it, Cassandra!” he proclaimed, taking his spouse in his arms and kissing her affectionately to the dismay of passers-by. “Let’s go for a stroll down to the end of the harbour so I can try it out. By the way, where’s Pete?”

“Sleeping like a baby as are most of those who returned with him from the binge.”

Arm-in-arm, the contented couple made their way down the quay laughing and joking about the antics and misdeeds of various members of the crew.

An invitation to dinner

The next day the crew was a little more reserved than on the previous day. Many were nursing severe hangovers; others had spent all their hard earned plunder the day before. Most of the crew were resting in the warehouse or having a quiet drink in one of the nearby taverns. Ironside spent most of the day wandering through the city with his wife to view the sights it had to offer. On returning to the docks they were

greeted by Faustus and Woody conversing with a tall, severe-faced man dressed in a black tail-coat and spotless white breeches. His cylindrical hat sported a large white feather.

“What’s going on, Faustus?” asked the captain, smiling at the stranger, who responded with a polite bow.

“This man’s a messenger from General Pumpernickel. He says we are both invited to dine at his residence this evening with him and his wife,” answered the surgeon jovially.

“I think it would be better to accept, as we don’t want to anger our hosts. His wife will be there, you say? Then I shall bring mine too.” He turned to face Cassandra. “That is, if you wish to accompany us.”

“Of course I do, Björn. After all you have told me about him, I’d like to see this grandiloquent military man for myself,” grinned the woman, revealing her pearly white teeth.

“The man says he will fetch us at seven of the clock,” Woody informed them.

“Good. That’ll give us plenty of time to freshen up. I saw a bathhouse a couple of streets away. Maybe we should pay it a visit,” suggested Cassandra.

As the bells of a nearby church struck seven, the black-coated man reappeared and led the spruced up trio to the magnificent building where the dinner was to take place. The three invitees had gone to great efforts to make themselves look presentable, although they still appeared scruffy in comparison to the primly attired servants. They were received by the Secretary of State, who led them into a magnificent, spacious dining room adjacent to the chamber in which they had previously met the general. Seated at the head of a long table with a decanter of wine in one hand and a silver goblet in the other was their host; on his right sat a moon-faced, heavily made-up woman dressed in an extensive, yellow and orange mantua gown, adorned with a lace neck frill and sleeve ruffles. A combination of natural and false hair was piled, curled and frizzed high on the top of the stout woman’s

head. The haughty lady stared at them appraisingly while they entered and were shown to their seats by an anxious servant.

“Die Dienerin darf draußen bleiben,” snapped the woman in a shrill voice.

“I’m sorry, but the Gräfin seems to be under the impression that your wife is a servant,” replied Wartenburg apologetically.

After the Secretary carefully explained who Cassandra was, the seated woman exchanged a few brusque words with her spouse before nodding disdainfully and indicating for the guests to take their assigned places.

“The General you already know, but let me introduce you to his wife Gräfin Viktoria Luise Adelheid Mathilde Charlotte von Teutonburg,” said Wartenburg with an awkward smile.

The portly lady smiled pleasantly at the two men, although she completely ignored Cassandra, who simply shrugged resignedly.

“Die Wilden taugen nur als Bedienstete,” barked the General, who up until now had been silently observing the arrival of his guests.

After an exchange of words with the two nobles Wartenburg turned to Cassandra. “I do apologize, Mrs Gunnarsson, but the aristocracy in our land are of the opinion that the natives of the Southern Isles are only suitable as servants and slaves,” continuing with a paternal smile, “but I must add, it is not unknown for common men in the colonies to take indigenous wives.”

“It would seem that it is not so different here to where we come from,” scowled the Bermudian woman.

“Wir finden dem guten Kapitän eine hübsche, dralle Holsteinische Frau,” commented the General cordially, pouring himself some more wine.

“The General said they would like to find a pretty, buxom woman for the captain to take as a wife,” translated the official. On seeing Cassandra regarding their hosts with open enmity

and on the brink of rising from her seat, he continued. “I beg you to excuse the General’s unrefined sense of humour. I’m sure no harm was meant by it.”

The insulted woman sat back in her seat fuming soundlessly, filling her goblet to the rim with wine.

“If the General goes on like this, we’re out of here,” warned Captain Ironside.

“That would not be very wise, captain. The General would deem it an insult, and it might endanger your status as guests in Steinburg. I implore you to endure his witless humour, so you can conduct your task and sail on your way as heroes and not end up languishing in the dungeons as enemies of the state,” Wartenburg beseeched the irked pirate captain.

Sensing the uneasiness of his guests, the General had presence of mind to summon his musicians in an attempt to diffuse the tension. Four neatly dressed men shuffled into the room: the first was carrying a viola, the second an oboe, the next a tall harp, and the last was dragging in a small, ornate harpsichord with the help of two flustered servants. As soon as they had taken up their positions, they instantly started playing melodies not unlike the ones in the theatres Faustus had often frequented back home in England.

“They’re playing extracts from the latest symphonies by the most renowned of Holstein’s composers – Bootheven and Mazort. Their music is said to be known even in Albion. Have you heard of them?” asked Wartenburg, tapping his fingers rhythmically on the oak surface of the table.

“I can’t say I have, although I must say this one does sound familiar,” replied Faustus, taking in the sophisticated tunes with relish.

While both hosts and guests were enjoying the music, servants dressed in red breeches, blue tunics, and bright red wigs brought in an assortment of dishes containing regional delicacies. Curiously eyeing a large plate holding a crispy joint of roast meat, which had been placed near to him, Ironside inquired what it was.

“That’s Schweinshaxe,” replied Wartenburg. Observing the confused look on the captain’s face he added. “It’s a cut of slow-roasted pork.”

Ironside and his wife tucked into the tender meat, while Faustus, who did not willingly partake in the flesh of living beings, turned up his nose in disgust. Despite the disapproving glances from their hosts, the physician contentedly heaped his plate with potatoes, carrots, and peas. After they had finished the main course the servants carried in a large cake consisting of several layers of chocolate sponge sandwiched with whipped cream and cherries. All three guests eagerly helped themselves to the rich gâteau, which they washed down with wheat beer and schnapps. It escaped none of those present that the General and his spouse were accustomed to overindulging in food and alcoholic beverages – both becoming increasingly boisterous from the effects of the latter.

“Wir werden unsere Feinde mit unserer Wunderwaffe vernichten!” bellowed Pumpernickel, knocking over his goblet. Unnoticed by the inebriated man, a harried servant promptly cleared away the mess and refilled his drinking vessel.

“You must excuse the General when he’s in his cups. He tends to get unduly excited,” said the Secretary contritely.

“What did he say?” asked Cassandra. “I hope he wasn’t being insulting again. I’ve had more of that than I can take for one evening.”

“No, no. He’s just raving about how this time we’ll overcome our foes.”

“How can he be sure of victory after forty years of stalemate?” inquired Gunnarsson, unconvinced by the General’s substantial claim.

“This time we do indeed have a secret weapon, but I’m not really sure of the translation. The military council call it the *Festungstörvernichtungssprengkörper* mounted on a *gepanzerte Dampfsturmwagen*. It’s a powerful explosive

device for destroying the enemy's gate, and is to be transported over the bridge by an armoured steam carriage, which will hopefully deflect any cannon balls targetted at it. Our scientists have been working on it in secret for years" explained Wartenburg.

"A steam engine that can carry an explosive charge!" exclaimed Faustus in disbelief. "I've heard of such devices being used for pumping water out of mines, but one that powers a vehicle so that it can propel itself is unheard of. I could make a fortune, if I knew how such a contraption worked. It would change the world!"

"As I said, it's secret – at least until it has been used to defeat our foes, but if it were to become commercially available, we could discuss a lucrative contract with your corporation in Albion," answered the official in a low voice.

On hearing the Secretary of State mention the secret weapon, the General went into another rant.

"He says victory is assured and that there will be no mercy this time," disclosed Wartenburg. "He says our forces will exact a terrible retribution on the people of Felsenburg for their years of supporting his brother the usurper."

"You mean they plan to massacre the civilian population?" blurted out the surgeon, exchanging a horrified glance with the captain and his wife.

"It would seem so," frowned the unhappy official. "They've chosen to ignore my advice of offering clemency, which would aid a swift reunification and restoration of the kingdom. He informs me that the attack will take place at dawn in two days from now, and that you and your men should be fully acquainted with the guns by then."

Pumpnickel gradually seemed to lose interest in his guests the more alcohol he consumed, until he finally dozed off in his seat snoring loudly. The bleary eyed, red-nosed countess downed another schnapps, all the time glaring at Cassandra as if she was her worst enemy in the world.

"Was macht sie hier! Hol das Küchenmädchen hier raus,

Wartenburg. Sie besudelt den Raum,” screeched the boozed up aristocrat, spitefully throwing the leftovers on her plate at Cassandra.

Although not understanding the words directed at her, Cassandra only too clearly understood the offensive intent. The Bermudian woman leapt to her feet, placing a hand on a nearby carving knife. “Why you snooty, puffed up old shrew!”

Her husband quickly placed a restraining hand on his affronted wife’s forearm. The outraged woman pulled away, but stopped when she noticed that the unbearable noblewoman too had collapsed back into her chair in a drunken stupor. It was unclear who was snoring the loudest – she or her husband. At this point, Wartenburg decided it was time to call it an evening and instructed the servants to take their comatose master and mistress to their rooms before sorrowfully leading the three guests out of the room.

“As you can see, the General can be a difficult man, and his wife no less so. I do apologize on behalf of my countrymen for the deplorable manners of our aristocracy,” said Wartenburg as they reached the main hall.

“Aristocrats are the same everywhere. They believe they are entitled to much more than the rest of us, but one day their time will come, and they’ll find themselves short a head,” stated Ironside passionately.

“Dangerous talk, Captain Ironside. Better to keep those thoughts to yourself. Anyway, I apologise again,” repeated the Secretary, summoning a servant to escort them back to the docks. “What concerns me most is the inevitable massacre should the army succeed in capturing Felsenburg, but there doesn’t seem to be anything I can do to stop it.”

Not long after, the subdued trio were being led back to the warehouse, also unsure of how the impending slaughter could be prevented.

Visitors in the night

Captain Ironside was woken from his restless slumber by someone gently shaking his arm. Opening his heavy eyelids he saw Christof Andersen, who had been on watch duty, smiling down at him.

“We’ve got visitors,” whispered the Dane.

“Who is it?” asked the captain sleepily.

“Two members of *Vengeful Mermaid* are here to see you.”

“What!” exclaimed the suddenly wide awake Swede, jumping to his feet and pulling on his boots.

Cassandra stirred, but he decided not to disturb her until he had found out more. He followed Andersen towards the two figures standing near the entrance, silhouetted in the candle light. He recognised the two men instantly: the first was John Loxton, a wiry Englishman, known for his superhuman swimming ability; the second man was Antoine Legrand, a muscular Frenchman from Marseilles, who had spent some years on a Mediterranean galley after being caught breaking into an apothecary.

“How did you get here? Where’s the rest of your crew? Are they all right?” inquired Ironside hurriedly.

“They’re doin’ fine, Captain Ironside, jus’ fine,” answered Loxton calmly.

“So where are they? Tell me everything,” ordered the captain impatiently.

“They’re across the river in Felsenburg. We were captured and put to work repairing vessels. Seems that both sides lost all their warships in that battle we mistakenly sailed into. Captain Wolf got us swiftly away after what happened to *The Blood Rose*, may their souls rest in peace. That’s when we were escorted into port by three sloops. At first, they were suspicious of us – thought we were spies, they did – but in the end they realised we had nothin’ to do with the war. Seem to think we’re from a country called Albion, wherever that is. We heard on the grapevine that *Dream Chaser* had been

taken to Steinburg, so Wolfie sent us out in a rowing boat to find out if it were true. With the mighty Antoine on the oars, it only took us four hours to get here.”

“But how did you find us so easily? We could have been anywhere,” asked the perplexed captain.

“Luckily, Antoine here can speak a little German, so we made a few inquiries and were told by some sailors that strangers were residing in this here warehouse. Wasn’t so hard really,” smirked Loxton, looking thoroughly pleased with himself.

“So what does Captain Wolf intend to do?”

“Well, Admiral Achtermast over there in Felsenburg said we could leave in a couple of weeks after helping to construct some new ships. Old Wolfie hopes you can join up with him, either before or after he leaves. We’re to return with your answer as soon as we’re rested,” replied the seaman, readily accepting a small cup of rum which the Dane had just offered him. “We can’t leave Felsenburg any earlier, ‘cos the Admiral needs warships to defend against the usurper in Steinburg.”

“The usurper? We were told that the usurper sits in Felsenburg,” said Ironside, scratching his hairy chin. “Seems we’re caught up in an imperial power struggle.” Turning to Andersen. “Go and wake up Mr. Quiddington.”

After a few minutes and several glasses of rum for the visitors, Faustus appeared in his shirt and breeches. “What’s going on, Björn?” The disquieted surgeon attentively listened to the captain before continuing. “It seems we might have an opportunity to prevent the wholesale butchery of the civilian population, Björn.”

“What do you suggest we do, Faustus?” asked the puzzled pirate captain.

“We warn the West Holsteiners of the attack. Mr. Loxton, you are to inform them of the planned assault with the gate-destroying device. Tell them to evacuate all civilians from the city, and prepare defences within the walls,” answered Faustus decidedly.

“But that won’t stop the attack, Faustus,” commented the unconvinced pirate captain.

“No, but at least it will be soldiers fighting soldiers. Maybe the attack will fail and the stalemate will continue. Should that be the case, it doesn’t really matter, although I believe the attack might succeed, but at least we can hopefully see to it that the population of Felsenburg will remain safe until the thirst for retribution has died down. I’m afraid there’s nothing else we can do,” lamented the ship’s physician.

“You’re right, Faustus. We can’t prevent the battle, but we can limit the casualties to the inhabitants of the city, who are not deserving of the terrible fate otherwise in store for them,” said Ironside. “Do you think you could return right away, John? Time is of the essence if they are to prepare an adequate defence.”

Loxton exchanged an uneasy glance with Legrand. “Do you think we could manage another four hours of rowing, big man? It’s you who does most of the work.”

“Oui, zat is possible. I’ve need only of a leetle nourishment first,” replied the sturdy Frenchman.

A short time later, after being thoroughly briefed by Captain Ironside, the two members of *Vengeful Mermaid* were stealthily making their way back to the quayside carrying a bundle of bread and cheese, and small bottle of rum.

Before returning to the warmth of their blankets, Ironside and Faustus clandestinely discussed a few significant modifications to their plan, so it would not only prevent a massacre of the civilian population, but hopefully additionally make life difficult for the two tyrants.

The day of the attack

Two days later just before dawn, the sleepy crew were assembled in the shadowy lantern light of the warehouse. Ironside stood imposingly before them, dressed in a freshly

cleaned coat and neatly polished boots that he only wore when he was ashore.

"As you all know, today is the big day," stated the captain, ignoring the excited mutterings around him. "Today is your chance to show off your skills as gunners when we man the batteries in support of the assault on Felsenburg. We are entering battle, so I will be exercising my right to absolute authority during this time. Is that understood?"

There were nods and murmurs of consent from all but a few men who were congregated around William Benton.

"What's really going on, Captain Ironside? I heard you intend us to do more than just fire off those guns. We want to know what you've in store for us," demanded the boatswain to the grumbles of agreement from his small following.

"It is better you don't know all, William," answered Ironside in a hostile tone. "It is important you follow my instructions unquestioningly, if we are to get through this in one piece."

"Why should we follow you, when we don't know nothin' 'bout what's goin' on?" persisted Benton. "We're not on *Dream Chaser* now, so, the way I sees it, you don't 'ave no authority over us."

"This is about reclaiming our ship and leaving this god-forsaken land. If you don't wish to be a part of the crew, you and your chums can go your own way." The captain turned to the rest of the crew. "Do the rest of you agree with me, or shall we elect a new captain here and now?"

"Oi says we trust the cap'n," growled Powder Keg Pete. "He ain't let us down yet." The rest of those assembled vocally expressed their agreement with the quartermaster. "So are ye wiv us, William Benton?"

"Then I guess we ain't got no choice. We're all with you, cap'n," assented the recalcitrant sailor with some reluctance.

"Good, I'm glad we could settle that like reasonable men," said the captain a little more calmly. "Unfortunately, our weapons are still on the ship, but I'd like everyone to take any

they're able to lay their hands on during the course of the morning and conceal them on their person: knives, cudgels and the like, as we might be needing them later."

"Like these," grinned Niamh O'Malley, producing a hunting knife, a thin stiletto dagger, and a small Spanish wheellock pistol from beneath her baggy clothing.

"Where did you get those, Neeve O'Malley?" asked the astonished coxswain.

"Smuggled 'em off t'e ship, I did. T'ought we might be needing them. Seems I was right," replied the woman merrily.

"You took a bit of a risk, but I'm glad you did. Now make sure they remain hidden," bid the captain.

The Irish woman slipped the sheathed blades into the belt under her shirt, but instead of concealing the small pistol she stepped forwards and held it out to Ironside. "You take it, cap'n. Ya needs a weapon befitting of an officer. Shame I couldn't bring ya out yer backsword, but twas a little too long ter fit down me trousers."

"You could have smuggled me out a musket while you were at it, Neeve?" commented an unidentified voice from the crowd. "What about a cannon, too?" rang out another voice mirthfully.

The hall was filled with laughter at the thought of the fearless young woman sneaking an untold number of weapons under her clothes past the unwitting guards. Nobody doubted her temerity.

"All right, all joking aside, here's the plan," said Ironside sternly and clearly. "I'll be leading the main body to the ramparts where we will undertake our task of firing the guns, but I want everyone to be ready to act when I give the order to do so. Mr. Brownrigg, I want you to take a dozen men to retake *Dream Chaser* as soon as you hear a large explosion. Not before, mind you."

"What if that giant petard the generals want to blow the gate with doesn't go off?" asked Brownrigg.

"That's why I want you to wait. If it doesn't go off, then the

plan is off, and we'll have to hope General Pumpernickel is a man of his word and grants us free passage for the aid we are lending to his war effort."

"Why don't we just wait til after the battle, if he's goin' to let us leave anyway?" grumbled William Benton. "Why go to all the trouble of retaking our ship by force, when we can get it back peaceably?"

"Firstly, we don't know how far we can trust the General to keep his word. Secondly, there's more at stake here than just us and our ship."

"What can be more important than us and our ship?" scowled the troublesome boatswain.

"The lives of thousands of innocents, Mr. Benton!" interceded Faustus.

"What do I care 'bout the fate of your so-called innocents. Nobody's innocent s'far as I'm concerned. We should be putting ourselves first and escaping this shithole of a city with all the booty we can carry," growled Benton to the concurring murmurs of his closest supporters.

"Looting and running riot will get us all hanged, Billy Boy," snapped Brownrigg.

"We'll use the confusion caused by the battle to escape. There's no need to draw any extra attention to ourselves. If all goes according to plan, you might have time to help yourself to some of the goods in the warehouses on the docks before we leave. How does that sound, William?" responded the Swede placatingly, wiping a thin layer of cold sweat from his brow.

"S'pose we'll have to be content with that," mumbled Benton.

"Good," replied the captain. "Cassandra and those others who are not able to take part in either manning the guns or reclaiming our vessel will wait here until they are fetched. Yuki, I want you to stay here and keep watch over them, if you would be so kind."

"An honour it would be, Captain Gunnarsson," answered

the samurai with a low bow.

The restless congregation of outlaw sailors lingered anxiously until a grey-bearded old man in a blue military jacket and tricorn finally arrived to escort them to the gun emplacements. The disorderly mob that meandered through the crowded streets was a strong contrast to the neat columns of disciplined infantrymen marching to their positions. The captain and his men did their best to ignore the contemptuous stares of the smartly uniformed officers and derisive sneers of the soldiers in the ranks as they passed.

Eventually, the mass of pirates swarmed along the wall, taking up the positions designated to them by Chief Gunner Frederick Sauer. It turned out that the old man who accompanied them, Olaf Mörser, was an artillery captain who had been assigned to oversee the bombardment.

“What about those strange rockets things that look like giant fireworks. I’m sure they’d make a big bang,” commented Benton, stroking the sturdy wooden launching frame which housed a row of the elongated projectiles.

On seeing the boatswain fondling one of the rockets, Captain Mörser hurried over and chided the seaman in Alamannish.

“What’s ‘e sayin’?” snarled Benton, tightly clenching his fists. “He insultin’ me?”

Luckily, Woody stepped in before the quarrelsome pirate offended the old man. “He says the rockets must not to be used. He says that although they have a fair range, they lack aerodynamic stability and are therefore inaccurate. He also says that they have a tendency to explode prematurely. He says that they have stopped using them after an incident when a rocket changed direction in mid-air and flew back and exploded in Steinburg, killing two townsfolk and injuring a horse.”

“Interesting,” replied the boatswain, stepping back cautiously from the dangerous contraption, smiling to himself as he strode away to join one of the gun crews.

Meanwhile, Captain Ironside was inspecting his men, and when he was satisfied all were at the ready he called over the two cabin boys he'd brought along for a specific purpose. The youngest was Sam Huckabee, a fourteen-year-old boy from Bristol, whom the crew called Sam Powder. The short, brown-haired boy with a round face stood eagerly next to his taller older brother, William Huckabee, better known as Monkey Boy Will. The fifteen-year-old had a pale, feminine face which was dotted with smudges of grease and dirt. His mid-length, mousey blonde hair was tied back with a cotton band and his oversized breeches held up with a length of mangy, old rope. Both boys attentively anticipated the task the captain had in store for them.

"I want you two to go and observe the main gate. Make sure you remain unnoticed, which shouldn't be too difficult in this chaos. Speak with no-one and only return when the last of the soldiers has left the city. Do you understand?"

"We's to watch the gate, Cap'n," replied the oldest of the two boys.

"We's only to return when the last soldier's left the city," added the younger boy proudly.

"Yes, and then one of you is to get back here as quickly as you can once that has happened. The other will continue observing the gate until we arrive," instructed Ironside sternly. "Do you think you can do that?"

"Of course we can," said Monkey Boy Will assuredly.

"Off you go then. The bombardment is about to begin."

Captain Ironside watched the two boys scurrying down the steps, confident that at least Will would carry out the task at hand. He trusted less in the ability of Sam Powder, who was a nervous, fidgety young lad, whose dreadful fear of heights caused the captain to doubt his future on the high seas. That said, he couldn't bring himself to be too harsh with the boy, as he and his brother were both orphans, which he had rescued from a treacherous life aboard a Bristol merchantman. He was glad to see their confidence and

contentment were growing day by day, and he hadn't given up all hope on young Sam quite yet.

Looking around, Ironside noticed Captain Mörser was expectantly holding a thin sword limply above his head. Moments later an unseen bugle blared out a signal and the old artilleryman jerkily lowered the tip of his weapon – the bombardment was to begin. The captain quickly squeezed lumps of wax into his ears and shouted at the top of his voice. “Fire!”

All hell was set loose as numerous iron cylinders discharged their loads at targets on the other side of the river. Using his new telescope, the Swedish captain observed many of the shots taking large chunks out of the opposing battlements and sending enemy artillery men scurrying for cover. Frederick Sauer's expert sighting of the guns resulted in three of the enemy's pieces being put out of action before they could even react. After the shock of the initial torrent of missiles, the soldiers of Felsenburg slowly recovered and sporadically started to return fire, but by that time the accumulated smoke – the fog of war – had decreased visibility, forcing both sides to fire blindly at each others fortifications. Ironside was pleased that they had so quickly achieved their aim of making it difficult for their opponents to target the bridge.

“Look, Cap'n,” shouted the quartermaster through the unbearable din, pointing at a stack of half empty powder kegs. “They got Spanish powder just like we got. Even ‘as the same seal.”

“Just continue firing, Pete!” ordered the captain, unable to make out clearly what the other man was saying.

Placing his telescope to his eye again, he was astounded by the sight that greeted him as he focused on the bridge, where the smoke was less dense. A huge armour-plated vehicle was making its way ponderously over the bridge towards the huge gate to Felsenburg, leaving a billowing trail of steam in its wake. Any cannon balls aimed at the monstrous contraption which met their mark simply ricocheted off the thick metal

plating enclosing it. A machine propelled without the aid of horses – it was a marvel to watch. When it finally reached the gate at the other side, he observed two men protected by cumbersome metal scales emerge from the self-propelled wagon and start running back towards their own lines. Despite their armour, both men were taken down by volleys of musket fire from above the gate before they got very far. With nervous anticipation, Captain Ironside wondered what would come next, but he didn't have long to wait when a momentous explosion shook the air, loud enough even to drown out the constant pounding of the guns for a short moment.

“Take cover!” shouted the captain as he dived behind a wall just in time to avoid the rain of stone shrapnel that had been hurled indiscriminately far and wide.

He was glad to see that his men had suffered nothing but minor cuts and bruises, but Captain Mörser, who had been too slow to react, hadn't been so lucky. A large chunk of flying masonry had all but taken his head off – it was a ghastly sight which the captain knew he wouldn't be able to forget so quickly. Taking advantage of the old man's fatal mishap, Ironside retrieved the dead man's fallen sword and attached the scabbard to his belt – it could come in useful later in the day.

Looking back down at the bridge he could see a gaping hole where the massive reinforced gates of Felsenburg had once been located. No-one within its immediate vicinity could have survived that blast. He then saw the vast army of East Holstein leaving the wide-open gates of Steinburg and starting to cross the bridge towards the gaping breach in the enemy's wall. First came the burly pioneers to clear a way through the rubble for the rest of the army, then appeared all manner of troops. There were proud grenadiers, followed closely by ranks of disciplined line infantry; there were lightly armed fusiliers and finely adorned guardsmen, then there was a loose formation of dismounted light dragoons,

and finally came the poorly equipped militiamen with their pikes and outdated muskets. But that was not all. Next came Emperor Wilhelm Ludwig Frederick von Holstein on a fine white stallion surrounded by his flamboyantly adorned generals and the elite palace guard, followed by rows of mounted men: cuirassiers in shiny metal breastplates; lancers holding their long and deadly spears high; smartly dressed hussars waving their polished sabres above their heads; carabiniers with their deadly carbines and sabres, succeeded by fearsome dragoon guards. Last of all came the light horse artillery to support the troops in their struggle to take the usurper's city.

Ironside wondered if the opposing generals of Felsenburg had heeded his warning, for if they had not they were surely doomed. Unprepared they would stand little chance against the onslaught of this martial behemoth.

The captain was roused from his thoughts by the sight of Monkey Boy Will rushing up the stone staircase two steps at a time.

"Have all the soldiers left the city, Will?"

"Yes, cap'n. They're all gone but for a dozen or so militiamen, most no older than me," wheezed the boy.

Captain Ironside gave the order for the guns to cease the bombardment. Once the firing had fizzled out, he ordered the men to gather up anything they could use as a weapon: rammers, handspikes, wormers, and scrapers, even long-handled powder scoops. The cabin boy, closely followed by the sword-wielding captain, excitedly led the crudely armed mob of pirates down to the city gate.

"Take a score of men and see to it those gates are closed and barred," Ironside shouted to the red-faced quartermaster. "The rest of you seize the sentries, but don't hurt them, they're no more than lads."

The few young guards at the gatehouse were completely overwhelmed without the least resistance, and Pete and his group of men, quickly joined by others, were soon busy

at working on the two huge capstan-like devices which painstakingly dragged the massive gates shut. “Do another lap ‘round the capstan, Johnnie!” shouted the panting quartermaster encouragingly.

It took Faustus’s extensive knowledge of mechanics to operate the complex locking system, which was composed of a confusing assortment of chains, cogs, and levers. As soon as the gates were securely shut, Ironside ordered the men to watch the streets leading from Steinburg in case there were still troops on this side of the wall, and to see to it that the captives were bound, gagged, and secured. They were then to await his return while he and Faustus, followed by a dozen men armed with muskets snatched from the prisoners, ascended a narrow tower overlooking the bridge. Although he couldn’t see what was happening in the city across the river, the unmistakable rattles and roars of musket and cannon fire, interspersed with the screams of wounded and dying men, told him that a fierce battle had ensued in the streets across the river in Felsenburg. It could be that the forces of East Holstein were looting and ransacking the captured city, or it could be that Emperor Wilhelm Ludwig Frederick and his generals had met with unexpected resistance – only time would tell.

Captain Ironside patiently waited and observed through his new telescope, until he spotted a trickle of battle worn soldiers emerge from the gaping hole at the other side of the bridge, soon turning into a torrent of scared, tattered men. It seemed the generals of Felsenburg had indeed heeded his advice. Some of the attacking regiments had broken and were attempting to escape the fray. When the first of the fleeing troops reached the middle of the bridge Ironside ordered his men to fire continuously at the ground in front of them, driving them back into the devastated city from which they had just come. With no way of retreat, the troops of East Holstein were forced to regroup and return to the ferocious conflict, giving the crew of *Dream Chaser* more time to make

their escape.

“Now’s the time to make ourselves scarce,” stated Ironside coolly. “Let’s get back to the ship with all haste.”

The pirate captain swiftly returned to his men below, leading them with cries of urgent encouragement through the deserted streets to the clangorous backdrop of the still raging combat across the river. After a few hundred meters, the fleeing crew were suddenly startled by an eerie screeching sound. Looking around, Ironside was horrified to see that someone had set off the rocket battery, sending all but one across the river in the direction of Felsenburg. A single deadly projectile had deviated from its course and was now heading in the direction of the retreating pirates.

“Skedaddle!” cried out the terrified quartermaster. “Run fer yer lives!”

Fortunately for the fear-stricken, scattering pirates, the missile veered away from them at the last moment and crashed into the facade of an ironmonger’s store a hundred feet behind them, sending stone, timber, nails, and frying pans flying in all directions.

“Who set off those bloody rockets?” barked the relieved, but irate captain, poking his head out from the cover of a low stone wall.

At that moment, he saw a grinning William Benton hurriedly scampering down a stone staircase leading down from the ramparts, looking thoroughly pleased with himself.

“Did you set off those damn things?” shouted Ironside angrily.

“Yeh, I did. I wanted ter see what’d happen. Never seen any thing like it, I haven’t,” smirked Benton.

“You nearly got us all bloody well killed, you ignorant bastard!” cried the outraged captain.

“Sorry, but it ain’t my fault they’re so unreliable. A goddamn sight well worth seeing, though,” laughed Benton, unperturbed by the captain’s chiding words.

“Everyone back to *Dream Chaser*!” growled Ironside,

realising the futility of reprimanding the rebellious boatswain further at the present time. He'd deal with him later.

"First to the warehouses to see what booty we can take with us," roared Benton, rapidly sprinting past the other running pirates.

A hasty departure

The breathless seamen finally made it to where *Dream Chaser* was berthed, and Ironside was overjoyed to see Cassandra awaiting him on the deck of the vessel. Some of the crew had already started loading wooden crates from the warehouses onto the ship, and he had to wait a moment for two of his men to lug a heavy wooden box up the wobbly gangplank before he could gain access to his ship and his wife. After hugging his spouse, he was greeted by a smiling John Brownrigg.

"You managed to take back the ship without any trouble then?" said the captain, patting his shipmate on the shoulder.

"It was easier than expected. There were only two guards, mere lads, they were. I guess every able man was needed for the assault," answered the coxswain cheerily.

"Where are they now?"

"Bound and gagged in that warehouse over there. They'll be found soon enough. Kept their muskets, though. You can never have enough of them, you can't."

"Well, I'm glad you didn't have to hurt them. There's been enough bloodshed for one day," said Ironside with regret.

"What's more, they repaired the damaged sails and shrouds, and even given the deck and bilge a good clean. Shame they didn't careen her too, but I guess beggars can't be choosers."

"It seems Kapitän Krüger is a man of his word, I just hope he didn't perish in the battle," muttered Ironside scratching his chin. "See to it that the men are promptly back on the ship. We need to get out of here before our absence is discovered."

“I’ve already commandeered a couple of long boats, and the men I charged to find them are ready to tow us out of the harbour. We’re in luck as the tide is starting to ebb, so it shouldn’t take too long,” explained Brownrigg, striding towards the busy gangplank. “All aboard and make to cast off posthaste!” he shouted, bringing men scurrying out of the nearby warehouse both burdened and unburdened.

Unfortunately, it was a little more difficult than he had hoped to get everyone back on board, and the captain was frequently forced to hail the men with a speaking trumpet using a combination of commands and expletives to finally get all of them back onto the ship. All but William Benton and three other men, who were still rolling barrels down the quayside from the far end of the quay, were now on board. The exasperated captain urged them to leave their plunder and immediately return to the ship, but desisted when he saw a figure dressed in a long black jacket, spotless white breeches, and smart tricorne heading towards them from the other direction followed by a squad of musket-carrying men – militia he presumed by their lack of uniforms. Ironside cursed the intractable boatswain and momentarily toyed with the idea of leaving him behind. It would certainly remove one source of constant strife from his life, but he realised he lacked the heart to do it, and anyway he needed the skilled navigator, at least until he had found an adequate replacement.

Björn Gunnarsson’s heart skipped a beat when he recognized the stern expression on the face of the approaching man – Secretary of State Johan Wartenburg. There were only a dozen men with him, but they would clearly arrive at the ship before Benton and the others. Without hesitation, he called Pete over and instructed him to gather a handful of men with muskets, who were to conceal themselves behind the gunwale, as well as loading one of the swivel guns as an extra precaution. He sincerely hoped he wouldn’t be forced to open fire on the Holstein official. Despite his inherent

aversion to all those who called themselves politicians, he had grown quite fond of this man, so he waited for him to reach the foot of the gangplank before calling down to him. "What can I do for you, Mr. Wartenburg?"

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed his men ducked out of sight, shifting nervously, and on his other side Powder Keg Pete leaning nonchalantly against a loaded swivel gun, which he had had the sense to direct towards the heavens so as to appear less threatening.

"I wish to speak with you about what has been going on, Captain Gunnarsson. Could we please speak privately?" On seeing the agitated sailors watching him from the deck, the official ordered his men to shoulder their arms and take a step back. "May I come aboard?"

"Certainly, if you come alone," responded the captain with forced cordiality, silently cursing Benton for dawdling and himself for not having pushed the men harder to depart earlier.

"Join me on the quarterdeck, Mr. Wartenburg," said Ironside once the Secretary of State was aboard. Both men climbed the wooden steps observed by a multitude of curious faces. "What can I do for you?" asked the captain innocently.

"You carried out your task as agreed," answered the official. "But it seems that everything didn't go according to plan. It appears the West Holsteiners were prepared for the attack, as if someone had warned them, which resulted in a cataclysmic battle, in which all the generals of both sides met their end. Both kaisers also perished in the fray and I'm told they were both killed by the blasts from rockets fired from our own gun emplacements, which is most unfortunate. I've also been informed that someone barred the gates to prevent the return of our forces. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"No idea about the gates, but I must admit one of my overzealous men did ignite the rockets against my orders, and he'll be punished for it," replied the Swede with a poker-

face.

“It matters not. It may even have been for the best, but don’t tell anyone I said that. On seeing their superiors fall the soldiers of both sides quickly called a truce and a peace treaty has already been negotiated by the civilian authorities, which have now taken control of both cities. It would seem the war is over and the reunification of the two kingdoms is in sight. It will take time to rebuild our society, but both sides are in agreement that the time of the generals is past. The united cities are to be ruled in the future by a joint council of elected members. The people are weary of war and will greet the change. It would seem that whoever closed the gates and prevented a retreat put an end to a war that could have raged for another forty years.”

“I’m pleased to hear the war is over,” said Ironside, grinning inwardly. He and Faustus could never have hoped their plan would have been so successful. They had believed they would only have been able to save the civilian population of Felsenburg by their actions.

“Furthermore, I’ve been tasked with asking you if you and your men would care to remain in Holstein and oversee the construction of a new combined navy,” continued Wartenburg, producing a rolled up document from the inside of his jacket.

“It seems to me you and your people were well prepared for such an eventuality, Mr. Wartenburg.”

“You could say we were. I was part of a clandestine movement on both sides of the river struggling to bring an end to the infernal conflict which has plagued our land for so long. We were awaiting an apt opportunity to dismantle the war machine dominating our realm. We had already drawn up detailed plans for the transitional phase. I would never have believed it would be on this day though, but we were ready all the same. The best we hoped for was a victory to end the civil war, but I fear, even then, the generals would have turned their attentions north towards the neighbouring

kingdoms of Meckburg and Pomrania, and when the generals wage war, it is the common folk who suffer most.”

“If we don’t end war, war will end us,” came a voice from behind the two men. Looking around they saw Faustus, who had obviously been listening in on the conversation. “Those are the words of the philosopher Plato.”

“I’ve never heard of this man, but he does sound wise,” commented Wartenburg. “So what say you to staying in Holstein?”

“I fear we must decline. The men are itching to return to their own domain and our journey will be a long one,” replied the captain, shaking his head.

“I understand. It is a fair way back to Albion,” said Wartenburg with an understanding smile. “Won’t you at least let us honour you with medals and a feast?”

“Medals are for military men, and although a feast sounds tempting, it would be better for all, if we were on our way,” replied Captain Ironside stoically.

Suddenly, the men’s attention was drawn to a commotion on the quayside. He saw Benton and several other pirates pelting towards the ship, having abandoned the barrels, a mob of angry dockworkers and merchants hot on their heels.

“I think it’s time you indeed left. It seems the local traders aren’t too happy with your men helping themselves to their wares. Don’t worry, I’ll deal with that lot. Let us just say the items your men acquired are a reward for your aid. I’ll see to it the council covers the costs,” smiled the Secretary of Sate, waving his men back to allow the fleeing sailors aboard. “Farewell and a safe journey,” added the man before quickly making his way down the gangplank and placing himself and his men in front of it before he attempted to appease the furious throng.

The ship was ponderously towed away from the wharf until it was in a position where the crew could set the sails and catch the wind. As they drifted away from the quayside, the seamen warily eyed the forts at the entrance to the harbour,

hoping Wartenburg had had the time to warn the occupants that their ship was allowed to pass, for if they opened fire, *Dream Chaser* would be done for, but, as luck would have it, it seemed that the occupants saw no reason to fire, or, alternatively, the forts had been stripped of manpower for the attack on Felsenburg. Whatever the reason, the guns remained still.

While they were nervously watching the shore, the quartermaster and boatswain were spiritedly checking the plundered crates and barrels which had been hastily brought on board, and which were now stored safely below deck.

"All in all, it be a good catch," grinned Pete. "There be cocoa beans, loaves of cane sugar, an' bundles of cinnamon sticks in these here crates, and those over there contain clothes. I be in need of a fresh pair of breeches. Someone brought aboard a great deal of hemp rope, too."

"I'm more interested in what's in the barrels," mumbled Benton, testing the contents of one with a ladle and spitting it out in disgust. "It's just bloody drinkin' water." He hopefully tried another. "That's more like it! Brandy, and good stuff it is, too." The boatswain slurped down a generous helping.

"Don't you go drinkin' it all, Billy Boy. Leave some for the rest of us, or they're be trouble." Benton took one more gulp before replacing the lid and wiping his mouth. "Let's get the cook to prepare us some nice hot chocolate. I ain't had any for bloody ages," said Pete, ushering the boatswain towards the upper deck.

Once they were under sail, Captain Ironside reported to the crew what Wartenburg had said. Most were relieved to be away from that strange land, but a few, including Benton, resented being deprived of a feast. Finally, the pirate captain managed to convince them all that they needed to try to pick up the trail of the Spanish galleon, and the thirst for treasure helped dispel any further desire to remain in Steinburg. The captain then addressed the matter of William Benton's irresponsible actions, and some, egged on by

Niamh O'Malley wanted to dump the pestiferous pirate on the first isolated island they found and leave him there, but after Benton protested that he'd rather die than be marooned on an island with no ship, no crew, and no bottle of rum, the majority pleaded for leniency. In the end, Benton promised to cause no more mischief and called for the distribution of hot chocolate and brandy in a successful attempt to divert attention from himself.

They were almost out of sight of land when the ship's purser, the only other female crewmember on board, approached the captain with urgency. Her name was Charlotte Scowcroft, although she preferred to be called Charlie, but was meanly nicknamed Scowler by many of the male crewmembers on account of her grouchy demeanour. In fact, in the absence of these aforementioned fellows she was generally warm and kind-hearted. What often soured her mood was the macho bravado and misogynist outbursts of some of the men, an all too common occurrence. The Jamaican born daughter of a tavern-keeper was a tall, wiry woman with a narrow, tanned face and long brown hair which was always neatly tied back, and who favoured men's clothing as being more practical and comfortable.

"What's wrong, Charlie?" asked Ironside, noticing the look of concern on the woman's face.

"It's the powder, Cap'n," replied the woman, tucking her thumbs into her loose-fitting trousers.

"What about it?" frowned the captain.

"It's all gone. There ain't a single barrel left of that Spanish stuff we stole, nor any of the less good stuff we purchased in Nassau. All we got left's what's in the powder flasks for our muskets," said Charlie miserably.

"What do you mean it's all gone?" exclaimed Ironside. Then he vaguely remembered Pete mentioning something about seeing Spanish powder while they were on the ramparts. He cursed himself for being too preoccupied to realise it was their own powder they'd been using to fire at

the enemy. It would definitely make capturing a Spanish ship into much more of a challenge. They couldn't sail back after plundering the warehouses, even if Wartenburg put in a good word for them, and, anyway, he didn't fancy returning to that unknown country. No, they'd somehow manage. They were pirates after all.

"Sail to starboard!" came a cry from the main yard.

Captain Ironside quickly fetched his telescope and his heart was filled with glee to see it was *Vengeful Mermaid*. He ordered for the sails to be adjusted to let the other vessel catch up, and side by side both ships re-entered the mist which was forming anew ahead of them.

Interlude

Nathaniel Bagshaw sat gaping wide-eyed in disbelief at what William Benton had just disclosed to him.

“You mean to tell me you discovered an unknown Germanic land? That’s not possible, I say,” stuttered the journalist.

“It’s true I tell ya. Saw it all with me own eyes, I did,” responded Benton menacingly. “You sayin’ I’m a liar?”

“No, of course not, my dear man, but you must admit it does all sound very far fetched,” replied Nathaniel conciliatorily. “All right, let’s say it’s all true. I still find it hard to believe that a band of pirates managed to put an end to a forty-year long war.”

“Well, those generals certainly weren’t goin’ to do it, were they? It took good ‘ole William Benton to end the war. If I hadn’t shot off those rocket things, those two emperors probably still would’ve been alive, and the war would’ve raged on for many a year.”

“So now you’re personally taking credit for ending the war, are you?” frowned Nathaniel sceptically.

“More or less, but, of course I wouldn’t’ve managed it without the help of me shipmates,” answered the prisoner with conviction.

“If it is true what you say, then it was a noble deed. War is

such a horrid matter,” said the other man earnestly. “In 1706, my older brother, Rupert, fought at the Battle of Ramillies in the Spanish War, and he’s never been the same since. He saw more bloodshed there than any man should witness in his lifetime.”

“I ain’t ever heard of this Battle of Ram-mee-ye.”

“A bloody affair it was. The allied forces were led by the Duke of Marlborough against a combined force of French, Spanish, and Bavarians somewhere in the Spanish Netherlands. Our foe was routed with some 12,000 dead and wounded plus another 7,000 or so taken prisoner. Our armies were more fortunate, losing less than 5000 men, but it was a terrible slaughter all the same.”

“Yeh, war’s pretty shitty. I wouldn’t want to be a soldier. I prefers the freedom of the high seas meself,” commented Benton phlegmatically. “Although I was in Queen Anne’s War on a privateer.”

“That’s the same war my brother was in. It’s just another name for the part of the Spanish War of Succession which was fought in the Americas,” commented Nathaniel knowledgeably.

“Back then I was still a sailor in the Royal Navy, I was. That’s before I jumped ship, that is. I served as helmsman’s mate on a British frigate then, but was lucky to experience nothin’ more than minor ship engagements with few casualties,” continued Benton, scratching his itchy head.

“Yes, you were indeed lucky,” replied the journalist as he scribbled in his notebook. “But what interests me is your self-professed antagonistic attitude towards other members of your crew. You don’t seem to have been very popular, do you?”

“Sure I was popular. It was just that many of the crew were severely lacking in a sense of humour. I must admit I was partial to pulling their legs from time to time. Just a bit of fun, it was,” grinned Benton unabashedly.

“Is that what you call it?” responded Nathaniel,

unconvinced by the other man's words. "What about you setting off those rockets, although your captain expressly forbade it?"

"I ended the war, din I? Anyway, I was interested to see what would happen. Can't blame me for bein' curious."

"And the looting?"

"I'm a pirate, ain't I? And it weren't just me," said the ex-boatswain defiantly. "And the way I sees it, what we took was payment for our troubles."

"Very well, Mr. Benton," said Nathaniel Bagshaw. "I'd be grateful if you'd continue with the account of your adventure, if you would."

"Course I will. Well, what happened next is ..."

Long Ben

A parting of ways

The two pirate vessels had been sailing on the open ocean for almost three weeks after emerging once again from the mysterious mist. The wind was fair and the weather was obliging, but neither captain had any idea where they now found themselves at this moment in time, so they decided to sail with the westward wind in the hope of reaching familiar shores.

William Benton was standing at the larboard gunwale expressing his dissatisfaction to a fellow shipmate, Josiah Badger, better known as Old Joe, a veteran sailor of an unusually ripe age for a pirate – he was fifty-eight years old. Josiah was born and grew up in South Carolina, but had spent half of his life at sea, first as a fisherman, then as a sailor on a merchant ship, and finally as a pirate. He had decided to retire after a successful bout of plundering in the Indian Ocean, and had bought a farm and settled down on New Providence with a woman from Barbados, who bore him three sons. In 1716, after twenty-years of relative contentment disaster struck, his wife and two youngest sons died of cholera, and Josiah fell into a fit of depression. He sought refuge from his plight in drinking and gambling

and would now surely have been six-feet under had he not encountered Captain Ironside in a quayside tavern, which re-awoke his desire to sail the seven seas in search of plunder. From that day on, he pledged to quit drinking and gambling, and, after bequeathing his farmstead to his oldest son and his wife, he packed his sea chest and never looked back.

"We've been at sea for weeks with no land in sight," muttered Benton, hawking noisily and ejecting a thick globule of phlegm into the sea below. "Captain Ironside don't know where he's goin'. We could end up sailing off the edge of the world at this rate."

"Everyone knows the world is a ball," grunted the older man, scratching his rear end.

"I means it metaphorically, I does. You know what that means, Old Joe?" sneered the boatswain condescendingly.

"Can't say I do, Billy Boy. I just knows the earth ain't flat."

"I'm just sayin' I think we're lost. And what's more, we're all gonna get the scurvy, if we don't find land soon."

"You think you can do better than Captain Gunnarsson, do ya, Will?" asked Josiah, rubbing his aching back.

"I do in fact believe I could," replied Benton, flexing his shoulder muscles.

"If ya say so. Anyway, I'm goin' down below. Me lumbago is giving me gyp again," sighed the old seaman, hobbling away towards the companion hatch.

It wasn't just William Benton who was befallen by discontentment, even though he was the only one expressing it so loudly and openly. Small groups of miserable seamen milled restlessly around the deck or down below, whispering words of dissatisfaction to each other. Captain Ironside was aware of the growing despair and his issuing of a double brandy ration for all had temporarily soothed their concerned souls, at least until it ran out. With little to distract them, there was a risk that the crew of *Dream Chaser* might turn on each other. He had already broken up two brawls this day, and it wasn't yet noon. This time, he couldn't blame Benton for the general

disgruntlement, although the man's constant complaining didn't help matters. If they didn't make landfall within the next few days, he feared the infighting would intensify as the stores of food and water became more and more depleted. He had taken the precaution of assigning the honourable Konishi Yukinaga and his two keen-bladed Japanese swords with watching over the dwindling stores, as he did not wish to worsen the already deteriorating mood further by having to punish anyone for theft. With the weight of the fate's crew hanging over him like a storm cloud, the captain returned to his cabin, where he found his wife, Cassandra, embroidering a shawl to pass away the time.

"Anything new, dear?" she frowned, looking up from her handicraft.

"No, love, but the situation is becoming desperate. It won't be long before we're completely out of supplies. It hasn't rained since we left the mist, so water is running low, too. I'm worried how the crew will react, if it continues this way," lamented Ironside. "Normal men can be cruel when they're hungry, pirates even more so."

"I'm sure it will all turn out well. I have a feeling we'll soon be nearing land," reassured Cassandra.

Before her husband could answer, they were interrupted by a commotion on deck and a harsh hammering on the door of the cabin. On opening it they found the quartermaster, red-faced and excited, standing before them.

"Come quick, Cap'n!" gasped Powder Keg Pete. "Land in sight, and not only that, we've spotted the bloody galleon, too."

With a rush of adrenalin Captain Ironside pushed past the thrilled quartermaster, telescope in hand, almost colliding with Brownrigg as he rushed out onto the quarterdeck.

"Land abeam to larboard, ship off the starboard bow," reported the coxswain gleefully.

"First nothing, then out of the blue we sight both land and chase," responded the captain in disbelief.

Looking down at the main deck, he saw new life had awakened in the crew, who were pressed against the gunwales on either side of the ship, straining their eyes for a better view. Placing the brass cylinder to his eye and facing larboard he indeed saw what could have been an island or headland far in the distance. Turning to starboard, he scanned the horizon until he could just make out the sails of a distant vessel heading in the opposite direction to the land mass. From its rigging and profile, it could only be the Spanish ship they were pursuing. Ironside scratched his head as he contemplated the dilemma that now faced them. He had all but given up hope of finding the treasure ship again, but they could not continue their pursuit without supplies, and that damned vessel was sailing in the other direction. Lost in thought, the Swede hadn't noticed some of the other crewmembers congregating around him and observing him expectantly.

"What are we going to do, Captain?" inquired Faustus Quiddington.

"We take the galleon and its gold," exclaimed Benton. "Then we eat their food."

"We could try to capture the galleon and hope its crew aren't in the same predicament as we are," answered Ironside anxiously. "But that's a huge risk."

"You want ter let all that gold slip through our hands, Cap'n!" proclaimed the boatswain incredulously.

"We've got to sail to that island," interceded the purser, Charlotte Scowcroft. "We'll be done for, if we don't soon take on fresh water. What we got left is starting to get slimy."

"Shut it, Scowler!" snapped Benton. "Leave the important decisions to the men."

"There's no need fer that tone, Billy Boy," growled Pete, before the furious woman could respond. "Charlie's got as much right ter speak as any of us."

Although grateful for Pete's chivalrous act of speaking in her defence, Charlotte silently fumed inside at being

deprived of responding on her own behalf. But in light of the urgent situation, instead of speaking out, she just wordlessly scowled at both men.

“Enough squabbling!” shouted Ironside. “There’s no time to waste. In my opinion, Charlie is right. We need to resupply before even considering following that treasure ship. And remember, we don’t have any powder for the guns, so we’ll need all our strength and wits about us if we are to capture our prize.”

“Shouldn’t we put it to the vote?” suggested the surgeon.

“Yes, we should,” agreed the pirate captain, desiring to put a swift end to the quandary.

The entire crew gathered on the main deck and, after both William Benton and Charlotte Scowcroft had their say, the vote was taken. It seemed the hunger in their bellies was presently stronger than the desire for gold, as nine out of every ten votes was for the island.

“Now we must consult with Captain Wolf on the *Vengeful Mermaid* to find out whether he will join us,” Ironside addressed the delighted, dispersing crew.

A short time later the sloop had pulled alongside *Dream Chaser* and its stern captain had climbed aboard, both men were now involved in a heated discussion.

“You can’t be serious about continuing the pursuit alone, Captain Wolfenden. We should stick together if we are to take to a galleon at little cost to ourselves,” exclaimed Ironside.

“My men have voted to maintain the chase for another four days. We’ve enough stores for a week and less mouths to feed, but if our prize eludes us, we’ll return to join you,” responded Wolf confidently.

“Do you really think you can take that ship with only one small vessel?”

“With a little cunning and gumption I believe we can. What’s more, we were fortunate enough not to lose all our powder,” replied Captain Wolf reproachfully.

“All right, you must do what you see fit,” conceded Ironside,

“but I doubt my crew will be happy if you are successful and deprive them of their share of the booty.”

“I’ll consider giving your men a lesser share of the plunder should I succeed, that is if my men don’t disagree and prevent me from returning to join you. I couldn’t blame them if they wanted to keep it all for themselves,” answered Captain Wolf giving the other man a predatory grin.

“Well, I would normally wish you luck in such an endeavour, but under the circumstances ...”

“I understand, Björn. It’d certainly pain me, if we were to be permanently separated,” said Wolf, offering a comradely hand.

Captain Ironside watched uneasily while the other captain returned to his vessel. He was deeply concerned that he might never see the other ship again. Captain Wolf might be biting off more than he could chew attempting to tackle the galleon alone, although he sincerely hoped the man’s resourceful nature would lead him to success, or rather that he would be forced to break off the pursuit due to lack of supplies.

“Cap’n Wolf goin’ to chase that treasure ship without us?” asked Benton, sidling up alongside the captain.

“It would seem so,” muttered Ironside. “If you’re quick you can join them, Will. You too were eager to continue the chase, were you not?”

“Nah, I think I’ll pass on that. The crew of *Dream Chaser* needs me more,” declined the boatswain, knowing full well that Wolf and his crew would be far less tolerant of his teasing and provocations than those on this vessel. He would hate to be lynched or tossed overboard, because of a simple misunderstanding. No, he was better off staying on *Dream Chaser*, even if it meant missing out on his share of the treasure for now.

Both men watched dolefully as the sloop pulled away. A few moments later Captain Ironside gave the order to make towards the mysterious mass of land. With luck, it would be one of the Leeward Islands where the Atlantic met the

Caribbean, but, somehow, he seriously doubted it.

Benjamin Bridgeman

It took nearly two hours to reach land and another sailing along the rocky coastline until they found a suitable sheltered cove. Ironside scanned the coast with his telescope as *Dream Chaser* sailed cautiously into the inviting bay. The waters were clear and the shoreline lined with a beach of fine golden sand. The inlet was flanked by rocky inclines on either side which gradually extended below the waterline. They would have to watch out for treacherous reefs submerged unseen below the surface. The captain's fears were confirmed as they neared the beach, when he saw the decayed, mastless carcass of a small ship perched precariously on submerged rocks, the hull covered with barnacles and seaweed which made it all but invisible to the naked eye until one was close up. From the look of it, it must have been there for many years, and by the state of it, must have been wrecked in a storm that washed it up on those concealed rocky fangs. Eventually, Ironside ordered the anchor to be dropped eight hundred yards from the beach, any closer and he risked being stranded when the tide went out.

What was more interesting was that there appeared to be a village of crude stone and wooden huts just beyond the beach, and from the swirls of smoke rising above the roof tops it was clearly inhabited. That it was not an abandoned settlement was confirmed when the captain spied figures scurrying onto the beach obviously aware of their presence.

"Do you think they're friendly, Björn?" inquired Faustus.

"Hard to say. Some appear to be European and others of African descent," replied Ironside, passing the surgeon his telescope.

"Could be a community of maroons or logwood cutters," ventured the physician.

"Or bloodthirsty pirates and murderers," commented

Benton cynically.

“Whoever they are, the only seaworthy vessels I can see are a jolly boat and a dozen dugouts on the beach. All the same, I believe we should proceed with caution. I say we send a boat to make contact, and just to be in an advantageous bargaining position, we’ll train our guns on them,” said Ironside.

“But we don’t have no powder, cap’n,” the boatswain reminded them all.

“Charlie has scrapped together enough powder for one shot. They don’t know that’s all we’ve got,” replied Ironside.

“We’re goin’ to bluff it,” said Benton. “I like the sound of that, but we’re unlikely to hit anything at this range with a single shot.”

“We’d only aim to scare them. But let’s not presume the worst. If we’re lucky, we might be able to procure more powder from them,” responded the captain calmly. “I suggest that I land with five men in the smallest of the ship’s boats.”

“I don’t think that’s wise, Björn,” interrupted Faustus. “What if they take you hostage? We’d be like a chicken without a head.”

“Not with me on board, we wouldn’t,” replied the cocky boatswain.

“He be right,” added Powder Keg Pete, ignoring Benton’s self-important comment. “Oi should lead the landing party instead.”

Björn Gunnarsson reluctantly agreed only when Faustus offered to accompany the quartermaster, the surgeon being the only other man on board whose tactfulness and diplomatic skills he fully trusted. He would see to it the others didn’t get distracted from their duty by wine, women, and song. He drew the line at William Benton being one of the six under the pretext he was, as navigator, too valuable to the ship to be lost. This was only partly true, as what the captain really feared was the irritating boatswain turning the townsfolk against them with his spiteful wit.

Half an hour later, the crew watched as their quartermaster

and surgeon were rowed to the shore by four stalwart crewmen armed with muskets. When the small boat finally reached the beach, a small crowd had already assembled and all faces there were observing them expectantly. At the front of the crowd were a dozen or so men of European descent dressed in a hodgepodge of heavily patched garments and roughly worked animal skins. All were well over fifty years of age, and all were holding well-used muskets. Behind them stood a larger number of dark-skinned men and women – some old, some young – wearing plain, roughly sewn clothing. There were a number of children and youths eyeing the newcomers warily from the back, and Faustus couldn't help noticing that some were much lighter skinned than others. A man with a bushy, blonde-grey beard in a frayed tunic and battered broad-rimmed hat stepped forward, resting the butt of his weapon in the soft sand.

"Welcome to the village of Gunsway, gentlemen," croaked the man. "How can we be of service?"

"We are merchant men on our way to Jamaica," lied the surgeon before Pete managed to say anything. "Alas, we suffered the bad luck to lose ourselves in the fog. And if I may ask, on what island do we presently find ourselves?"

"You be on an island far from any civilisation, mister. You be way off course from Jamaica," answered the man cheerily.

"So you have heard of that colony?" asked the surprised physician.

"Of course I 'ave," replied the man as if Faustus were some kind of fool. "In fact, I was there in ninety-two when that cursed earthquake struck. As many as 3000 souls perished on that fateful day."

"So how did you end up here?" inquired the surgeon, feeling a pang of hope that they might soon reach familiar waters.

"I think it'd be better if you spoke to Mr. Bridgeman, our gallant leader," answered the man.

"It would be my pleasure," said Faustus cordially.

The surgeon ordered the four men to remain with the boat while he and Pete followed the old man along a dusty street to a small stone building. Sitting on the veranda was a grey-bearded man of over sixty years dressed in a coat that had seen better days. Although the man was smiling, there was something predacious about his manner.

"I brought them visitors to speak with you, Mr. Bridgeman," reported the man to his leader.

"Thank you, Tom. Could you bring some of that fine apple wine for the visitors?"

The old man scurried off obediently. Meanwhile Mr. Bridgeman bade his guests to sit opposite him on two rickety whicker chairs. Some minutes later, the man called Tom returned with a wooden tray bearing a clay jug and three cups made from coconut shells. After filling the drinking vessels, he left the three men and rejoined his comrades on the beach, where they roughly ushered the darker skinned inhabitants back to their chores.

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Captain Benjamin Bridgeman, magistrate of Gunsway," said the seated man. "So now, gentlemen, would you please tell me who you are and what you are doing here?"

Faustus felt sure he had heard that name before, but couldn't place where. He decided he would worry about it later, after he had successfully established a rapport with the people on this island.

"My name is Faustus Quiddington, ship's surgeon, and this is the quartermaster Peter Thurlow. Unfortunately, we find ourselves short on water and supplies and this is the first island we encountered. We were unaware it was inhabited and do not wish to cause you any trouble. I hope you might allow us to refill our water casks and furnish us with provisions – we would compensate you generously, of course," explained Faustus hopefully.

"And where is your captain? Does he deem such a task beneath him?" asked Benjamin coolly.

“He wanted to come, but we persuaded him to allow us to determine if the locals were friendly first. It would seem you are.”

“Aye, that we are,” grinned the magistrate, revealing the few brown teeth he still possessed. “We’ll do all we can to aid you.”

“Would you be so kind as to tell us more about yourself and how you got here, Mr. Bridgeman?” continued Faustus, hoping more information might jog his memory.

“Indeed I shall,” replied Benjamin. “Some twenty years past I was the captain on a merchant ship sailing the triangle.”

“So ye were a slaver,” stated Pete, refilling his cup.

“Of sorts, but it seems fate had other plans in store for me and my men. You mentioned a fog. We too sailed into it and spent weeks lost at sea until we had the luck to discover this uninhabited island, but fortune didn’t smile on us for long, as before we reached the shore a gale struck and washed us onto the rocks. I lost two men and part of our cargo, but we managed to make it on land and establish a settlement on this isle of abundance.”

“That wreck in the bay was yer vessel?” inquired Pete, filling his pipe.

“Yes, it was,” answered Benjamin warily.

“Bit small for a slave ship, ain’t it?” commented the quartermaster.

“Yes, we had to trade down when we discovered that our three-master was too heavily infested with shipworm,” explained the older man hurriedly.

“Yes, teredo navalis, or shipworms as they are better known as, although they are actually molluscs. They’re a constant problem for ships which frequent Caribbean waters,” said Faustus, happily showing off his knowledge, “and can destroy a ship’s hull in a matter of months, or so I’m told.”

“The scourge of the seas for honest and dishonest seaman alike,” agreed Bridgeman. “Anyway, not knowing where we were and after a few failed attempts to construct our own

craft, we decided to call this place our new home. We have all we need here as the island provides much for us, and the blacks cultivate our land.”

“Them blacks be yer slaves,” pointed out the quartermaster, adeptly lighting his pipe.

“Yes, they were our cargo and have more than proved their worth. Toiling the land is all they’re good for. They’re suited to carrying out the menial tasks while we civilized men concentrate on keeping the settlement in order,” replied the magistrate frankly.

“I beg to differ, but it matters not. We’re not here to disturb your little society, but require only assistance, and then we’ll be on our way,” frowned the surgeon disapprovingly. “But I do have one question, Mr. Bridgeman. I couldn’t help noticing there are a number of lighter skinned children among your people.”

“Mr. Bridgeman an’ ‘is men ‘ave been misusing the slave women, no doubt,” stated Pete casually.

“They are the only women on the island and are our property to do with as we please,” responded Benjamin challengingly. “Do you have a problem with that, sir?”

“No, Mr. Bridgeman, it is none of our business how you run your village,” answered Faustus, placing a hand on the quartermaster’s forearm to refrain him from pouring himself a third cup of wine.

“I’m glad to hear it, gentlemen. Now tell me something about your ship. From whence do you sail and to which destination? How many people are on board? Is it in good shape? How many guns does it carry? What cargo are you transporting?”

“Why be you so interested in our vessel, Mr. Bridgeman?” inquired the quartermaster, taking advantage of the surgeon’s attention being diverted by so many questions to pour himself some more wine.

“I desire to know who we’ll be aiding? You could be pirates posing as honest merchantmen for all I know,” said

the older man cautiously. "It pays to be careful in this life, Mr. Thurlow."

"It certainly does, Mr. Bridgeman, and I assure you that our intentions are honourable. As I said, we'll compensate you for your trouble."

"Very well, Mr. Quiddington. You have convinced me. We are blessed with an abundance on this island. Wild fruit grows plentifully and the conditions are perfect for the cultivation of crops. We've domesticated some of the wild cattle and chickens we found on the island, and occasionally hunt the wild pigs. We even maintain our own distillery."

Pete's eyes lit up as he heard the last few words. "You have more than just apple wine here?"

"Indeed we do. We have light and dark beer, various wines, cider, and rum," explained Benjamin. "Now I'd appreciate it, if you'd briefly inform me of what has transpired in the last twenty years while we've been marooned on this island. Are we still at war with France and at peace with Spain? Is William still the king, or did the Jacobites succeed in ousting him?"

"For better or for worst the Kingdom of Great Britain is at peace with both," said Faustus.

"The Kingdom of Great Britain? You surely mean the Kingdom of England," commented their host.

"Well, you know the kingdoms of England and Scotland shared a monarch when the first King James ascended the throne of both countries separately, and since then both realms have become one. The parliaments of both lands passed the Acts of Union about ten years ago. They are now one and the same nation," Faustus told the surprised magistrate. "And as for the monarch, after twelve years of reign by the fair Queen Anne, we now have a German by the name of George governing us."

"A wench and a sausage eater! So I presume the Jacobites failed. Not that it matters to us. We bend the knee to no man on this island."

"You also missed the war against Spain and France that raged in Europe for some fourteen years, which broke out after just four years of peace with the Frenchies. They called it the Spanish War of Succession, a fight over the Spanish throne, and it was all others against Spain and France, but since then there has been only a prosperous peace with both nations."

"It must have been a great time to be a privateer," said Benjamin thoughtfully, more to himself than to the others.

"I've heard it was. Now there are only pirates, *communis hostis omnium* – the common foe of all – , who are callously hunted down by all seafaring nations," replied Faustus regretfully.

"Indeed, but that is of no concern to us. You are all welcome to stay as long as you wish and we'll supply you with all you need. In fact, I mean to organize a feast for you and your crew this very evening," said Bridgeman jovially. "It'll be good for all, as it's been such a long time since we had contact with other Europeans."

"Will there be rum?" asked Pete eagerly.

"Indeed there will, Mr. Thurlow. My cooper, Mr. Jameson, makes the best rum I've ever tasted. There'll be all manner of food as well: roast meat, crisply baked bread, fresh fruit. All a man who has spent weeks at sea could desire."

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Bridgeman. We'll return to our ship and inform the captain. I'm sure he'll be delighted," replied Faustus, satisfied of their host's good intentions.

"And in the meantime, I'll have lodgings prepared for the crew," said their older seaman, stiffly rising from his seat.

Not long later, the six men were sitting in the small boat on their way back to *Dream Chaser* in good spirits. On hearing the news, the rowers had doubled their efforts to return quickly to the ship to inform the others.

"Seems like a nice enough bloke," commented the quartermaster as they were approaching their vessel.

"Yes, but it concerns me how they treat their slaves. They

are clearly an abused and down-trodden bunch,” stated the surgeon wistfully.

“It be the way of the world, Doc, but look on the bright side: most of those old codgers’ll be as dead as doornails before too long, so them slaves’ll be then free ta do as they please,” said Pete shrewdly.

“I suppose your right, Pete,” replied Faustus with hope in his heart.

Back on the ship, the quartermaster excitedly relayed the invitation to the feast to the expectant crew. At first, Captain Ironside was sceptical, but was soon convinced by a combination of Faustus’s reassurances and the pleas of a horde of enthusiastic crewmembers who would not so easily let themselves be deprived of the promise of festivities.

It took over three hours to transfer the crew of the pirate vessel to the shore in the ship’s three boats with only six reluctant sailors being left on board to keep watch over the ship. Ironside managed to convince them to stay only with the promise of a double share when they took their next prize, as well as leaving them with the last bottle from his private stash of brandy. He also promised to save them an ample amount of food and drink for when they were relieved the following morning. The captain and his wife together with William Benton were among the last to leave the ship in one of the jolly boats.

“Do you think we can trust those men on the island, Björn?” asked Cassandra tensely.

“Can we ever really trust anyone we do not know well?” answered Ironside. “I think we have no choice. We’ll be under sail again in a couple of days – well provisioned and rested. Anyway, Faustus reported that there were no more than twenty old men and a bunch of slaves in the village. Nothing a band of seasoned pirates can’t deal with.”

“We could just seize the village by force and take what we wants,” suggested the boatswain with an impish twinkle in his eye.

"After they have welcomed us with open arms?" exclaimed the shocked Bermudian woman.

"If it were good enough a method fer Henry Morgan, why not fer us?" persisted Benton. "We don't 'ave to kill 'em or anything. A bit of gentle persuasion to find out where their valuables are hidden should suffice."

"No, Will, not after they've so kindly offered us their hospitality. We aren't buccaneers and we don't attack civilian settlements when they aren't at war with us," replied the captain sternly.

"Buccaneers! Pirates! It's all the same thing, ain't it?" muttered Benton, dangling his hand into the cool water.

"No it's not, Will. If you bothered to read a history book, you'd know that the buccaneers were of a different age. One in which England was at war with Spain. Morgan and his ilk had clearly defined enemies, even though they sometimes may have attacked the colonies of New Spain without the express permission of the Crown. Besides, they could at times muster thousands of men and had plenty of safe havens such as Port Royal and Tortuga to fall back to."

"I still says we could take 'em," pushed William.

"I dare say we could, but to what ends? I doubt they have much of value and they freely offer to provide us what we need for our journey."

"It was just an idea, Cap'n. No need to get yer breeches in a twist," said Benton before turning his attention to a strand of seaweed he'd plucked from the surface of the water.

The captain's boat eventually reached the beach without any further unwelcome comments from the rapacious boatswain. John Brownrigg was waiting for them so he could show them to the place they would be staying, which was located further down the beach beyond some rocks and trees.

"A nice little place they've prepared for us," explained the coxswain as they strolled along the soft sand. "Laid out some straw mats for us, although I doubt there'll be enough for everyone."

"A real man don't need no mats," said Benton, kicking up the sand as he went.

"So you'll be needing a dozen then, Billy Boy," quipped Brownrigg.

"You think you're a funny man, Johnny, don't you?" chuckled Benton malevolently. "But to me you ain't nothin' but a clown, like them court jesters they 'ad back in the time of King Arthur."

"Enough, William!" snapped the captain, noticing the patches of crimson rising in the easily provoked coxswain's cheeks. "Why don't you go on ahead and find yourself a comfortable place to sleep for tonight."

"Preferably on the other side of the island," muttered Brownrigg irately.

"There once was a man called Johnny, who believed himself to be funny," sang Benton loudly and happily to himself as he jogged ahead. "But he was really a git, who didn't know shit, and his jokes were abysmally crummy."

Both Ironside and Cassandra simultaneously placed restraining hands on the furious seaman to prevent him from sprinting after his mischievous shipmate and pounding him into the ground.

"He's not worth it, John," whispered Cassandra soothingly in his ear.

"I guess not," responded Brownrigg, taking a deep breath while staring venomously at the back of the vexatious boatswain as he disappeared between the trees, loudly repeating his self-composed limerick between bouts of malicious laughter. "He'll get his comeuppance one of these days, though. You mark my words."

Making their way between a group of rocks jutting out into the sea and a clump of coconut trees they emerged onto a sheltered beach where they found many of the crew had already stripped naked and were splashing gleefully in the surf. Where the treeline started, a large area had long been cleared away to make space for several permanent open-

sided structures with roofs of palm leaves, where those who weren't bathing were enjoying the shade from the warm late afternoon's sun while sipping fruit juice brought to them by nervous slaves. The captain smiled to himself as he observed the luxurious scene before him, glad his men had found a moment of respite from the harsh life at sea.

The feast

As the captain and his wife reached the shelter they were approached by Charlotte Scowcroft, smiling as she handed Cassandra a crude cotton towel.

"We've found a secluded place for us women to bathe unmolested, Cassandra," said Charlie gleefully, pointing to a small nearby river which flowed out from the trees into the bay. "Neeve wanted to bath with the men. Said she had nothing to be ashamed of, but I talked her out of it. Told her that it wasn't wise or safe for her to display her naked form before a horde of sex-starved pirates. Although she said she would gut any man like a rotten fish who tried to touch her against her will, she finally saw sense. Come, Cassandra. I'll show you where it is."

"Yes, thank you, Charlie. It would be nice to finally remove this salt and grime from my skin, and also to scrub my clothes a little," replied the other woman gratefully. "I'll see you later, Björn," she added, giving her husband a quick peck on the cheek.

After watching his spouse disappear between the trees, Captain Ironside strode over to where Faustus was lying in the shade trying to extract the milk from a coconut with a small knife.

"Ah, there you are, Björn," the surgeon greeted him, giving up his frustrated attempt to penetrate the shell for the moment. "Did you know these shelters are normally where the slaves sleep? They've been driven out to make room for us, you know."

“Really? Didn’t you tell Mr. Bridgeman that wasn’t necessary. The men are more than used to the discomfort of sleeping on a hard wooden deck.”

“I’ve only just found out about it myself. At least it’s only temporary. Those poor buggers will soon have their home back once we’re underway again.”

“Where are they sleeping now?” frowned Ironside.

“Under the open stars as far as I know. Let’s just hope it doesn’t rain.”

“We’ll let the men sleep here tonight, but on the morrow I’ll insist the slaves are given their accommodation back. The men are accustomed to roughing it,” stated the captain, sitting himself next to Faustus and picking up the coconut and knife. With one swift flick of the wrist he gained access to the milky substance inside. Smiling, he handed both items back to the impressed physician.

“By the way, Björn, the feast will be held in a large barn just beyond the village. They’ve already started preparing it. Well, to be more exact, the slaves are preparing it,” Faustus informed the captain. “Why do you think they allow themselves to be oppressed here? There must be over a hundred of them and no more than twenty old white men to watch over them. Why don’t they rise up, Björn?”

“The fear of whips, muskets, and the noose, no doubt,” replied Ironside pensively.

“It could be a fear of the alternative, or a fatalistic acceptance of their circumstances,” added Faustus.

“No, I think it’s the whips and muskets, but even if they succeeded in rising up, it would surely come at the cost of losing many of their own kin in the struggle. Maybe with the right leader to inspire them, they’d be willing to take the risk, but it’d be no guarantee of success. Look at what happened to that Greek bloke. Spartacus I think his name was. He got himself and many others crucified, didn’t he?”

“He was Thracian, actually,” explained the well-read surgeon. “And although some six thousand slaves were

indeed crucified along the Appian Way, nobody really knows what happened to him, as his body was never found.”

“That maybe so, but that’s not what I’m trying to say, Faustus. The point being that it’s a huge risk to try to break the chains that the masters place upon us,” replied the Swede earnestly. “Look at what awaits us, should we ever be caught by the authorities.”

“The gallows and gibbet,” said Faustus grimly. “I do now see your point, Björn.”

“But I do believe that one day slaves, exploited workers, and downtrodden peasants alike will rise and smash the oppressive yoke weighing down on them, although I fear we might not live long enough to see it happen.”

The two men continued contemplating the state of the world until Cassandra finally returned, clean and refreshed. Most of the men were now sunning themselves on the warm sand or relaxing in the shelter. Ironside strolled with his wife down to the water’s edge where he removed his boots and rolled up his grubby trousers, then he waded, almost knee deep, arm-in-arm with Cassandra, who, already bare-footed, was holding up her skirts so they wouldn’t be made wet by the gentle waves lapping around her legs.

“Ooh, the water’s not as warm as I thought,” complained the captain.

“Is the brave Captain Gunnarsson concerned by a drop of cold water?” teased Cassandra. Her husband shivered and smiled sheepishly. “It is indeed a lovely place, Björn, but I have an uneasy feeling about it. I saw that Bridgeman and a few of his men observing us at a distance when we arrived, and I must say I don’t trust him. Maybe it would be better to obtain what we need and leave this place before nightfall.”

“And offend our hosts?” laughed Ironside. “And what would the men say? You worry too much, my dear. There is nothing but a bunch of old men and their slaves here. Nothing that a shipload of hardened pirates couldn’t deal with should need arise. Unlike in Steinburg, we have our weapons with us

and I'll be posting a couple of the men to keep watch. Relax and enjoy our stay here, as it won't be long before you'll be stuck in the dingy cabin again."

"I'll try, Björn," replied the woman, still looking a little unsettled.

The couple walked for almost an hour before they realised they had strayed far from their encampment, and by the time they returned almost everyone had already left for the feast. Two of the men, neither of who consumed alcohol, had voluntarily remained to guard the camp, where the other men had left most of their weapons. The first was the reliable samurai, Yuki, the other was Asbat, a Muslim from Algiers, who had previously been a corsair operating in the Mediterranean. Nobody really knew much about the dark-haired man with a trim beard and how he had ended up so far from his homeland, as he spoke no English, although the Algerian did have a basic grasp of Spanish. This enabled Faustus to find out that the man had been captured by the Spanish and pressed into service on an undermanned warship, on which he had obediently served until he managed to escape while the vessel was anchored off the coast of Havana. Due to the language barrier, Faustus was unable to determine how the corsair made it to Nassau, where he had been recruited by Captain Ironside, but since he had come aboard he had proved himself to be one of the most hard-working and dependable members of the crew.

One other man was still in the camp, lying on his back under the shelter. It was Josiah Badger.

"What's wrong, Joe?" inquired Cassandra. "Why aren't you at the feast with the others?"

"Me back's playing me up again," groaned the old pirate, "But thanks for asking, Mrs. Gunnarsson. Old Joe'll be all right in a bit, he will. Then he'll enjoy the frivolities with the rest."

"All right then, Joe, we'll see you later," said the captain. He then turned to Yuki. "I'll see to it that some food is brought

to you two.”

“Very kind you are, Gunnarsson san,” replied the Japanese man, bowing habitually.

Finding the feast wasn’t difficult, the loud music and raucous shouts helped guide them to its location. When they arrived the party was already in full swing in the old barn. A large platter of quickly disappearing roast meat, which was being continuously replenished by harried slaves, had been laid out on a makeshift table of logs and boards at the far end of the barn, where the men could load up their wooden platters as they desired. There was also an abundance of fresh fruit and cooked vegetables, although most of the men seemed less interested in them. Next to the food were several barrels of ale, crates of wine, and kegs of rum, around which were congregated a group of excited, tipsy seamen. Most of the crew were sitting on straw bales and smooth logs, stuffing their faces and gulping down ale as if there were no tomorrow. Others were dancing merrily to the sound of a fiddle, wooden flute, and tabor, played by three of the crew who themselves already seemed unsteady on their feet. Near the door Mr. Bridgeman and a handful of his men were seated at the only real table in the place, sipping wine and nibbling at the roast meat as they watched the debauchery unfurling around them. The magistrate rose as Ironside and Cassandra entered.

“So you must be Captain Gunnarsson. I am pleased to make your acquaintance,” said Benjamin, extending a welcoming hand.

“Yes, and you are Captain Bridgeman, I take it,” replied Ironside, vigorously shaking the other man’s hand. “I would like to thank you on behalf of my crew for such a warm welcome and your offer of aid.”

“Call me Mr. Bridgeman. I haven’t had the pleasure of commanding a ship for many a year, and it is my pleasure to offer you our hospitality.”

“And this is my wife Cassandra,” added the captain,

placing an arm around his spouse's waist.

"Your wife? But she's bl..." Bridgeman restrained himself from completing his sentence and continued in a tone of forced cordiality. "A pleasure to meet you, madame. We must all get better acquainted tomorrow, but for now why don't you join the feast?"

"Yes, I think we will, but, by the way, where are the rest of your men?" inquired Ironside, noticing that only four other men were seated at the table with Benjamin.

"We aren't as young as we once were, Captain. We are no longer up to all night drinking sprees like you younger men. The rest have already eaten and have retired for the evening. Anyway, this shindig is for your benefit not ours."

"Very well, Mr. Bridgeman, we'll speak tomorrow," said Ironside before leading his wife through the joyous bustle towards where Pete and Faustus were seated.

"I don't like him, Björn," whispered Cassandra. "He's not to be trusted."

"He seems nice enough to me, but don't worry, I'll find out more about his intentions tomorrow. Let's enjoy the evening for now," answered the Swedish captain, kissing his wife lightly on the cheek.

Cassandra sighed resignedly as they made their way towards the others. They sat down next to Powder Keg Pete, which the captain quickly regretted when the bleary-eyed quartermaster leaned towards him to say something and spilled half the contents of his cup on his coat.

"Ya gotta try the rum," slurred Pete, not even aware of the mishap. "The cooper, Mr. Jameson, made it himself. I've never had a spirit like the cooper's rum, I ain't."

"Maybe later, Pete," replied Ironside, wringing out the soggy tail of his coat.

The quartermaster emptied what remained in his cup down his throat before falling backwards off the bale of straw, waving his legs in the air like an overturned beetle. One of the men tried to help him sit up again, and the captain took

the opportunity to move away from him towards Faustus, who was serenely sipping a cup of red wine.

“The men seem to be having a good time,” said Faustus, putting down the cup and biting into to a cob of corn dripping with butter.

“Too good a time, if you ask me,” frowned the captain. “I’ll fetch us something to eat and drink, Cassandra. What would you like?”

“Just a little wine and a small platter of food for me,” she replied, observing with amusement as two of the crew tried with difficulty to prop the drunken quartermaster up against the wall.

After returning with the food Ironside sat down again next to the surgeon who was now hungrily devouring a plate of carrots and yams.

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you, Faustus,” said the captain as he cut a slice of pork into smaller pieces.

“Wha yat, Björg?” asked the physician with his mouth over-brimming with food.

“You told me you chose a life as a gentleman of fortune due to money problems back in England. I’d be interested to know a little more about what happened to you, if you’re willing to tell me.”

“Of course I’ll tell you,” replied Faustus after he had chewed and swallowed the contents of his mouth. “Foolishness and inexperience on my part, I’m afraid. I took the advice of someone who I thought to be a friend and invested all my money in a cargo of indigo being brought to England from India.”

“What happened to it?” inquired the captain, suspecting the ship had been lost in a storm like so many others.

“It was seized by pirates operating out of Madagascar, Björn. Can you believe it?” uttered the surgeon. “I lost everything.”

“So you became one yourself?”

“Didn’t see any other option. It was either that or the

debtors prison,” answered the unfortunate investor, wiping his mouth on the sleeve of his jacket. “If you can’t beat them, join them. Isn’t that what they say?”

“So, if you hadn’t lost your investment you might have become a successful trader, one of those parasites we despise so much?” asked the captain disapprovingly.

“Quite possibly, Björn, but after my experience with the British justice system, my eyes were opened wide. Funny how things turn out, isn’t it?”

“Indeed it is,” replied Ironside before taking a large gulp of wine.

When the surgeon continued to rigorously tuck into his meal, Ironside turned his attention to two men sitting opposite: William Benton and John Brownrigg. Both men seemed to have already consumed more than their fair share of alcohol.

“I loves ya, Johnny,” drawled Benton, placing an arm around the swaying coxswain’s shoulder.

“Then why do you always taunt me so?” asked Brownrigg, stiffening at the unwelcome, close physical contact.

“It’s ‘cos I love ya, Johnny. You be like a brother to me,” slurred Benton.

“Really?” responded Brownrigg, trying hard to focus on the man sitting next to him.

“Yeh, like a brother,” grinned the inebriated pirate devilishly. “Like one of those annoyin’ little, podgy brats, who whines and wets his pants,” added Benton, taking both of Brownrigg’s cheeks in his hands and wobbling them up and down. “I love ya, me little chubby chops.”

There was a moment of tense silence as all those within earshot awaited the outburst of rage from the hot-tempered coxswain, but to everyone’s amazement, the expected tempest did not materialise. Instead, Brownrigg just grinned inanely at the other man, seemingly made oblivious by drink to the clear provocation. On seeing that his victim wasn’t going to take the bait, William Benton turned to face the person seated

on his other side, which happened to be Niamh O'Malley.

"Oh no ye don't, Billy Boy," snapped the Irish woman, hoping to nip any intended mischief in the bud.

"I loves you too, Neeve," declared the unperturbed boatswain, throwing his other arm around her shoulder and drawing her close to him. "I loves yer like a sister."

"Like a sister, eh?" replied the woman coolly. "So, ye likes to fondle yer poor sister's breast too, do yer, William Benton?"

Benton's right hand had indeed wandered slyly down to Niamh's right breast.

"How's about a little kiss," slobbered the drunken seaman, his face nearing hers.

The short Irish woman smiled sweetly at the molesting man before springing into action. With surprising speed her forehead connected with Benton's chin and her left elbow thudded into his ribs, sending the surprised man flying backwards and landing heavily on the hard, straw-covered flaw. The Irish woman nonchalantly resumed drinking from her tankard and those who had witnessed the incident burst into laughter. It took a few moments for everyone to realise that the supine boatswain hadn't stirred. Faustus put down his half-empty plate and crouched down next to the recumbent pirate, checking his pulse and breathing.

"Out cold, but he'll live," smiled the surgeon, placing Benton on his side, so he wouldn't choke should he regurgitate the contents of his belly.

"That feekin' idjit won't be so lucky next time, nor any other who would see fit to mistreat me," proclaimed O'Malley challengingly as she toyed menacingly with her knife.

Cassandra gave the plucky Irish woman an admiring smile, whereas most of the men did their best to avoid her glare by busying themselves with their food and drink. It didn't take long for things to settle down once again, and soon most were dancing to an upbeat, out-of-tune rendition of *The Twa Corbies*. After a brief, but effortful dance with his wife, the out-of-breath captain sat himself down next

to Josiah Badger, who had just arrived and was happily chomping on a piece of greasy meat.

"How's your back, Joe?" inquired the captain.

"It's settled down a bit," replied Josiah with drops of fat trickling down his unshaven chin. "Mind you, I won't be up to no dancing this evening, Cap'n."

"I think I've had enough for one evening, too, although it seems my wife hasn't yet had her fill."

"You'll never guess who I saw on my way here, Cap'n," said Joe, washing down the mouthful with a gulp of ale.

"Who, Joe?"

"I saw Mr. Bridgeman, I did."

"Well, that's nothing new. We've all seen him this evening," answered the captain.

"Yeh, but I knows Mr. Bridgeman from me past. I served under him, I did, although in those days he went under the name of Henry Avery," explained the old seaman.

"Henry Avery? That can't be! That man must have been dead for over twenty years," responded Ironside in disbelief. "You must be mistaken, Joe."

"Old Joe knows what he saw, Cap'n. In those days we called him Long Ben. As I was a younger man, I served with him on the *Fancy* in ninety-five, when we took that ship of the Grand Mughal on the Indian Ocean, the *Ganj-i-Sawai* I think it was called. We took a fortune on that day, we did. So much that the Crown and East India Company were after us for years."

"Come on, Joe. I think you've been at that cooper's rum," laughed Ironside uneasily. At that moment Faustus sat down next to them with another plate piled with various vegetables. "You'll never guess what, Faustus. Old Joe here claims that our Mr. Bridgeman is none other than Henry Avery."

"That's it!" cried out the surgeon, almost dropping his overfilled plate. "I knew I'd heard the name Bridgeman before. It's one of the aliases that was used by Avery. A meaner pirate never did sail the seas!"

"Aye, you're right there, Mr. Quiddington, he could be a right callous one at times, he could," agreed Josiah.

"They used to call him the Arch-Pirate back in the days," continued Faustus, unaware in his excitement that half the contents of his plate had fallen onto the floor. "He disappeared in 1696 at around forty years of age. Nobody knows what really happened to him, although there have been many false claims. He was last seen alive in Nassau."

"Yeh, that's where we parted ways," said Joe. "He left New Providence on an old sloop with a few men and a bunch of slaves he'd purchased on the way to the Caribbean. Never saw him again, I didn't, but I had enough money from me share of the loot to settle down, so I didn't care."

The anxious group of men were joined by Cassandra, who was perspiring from the exertion of dancing.

"Why do you all look so serious?" asked the exhausted woman.

"We were just talking about our host," replied Captain Ironside earnestly.

"Where is he, anyway?" inquired Cassandra, turning to look at the empty table near the door. "I haven't seen him for a while, although I've been too busy dancing to really take notice of him. Do you think he's up to something?"

Scanning the spacious room, Ironside's heart skipped a beat when he saw that neither Bridgeman nor any of his men were longer present. He could only see a few tired slaves hanging around in the background.

"Mr. Bridgeman was down on the beach about half an hour ago," chirped Josiah. "I saw him and his men dragging barrels and boxes down there. Right busy they looked."

"What!" cried the agitated captain. "Why didn't you say that earlier, Joe?"

It all made sense now. Avery vanished on a sloop loaded with slaves. There were slaves here, some of whom were as old as Bridgeman and his men, and wasn't that the wreck of a sloop they had seen in the bay? What's more, didn't Old Joe

say that Avery disappeared some twenty years ago, and didn't Bridgman claim they'd been here for a similar length of time? What about the name of this settlement – Gunsway? He now recalled this being the anglicised name of the captured Mughal ship – Ganj-i-Sawai. Why didn't he realise it before? It seemed so obvious now. It now dawned on him that this feast had all been part of an elaborate ploy to distract them, but to what end?"

"The *Dream Chaser*!" shouted Ironside, springing to his feet. "They're after our bloody ship!"

Barging his way through the crowd he bellowed for everyone to follow him outside, but his attempts to rouse the crew were in vain, as the rejoicing, drunken pirates were too far gone to heed his words. On his way out, he grabbed the quartermaster, who was perched on a log staring at the patch of ground between his feet.

"Pete! They're taking our ship," the panicking captain shouted.

The drunken man seemed to register the urgency of the situation and rose unsteadily. He lurched forward, first spinning around on the spot, but somehow managing to stay on his feet and then staggered in a zigzag after the departing captain. Faustus, Cassandra, and Old Joe were not far behind, unsuccessfully urging other crewmembers to come with them. By the time they emerged from the old barn, Ironside was already half-way down to the beach.

Thieves in the night

It took a while for their eyes to grow accustomed to the darkness after the bright light of the lanterns in the barn. A few scattered torches enabled them to finally reach the beach, and Faustus wondered aloud how Ironside had managed it without falling flat on his face. When the others caught up with him, the despairing captain was standing knee-deep in the surf.

"They've bloody well taken all the boats," murmured Ironside, close to tears.

The three ship's boats, Bridgeman's jolly boat, and all but one of the canoes were no longer where they had been hours before.

"But will they be able to sail the ship being so few in number?" inquired Faustus anxiously.

"I saw a dozen or so slaves with them," panted Old Joe. "It'll be them doin' most of the heavy work, no doubt."

"It'll be a toilsome task, but not impossible," stated the dispirited pirate captain. "It looks like we've lost her and it's all my fault."

"You couldn't have known, Björn," said Cassandra consolingly, wading into the water to stand by her downhearted husband's side.

"But you warned me that something was amiss, and I failed to heed your words."

"The choice wasn't yours alone, dear," replied his spouse, taking his hand in hers and giving it a gentle squeeze.

They all strained their eyes to see their ship which was nothing more than a shadow in the darkness. Then the moon emerged from behind a cloud revealing the familiar silhouette of *Dream Chaser* in the distance. They could just make out the dark shapes of small boats reaching the side of the larger vessel, and moments later several pistol shots rang out across the bay.

"No!" Ironside screamed, unsheathing his sword and wading waist deep into the cold waves.

It took both Cassandra and Faustus great effort to prevent the captain from futilely swimming towards his beloved ship. They struggled to drag him back to the beach, where the drenched trio collapsed breathless on the sand.

"There's nothing we can do for the men on board," croaked the surgeon. "Let's hope Avery is merciful."

"He'll press them into his crew. He needs all the hands he can get," replied Ironside, wiping a tear from his eye. "It's the

last we'll see of them." There was a moment of uncomfortable silence. "The funny thing is," continued the Swede. "I can't help thinking about the telescope you gave me, dear. It's still in our cabin."

"I'll get you another one, my love," reassured Cassandra. "The main thing is that we're safe."

"You're right, of course, Cassandra." The captain was about to continue speaking when shouts of distress filled the night air.

They quickly discovered the source of the commotion – Pete had taken the only remaining canoe and was desperately paddling it towards their ship. Fortunately, he hadn't got very far when the small dugout started foundering – there had clearly been a reason why it had been left behind.

"Help me! I'm sinkin'" shrieked the panic-stricken quartermaster.

Forgetting his woes, Ironside sprang to his feet, and discarding his coat, boots, and sword on the sand, he ran and dived into the waves. Before he could reach the sinking canoe, it capsized, throwing the hapless quartermaster head first into the sea.

"Help! I be drowning," spluttered the flailing pirate, spitting out a mouthful of salty water.

On reaching Pete, who was thrashing wildly about, sending large splashes in all directions, the captain was surprised to find he could stand with the surface of the water only reaching just below his shoulders.

"Davy Jones has got me," howled the terrified pirate before disappearing beneath the surface.

Captain Ironside reached into the water and grabbed the quartermaster by the scruff of his neck and pulled the spluttering man up.

"But the water's only five feet deep, Pete," exclaimed the nonplussed commander.

Powder Keg Pete waved his hands frantically around him for a few moments more before registering what the captain

had said. Throwing both arms around the captain's neck he pulled himself upright and gingerly tested the submerged ground beneath him. Satisfied that his footing was sure, the now half-sober quartermaster hugged his captain gratefully.

"You saved me life, Cap'n. I'm fer ever in yer debt," puffed Pete.

"What were you thinking, Pete?" said Ironside sternly. "Did you think you could take back the ship alone, unarmed and inebriated?"

"I 'ad to do somethin', Cap'n," huffed the rescued man dejectedly.

"A crazy notion, Pete. If you'd somehow reached the ship, Avery would surely have killed you," chided Ironside as he helped his comrade onto dry land.

Looking around, the two men saw more of the crew jogging down to the beach, drawn by either the pistol shots or Pete's desperate cries for help. At their head was William Benton, wielding a cumbersome pistol.

"What's goin' on, Cap'n?" inquired the boatswain, seemingly a little more sober than he was a short time ago.

"They've taken our ship," replied Ironside sadly.

"But I can still see *Dream Chaser*. Look," replied Benton, pointing out to the bay. Squinting at the dark shape, he added hurriedly. "Who's unfurling the bloody sails?"

"Mr. Bridgeman, or rather Henry Avery. They've been distracting us while they seized our vessel. They clearly saw an opportunity to escape this island and they took it."

"I'll be damned if I'll let anyone take me dear old ship," howled Benton. "Least of all Henry bloody Avery!"

Before anyone could say anything, the furious man had waded knee deep into the surf, taken aim at the ship, and fired his pistol at it. The sudden crack of the firearm caused many of the men on the beach, who were still unaware of the direness of the situation and still heavily under the influence of rum and beer, to flinch and scatter in various directions.

"They're weighing anchor, Cap'n," shouted Pete. "What're

we gonna do?”

The captain of *Dream Chaser* looked around at the expectant faces all focused on him. What could they do? They had no way of reaching the ship before it sailed. All was lost. Now they'd be forced to take Avery's place on this secluded island. At least they wouldn't want for food and water. Before he could answer, he noticed Benton and some of the others making their way back up the beach towards the barn.

“Where are you going, Will?” demanded Ironside.

“Goin' to get even drunker. There's plenty of the cooper's rum left.”

“What about our ship?”

“There ain't nothin' we can do 'bout it now. We can worry about our predicament in the morning. Come on lads!” declared the boatswain indifferently.

All but a few followed William purposefully back to the barn. Pete remained, but soon collapsed into a sobbing heap on the sand. Faustus was sat nearby wracking his brains for a solution to their dilemma. Josiah Badger stood for a while shaking his head.

“A nasty business, but if there's nowt we can do, I'm off to bed. Maybe things'll look better in the morning,” said Joe apologetically as he turned and hobbled in the direction of the shelters.

Captain Gunnarsson just stood and watched as his pride and joy sailed out of the bay. His mind raced with reproaches and regrets. He'd been a fool. He should have posted men to watch the beach rather than the shelters. He should have been wary of the overly willing readiness of Bridgeman, no, Avery, to offer his aid to a group of strangers. He should have refused the offer of the feast.

“Stop torturing yourself, Björn. You couldn't have known what would happen,” said Cassandra softly, as if reading his thoughts. “Maybe we should also retire for the night.”

“No, what I need is a stiff drink. I think I'll take our quartermaster up on his offer of a glass of the cooper's rum,

or maybe three,” answered Ironside resolutely. “Come on, Pete.”

Moments later the last few who had remained on the beach were on their way to join the others in the barn to drown their sorrows.

Stranded

Just after sunrise the following day, over a hundred sleepy pirates were roused from their slumber by their captain hammering loudly on an iron skillet despite his own throbbing head. Most of the men gradually ambled down to the beach, although William Benton was noticeable by his absence. The ill-humoured captain waited until enough of the crew had assembled, most sitting or lying in the sand nursing momentous hangovers. The only ones who appeared refreshed were the hundred or so slaves who had gathered a short distance from the pirates. Once everyone had settled down, the captain addressed them all in a hoarse voice.

“As you all know by now, our ship was brazenly taken from us in the night by our hosts,” said Ironside loudly and clearly. “It turns out that Mr. Bridgeman was none other than Henry Avery, – The King of Pirates. They succeeded in pulling the wool over my eyes, and for that I am truly sorry.”

“It be a responsibility we all must bear,” called out the quartermaster, who seemed surprisingly chipper considering his overindulgence the night before. “The cap’n had ‘is doubts, but we were all intent on drinkin’ and feastin’. He cudn’t ‘ave stopped us if he’d wanted to. We all be just as fooled as our cap’n.” Pete’s words were accompanied by dozens of reluctant nods of agreement. “And oi says at least we was outwitted by a man of cunning and distinction and not some obscure halfwit.”

“Thank you for your words of support, Pete, but it doesn’t alter the fact that we’re all now trapped on this remote island as Avery and his men were before. Furthermore, we lost

six good men along with the ship, including our Danish helmsman Christof Andersen. We can only hope that Avery hasn't done them any harm."

Expressions of grief, anger, and bitterness could be seen on the assembled pirates' faces, but fortunately despair had not yet set in.

"We could build a new ship," called out Brownrigg. "It might not be as fine as *Dream Chaser*, but at least it'd get us off this damn island."

"That we must try," replied the captain, scanning the crowd for a particular face. "What do you think, Mr. Calderon? Is it feasible?"

A short, olive-skinned, middle-aged man with curly, greasy hair rose to his feet. His name was Emilio Calderon and he was a rigger by trade. He was the only Spaniard on the ship and had been working on a Spanish merchant vessel when it was captured by Ironside and his men. He had willingly joined *Dream Chaser's* crew to escape hefty gambling debts back in Havana. He claimed his life would be in danger if he ever returned there, so taking pity and in need of a skilled rigger the crew had reluctantly accepted into their number a man who moments before they had regarded as their enemy. He was indeed skilled in his trade, and his English was passable, but he was a shifty character and Ironside had been keeping a close eye on him since he joined the ship.

"Is feasible, Capitán," said the rigger, looking around nervously, "but would take months, even a year."

"Well, we have to try, maybe ..." Ironside stopped mid-sentence when a sudden pistol shot echoed from the village. "What the hell was that?"

The captain drew his sword and hurried towards the settlement followed by those possessing enough vitality to do so, where they found William Benton standing before the door of a low stone structure, which was located a short distance from the other buildings, gleefully reloading his

pistol.

“What’s going on, Will?” inquired Ironside, scanning the area for potential threats.

“You’ll never guess what I found, Cap’n.” stammered the excited boatswain. “I found their powder store. Thought I’d try some out, I did. It’s quality stuff. They even ‘ave a workshop to produce it themselves. Don’t know why the fools left it all here, though.”

“Probably presumed we had enough powder on our ship,” stated Brownrigg, sheathing his knife after seeing there was no imminent danger of attack. “It would have slowed them down, if they’d tried to take it with them.”

“I think you’re right, Johnny boy. You ain’t as dim as you look,” grinned Benton, aiming the reloaded pistol in the air and discharging its load.

“All right, Will, you’ve made your point,” warned the captain.

Benton laughed as he tucked the pistol in his belt and beckoned the captain to follow him into the gloomy building. There was just enough light from the doorway to reveal a considerable number of kegs stacked neatly against the wall on a platform of stone slabs.

“First we had cannons with no powder, now we have powder with no cannons,” commented Faustus from the doorway. “How vexatious.”

“How vex-ate-shuss,” parroted Benton. “Can’t you speak proper English for once. Not like some top-lofty scholar with a book stuck up his ass.”

“I’m sorry, Will. How could I expect such a puerile ninnyhammer as yourself to possess any more than a rudimentary gutter vocabulary,” countered Faustus calmly.

“Well, at least I ain’t ...” Benton began.

“Enough, William!” commanded Ironside, although he secretly agreed that the surgeon’s choice of words often lay beyond the grasp of the average seaman, including himself.

“You ain’t got no right to order me round no more, Mr.

Gunnarsson,” snapped Benton. “We don’t have no ship, so, in my eyes, you ain’t my captain no longer.”

“You are absolutely right, Mr. Benton, and as we no longer have a ship, I see no need for a boatswain. Especially one who does nothing but stir up trouble,” retorted the captain icily. “Maybe we’d all be better off if you left us and fended for yourself like the one of those hermits. In fact, I think I’ll put it to the vote. What do you say to that, William?”

“There’s no need to be so hasty, Cap’n Ironside,” rejoined the boatswain apprehensively. “You might need me when we’ve built that boat.”

“But not in the meantime. It could take up to a year before we are ready and then you could reapply for the position,” said Ironside surreptitiously winking at Faustus, who was smiling behind Benton’s back. “Now if you were to apologize to our surgeon and promise to keep your biting wit under control, we could forget the whole matter – at least for now.”

“I’ll say sorry to Mr. Quiddington, but I can’t promise that me humour might not unintentionally offend on occasions, Cap’n, but I’ll do me best,” propounded Benton.

“I can live with that, if your apology is sincere.”

“Sorry, Mr. Quiddington,” mumbled Benton, his eyes fixed on the floor in front of him. “I won’t call yer a top-lofty scholar with a book stuck up his ass again. I promise.”

“I’m sorry, William, I couldn’t hear you,” replied the surgeon, trying not to smile.

“I said sorry, Mr. Quiddington, I won’t insult yer again,” repeated Benton slightly more loudly, his gaze still focused on the floor.

“How do you expect me to believe you’re sincere if you don’t look me directly in the eyes while apologizing?”

“I said sorry, Mr. Quiddington, I won’t insult yer, or call yer a top-lofty scholar with a book stuck up his ass again,” the humiliated boatswain almost shouted, raising his gaze to look the other man calculatingly in the eyes.

“Apology accepted, Mr. Benton,” responded Faustus

amicably.

Benton turned and stormed out of the low-roofed building, muttering to himself. When he was out of earshot, the captain and the surgeon burst into uncontrollable laughter.

“Do you think I was too harsh with him?” asked Ironside when the fits of laughing had finally subsided.

“By no means, Björn. That man certainly needed taking down a peg or two,” chuckled Faustus, wiping his eyes with a silk handkerchief.

“I doubt it’ll be long before he’s up to his old tricks again.”

“I fear you’re right, but hopefully we’ll have a day or two of respite from his mischief.”

The two men stepped out into the sunlight and spent a few moments taking in the beauty of the island they now found themselves stranded on. Ironside was relieved that his head was not throbbing as much as before.

“That snollygoster Avery should consider himself fortuitous to have been stranded on such a pulchritudinous sanctuary for years on end, although I don’t blame him for excogitating a contrivance to return to civilisation,” said Faustus after a few minutes silence.

“I’m afraid I must agree with William in one respect, Faustus,” frowned the captain.

“And what’s that, Björn?”

“You do sometimes talk as if you had a book stuck up your ass. Quite a big one, in fact.”

The surgeon stared at his friend in astounded silence for a moment before eventually smiling weakly.

“You really believe so, Björn?” asked Faustus in a hurt voice.

“Well, put it this way, if a reasonably well-educated man like myself sometimes has trouble understanding what you say, how do you think a common, illiterate seaman feels when you speak that way?” replied Ironside placatingly. “How do you expect them to fully accept you as one of them?”

"I never thought of it like that. I shall try to restrict my vocabulary and express myself in a manner understood by the less educated in the future," answered the physician, brightening up. "Oi thinks it be time we be getting back to the others, Cap'n."

Both men laughed heartily as they made their way back to the beach where the others were milling around awaiting their return. The slaves were now sitting uncertainly in the shade of the trees wondering what their new masters had in store for them. After taking a large gulp of water from a ladle handed to him by one of the men, the captain again addressed the assembly.

"Sorry about the delay, but the good news is that we have an ample supply of black powder should we be in need of it," said Ironside, looking around at the weary faces. "As we might be here for some time, I propose we should regard this place as our home. Charlie, I'd like you to be responsible for allotting lodgings, and as there won't be enough dwellings for all, I think we should put Hans Zimmerman in charge of constructing more, and I believe he would appreciate it if everyone pulled their weight by helping him." The captain paused for effect. "Once we're settled in, he can work closely with Emilio in drawing up plans for a seafaring vessel to take us away from this island. There too, I would hope that everyone play their part. I'd suggest Mr. Quiddington organize the day to day running of the settlement. He could draw up rosters to ensure everyone participates in the more mundane tasks such as cooking and cleaning." Ignoring the groans of some of the men, he continued. "What say you all to my proposal?"

"The slaves should do that menial stuff, if you ask me," called out Sam Taylor, the pirate they'd seen struggling with his pipe and tobacco outside the tavern in Steinburg. There were a few nods of agreement. "Don't you agree, William?"

Benton, who had been lingering at the back of the assembly, shifted nervously. Overcome by inner turmoil he

was uncharacteristically slow to respond.

“Er, I thinks the Cap’n’s right. We all got to do our bit,” replied the boatswain without enthusiasm.

“Thank you, William,” said the captain, inwardly smiling. “Now, we pride ourselves on serving no masters, which I believe means we should ourselves be no masters served by others. So I propose we grant all the slaves here their freedom.”

There was the buzzing of surprised murmurs among both the crew and those slaves who understood English.

“Had we not better release them from their bonds after we have built the ship?” commented Brownrigg. “We’ll surely be needing their labour to cut down trees and prepare the timber.”

“We could force them to work for us, but then we’d be no better than those tyrants of the world who seek to enslave all honest men,” replied Ironside passionately. “I for one do not wish to leave here in a vessel soaked with the blood and tears of the abused.”

“Here, here!” cried out Faustus fervently. “We must break the bonds of servitude for all men, regardless of their creed or colour.”

Some of the crew frowned in disapproval at such a radical sermon; others nodded in agreement with the free-spirited proposition. A heated discussion suddenly erupted between the various factions, and the captain feared a physical altercation might break out at any moment. All the while the slaves looked on in bemusement. Captain Ironside had realised it wouldn’t be easy to convince the whole crew. He had always been aware there were those among his men who were simply there for the plunder, he also knew there were those who saw no injustice in enslaving people from far off lands. As for Björn Gunnarsson himself, he had always despised the yoke placed on all men and women, whether slaves from Africa, indentured servants sent from Europe, or the tormented workers and peasants of any land. He would

have no part in the oppression of others, even if it led to a split in the crew. He decided then that if he was overruled he would stand down as captain, but hoped there were enough who would share, or at least tolerate, his views to make this unnecessary. Before he could decide what to say next, he was rudely shaken from his thoughts by a scuffle which had broken out between two of the men.

One of the men was dressed in red and green, knee-length trousers and a loose-fitting, white cotton shirt. He was the helmsman's mate, Cyrus Shackley, a free-born black from Jamaica, who had grown tired of the tedious and underpaid work on the docks of Kingston. The other was a rough-looking man in long, brown hose and a shabby, black jacket. His name was Bart Hogg, a landsman, whose main role on the ship was to provide muscle when capturing a prize. He had previously worked as an overseer on a cotton plantation in South Carolina, but had been forced to flee when the proprietor had discovered he had been skimming from the profits. The two men were grappling on their knees until Hogg hammered his elbow into the side of his opponent's face. Before Cyrus could recover the physically stronger man was on top of him, cursing and raining down blows on his victim, who was shielding his head with his arms. When O'Malley tried to pull the assailant from the hapless man under him, Hogg turned on her, punching her square in the face, sending her flying back several feet to land heavily on her back with a grunt. As Ironside stepped forward to intervene, the deafening shot of a pistol rang out. Looking around, everyone was surprised to see William Benton with his weapon raised above his head, scowling at the bigger of the men.

"I says that be enough, Bart Hogg! Pirates don't fight pirates," growled the boatswain before sitting himself down on the sand again and tucking away his pistol.

This seemed to have done the trick, as Hogg hurriedly clambered off the prone man, even offering his hand to help

him stand up. Cyrus rejected the gesture, instead glaring at the larger man as he pushed himself to his feet. Both men returned to their places among the throng. Niamh O'Malley, sliding a knife back into its sheaf and nursing a bloody nose, took a few steps forwards until she was standing on the spot where the two men had been fighting moments before.

"Ye ought t'be ashamed of yerself, you does, Bart Hogg," she said sternly, sniffing and wiping away the clotted blood on her sleeve. "Beating on yer shipmates like t'at." The sturdy man grinned sheepishly under her baneful stare. "I t'ought we were about liberty, but it seems I was wrong. There are many here who seem no different in t'eir heads to t'ose who would exploit us. Always looking to kick down at those they deem in a lesser position, whether blacks from Africa, indios from the colonies, or women in any parts. I joined this crew to escape the fetters that men would place upon me, and I, like our brave captain, want no part in the maltreatment of any other than our own oppressors. If in that I'm not able, then this crew ain't right for me."

"If you ask me, the blacks are only fit for manual labour, and woman only for, well you know," sneered Sam Taylor mean-spiritedly.

A handful of men chuckled approvingly, while the majority sat in stunned silence, awaiting the Irish woman's reaction, but before she could do anything, Benton sprang to his feet.

"Firstly, no-one asked ye, Sam Taylor. And, secondly, you be only fit to swab the decks in my opinion," interceded Benton peevishly. "And, what's more, this young Irish lass be worth ten of your kind."

Taylor, who had always looked up to Benton, shrank dispiritedly into the ground, mumbling to himself, but not daring a retort. O'Malley first stared venomously at the man who had just insulted all black people and women, then she turned to the boatswain, shaking her head incredulously. "You never cease to amaze me, William Benton." She then

retook her place among the others, accepting a kerchief from the surgeon to wipe away the drying blood from her nose. Benton remained unusually silent.

“All right, if everyone has calmed down, I think the only fair option is to take a vote,” declared the captain solemnly.

As it turned out, three-quarters of the crew voted in favour of freeing the slaves, but whether it was because they truly believed that they should not be masters over others, or that they simply elected to please their captain, Ironside could not be sure. Whatever the reason, he was relieved he wouldn't have to resign his position, or be forced out of it. He looked towards the crowd of slaves, who were shifting nervously and avoiding eye-contact with him and his men. He was surprised they didn't appear more joyous on hearing their freedom was to be granted. The spokeswoman for the black inhabitants of the island, whose name was Azuba, stepped forward to speak. She was a sturdy woman in her late fifties originally abducted from her homelands in the south Senegambian region of western Africa some twenty years previously. She was a robust, self-assured, out-spoken woman whose boldness had saved her kin from a thrashing by Avery's men on more than one occasion. She had painstakingly perfected her English in the last twenty years, although she could not and wished not to lose her thick accent.

“My people thank you for your noble gesture, Captain, but you must excuse them if they appear mistrustful rather than jubilant,” said Azuba in a voice that all could hear. On seeing the captain's puzzlement she continued. “They, I mean we, fear that the white man who has the power to free us would also have the power to enslave us once more on a whim should we displease him. You will still hold power over us.”

“No, we hold no more power over you now you are free,” said Ironside hurriedly, a little startled that those he had just freed didn't seem as delighted and grateful as he had anticipated. Noticing the captain's discomfort, Faustus took over from him.

“You are prudent to be suspicious of us Europeans after the way you have been treated, but I assure you our intentions, even though exercised from a position of power, are benign,” stated the surgeon, now in his element. “Now you are free you are at liberty to stay as equals, or to leave and found your own settlement. If you choose not to go, your people will not be subject to our rules and can elect their own leader as they see fit. But, speaking for myself, it would greatly please me, if you chose to join our community.”

“But I fear not all your people are of the same opinion,” countered the African woman.

“It pains me to say I must agree, but, fortunately, they are in the minority and are subject to the decrees of the majority. We have no place for tyrants and individualists among us.”

At this point, Cassandra, who had been quietly listening to the conversation stepped in.

“I myself was fortunate to be born a free woman and have never had to endure the harsh sufferings of my enslaved brethren. You are wise to be cautious, as although I am free I have also been subjected to discrimination and humiliation at the hands of the whites on more than one occasion. In fact, should the Spanish or any other colonial power conquer my home island of Bermuda, I do not doubt I would soon find myself in chains, and in truth, there are many among the crew who I would not be foolish enough to trust. But that said, those few I do trust, I would trust with my life, and as long as Björn Gunnarsson is the captain, you have nothing to fear. Should it be otherwise, I would not have married him.”

“Very well, I am grateful for your words of reassurance, but I must first consult with my people for, although my people look up to me, I, like your husband, am no leader who would force them to do a thing against their will.”

Azuba smiled warmly at the other woman before she returned to her people to discuss their unexpected new future, while most of the pirates lazed around on the beach, or went for a refreshing swim. After an hour of heated

discussion in a *mélange* of English and languages none of the Europeans either understood or recognized, the leader of the ex-slaves strolled over to where Cassandra and her spouse were lounging with their feet in the rippling waves. Quiddington quickly joined them, not wishing to miss out on what the woman in loose, colourful clothing and a red headscarf had to say. All three regarded her expectantly.

“The decision has been made and we agree unanimously to join your settlement on the condition we are treated as equals. Should it come to pass that this is not so, we shall leave and find another spot on the island to build a settlement of our own, taking with us what is rightfully due to us,” stated Azuba. “Furthermore, we would like our shelters back and that some of the buildings that are to be constructed be assigned to us. We want some muskets and powder and we want all whips burned. What’s more, we’ll help with the erection of new dwellings and some will even help with the construction of your ship, as long as the more mean spirited ones amongst your crew do not seek to exploit them.”

“Your conditions are very reasonable,” grinned the relieved Swede. “I’ll see to it that my men vacate the shelters this very day. They can sleep under the open sky, or in the barn once they have cleaned it up.”

Azuba shouted something to her people, who let out a small cheer before dispersing excitedly, albeit a little warily.

“Well, that transpired rather splendidly, did it not?” declared the surgeon. Noticing Ironside frowning disapprovingly at him, he quickly rephrased what he had said. “That went pretty well, didn’t it?”

The crew of *Dream Chaser* seemed to quickly accept that they were now destined to establish a new home on this island. All agreed to vacate the shelters, although a few did so begrudgingly. Nobody seemed to mind that the captain and his wife claimed Avery’s small stone house with a thatched roof as their own, and Cassandra soon set about tidying it up. While his wife was busy with the chore, Ironside sought

out Callum Magee, the ship's cook, to ask him to prepare a meal for everyone. The short, ruddy-faced Irishman was now standing before him dressed in a grubby white vest, stiff linen breeches, and a brown, woollen Monmouth cap.

"Tere's plenty of food in the stores, Cap'n. Fresh, smoked, and dried. Lucky Avery didn't have time to take much," said the man with a round face and rum-reddened nose. "But I'll be needing help, I will. But by Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, it sure is a pity yer freed all them slaves, as it'd be a damn sight easier to use 'em than to motivate t'at lazy bunch of seamen, especially those lingering English bastards among them."

The man from Cork held no love for the British, who had torn him away from his family for expressing discontent with his English landlord too vocally, and who had shipped him off to become an indentured servant in South Carolina. Even though the fifty-one year old man had served on privateer vessels since he had escaped his bondage twenty years ago, he had always refused to serve under a British captain. He had even served for a couple of years with Spanish freebooters preying on English merchant ships.

"Are we idle aristocrats that need our work to be done by others?" replied Ironside gravely. "Mr. Quiddington is working on a roster and should any of those assigned to aid you refuse, then they'll have to find their own grub. Maybe some of Azuba's people will help too, if we invite them to eat with us."

"T'be honest, I'd rat'er ave t'em Africans helping me t'an any of t'em underhanded Brits like Sam Taylor and William Benton," mumbled the cook as he walked off towards the stores.

It was early evening by the time the meal was ready and both pirates and ex-slaves were sitting on the beach tucking into a hearty meal of stew and cornmeal bread washed down by small beer. Faustus was seated next to the captain, carefully picking out the pieces of meat from his bowl of thick stew.

"It's not so bad here after all," he commented casually.

“You maybe right, Faustus, but I’d sure feel a lot happier knowing *Dream Chaser* was anchored in the bay,” responded the captain ruefully.

Return of the Mermaid

Two days later Captain Ironside was sitting in front of his new house with Pete, Woody, Brownrigg, and Emilio Calderon carefully studying the plans the ship’s carpenter had drawn up for the hull and some sketches of the proposed rigging put together by the Spaniard, when they were disturbed by the sight of Cyrus Shackley excitedly dashing towards them.

“The sails of two ships sighted, Cap’n,” blurted the out-of-breath seaman.

“Two ships? Is one of them *Dream Chaser*?” inquired the stunned captain.

“We believe so, and the other appears to be the *Mermaid*.” Shackley quickly sprinted off, beckoning the others to follow.

All the men sprang simultaneously to their feet and darted after the helmsman’s mate, only just managing to keep up with the thrilled man. They eventually reached the rocky headland not far from the wreck of Avery’s old ship, where they found Benton, who had been sat on the rocks fishing together with Shackley not long before, but was now standing and looking out to sea, his hands shielding his eyes from the bright midday sun.

“Look, Cap’n,” the boatswain said, pointing to the horizon. “It’s definitely two ships and I be pretty sure it be the *Chaser* and the *Mermaid*.”

Ironside strained to see what Benton was pointing at. It was difficult to make out much in the bright sunlight. How he wished he still had his telescope. After a few moments the squinting captain could eventually make out the tops of the masts of two vessels – one larger than the other. He hooted with joy when he recognized the unmistakable sails

and rigging of his beloved ship. He wasn't yet sure, but the other must be Captain Wolf's ship. Had he retaken *Dream Chaser*, or had others captured both vessels? Whoever was in charge of them now was steering directly toward the island. It would take a couple of hours for them to get here, so they would have ample time to prepare for the worst case. With his heart pounding wildly, he ordered Shackley and Benton to keep an eye on the approaching vessels while he returned to the settlement with the others.

Now sure that the ships nearing the bay were their two ships, the crewmembers were nervously assembled on the beach armed with an assortment of weapons. They all watched in anticipation as eight men disembarked in one of the ships boats and rowed steadily towards the island. As it neared, everyone could make out the figure of Captain Wolf in his fine blue coat and red waistcoat proudly knelt at the prow of the small vessel. As the boat reached the beach the occupants jumped down into the shallow surf, where they were excitedly greeted by dozens of men, who swarmed around them. The crowd respectfully parted before Wolf as he passed through the throng to where Captain Ironside was restlessly awaiting him.

"By god, am I glad to see you, Captain Wolfenden!" the Swedish captain declared, extending his hand in welcome.

"I bet you are, Captain Gunnarsson," replied the other captain with mild derision as he firmly accepted the other man's hand. "It would seem you are in the habit of losing things, Björn – first your powder and now your ship. Fortunately for you, I was at least able to recover latter."

"I fear I cannot deny my misfortune, John," answered Ironside ashamedly. "But I must say that I am as surprised as I am pleased to see you here. What happened?"

"Despite my reproach, I am glad to find you and your crew in one piece," grinned Wolf, stroking his trim beard. "And I'll tell you all over a glass of wine."

Both men made their way to Ironside's dwelling, and once

there entered and closed the door behind them. Captain Wolf had insisted they spoke in private, but that didn't deter the curious sailors from congregating outside. Before seating himself, Wolf slammed the shutters on the inquisitive faces peering in through the two glassless windows. Faustus had at first been offended when he was told his presence wasn't required, but acceded when the captain told the surgeon it was Wolf's will, not his, and that he would tell him everything in detail later. Benton too had wanted to attend the meeting, but after a few stern words from Wolf, he backed down and trundled off grumpily to return to his fishing.

"So, what happened, John? Did you lose sight of the galleon?" asked Ironside, pouring them both some wine.

"I must confess we did. The winds became less favourable and many of the men began to express misgivings about continuing the chase," admitted Wolf before taking a sip from his clay cup. "As fortune would have it, it was a good thing we did return when we did, don't you think?"

"It certainly was. I did harbour hopes that you might return, but I kept it to myself, not wishing to spread false expectations among the crew, fearing your men's desire for treasure would lead you away from us for forever."

"Tell me, Björn. The leader of the men we captured claims to be Henry Avery," disclosed Wolf doubtfully, "but I believe him to be deranged. What say you?"

"One of my men, Josiah Badger, swears the man is indeed none other than the Arch-Pirate himself. Said he served with him on the *Fancy* in the Indian Ocean."

"Is that so?" frowned the captain of *Vengeful Mermaid*. "Let's say it is true. What I don't understand is how you let a group of old men and their slaves sail off in your ship."

"It shames me to admit that we were taken in by his feigned hospitality. We were unaware of his true name and nature at the time," replied the Swede defensively. "I couldn't prevent the men from losing themselves in celebration and revelry. Avery took advantage of that and stole off slyly in the

darkness.”

“What’s done is done,” commented Wolf philosophically, refilling his cup. “I presume you’re burning to find out how we reclaimed your ship.”

“Aye, that I am.”

“Well, after breaking off our pursuit we made our way back here with haste, and I can’t tell you how surprised I was to see *Dream Chaser* almost a day’s sailing from the island. Of course, my first reaction was to attempt to make contact, but your ship ignored my signal shots and quickly changed tack. The winds were behind us, so we soon caught up with your ship, and it didn’t take long to realise something was awry. At first, I feared there had been a mutiny, so I ordered my men to board her. Normally, I wouldn’t have risked so brazenly attempting to take a ship of that size with so many cannon, but I was relying on the fact that you had lost all of your powder in Steinburg,” said Wolf, this time without reproach. “After a short exchange of musket fire, we boarded her astern and soon overwhelmed the numerically inferior defenders, and I must say I was surprised to find the crew consisted merely of old men and slaves.”

“What about my men who were still on the vessel when it was taken?” asked Ironside, fearing the worst.

“One of your men, Charles Axton I think his name was, was killed defending the ship, but the others are all unharmed. Avery pressed them into service as he needed all the hands he could get. In fact, the Dane led the others in helping us to recapture the ship from within, which probably saved my men a few more injuries. As it was, we only took two casualties while boarding – Avery’s men took four.”

“I’m glad to hear Andersen is still alive. He’s a top-rate helmsman,” said the relieved captain.

“There’s something else, Björn,” added Wolf, wrinkling his forehead. “I’m going to be honest with you, although there are those among my crew who would rather keep our discovery a secret.”

"And what did you discover, John?" asked Ironside, anticipating the worst.

"You know that it's said that Avery amassed a fortune plundering the Mughal's ships in the Indian Ocean," said the captain of the *Mermaid* cautiously.

"Aye, I've heard it said."

"Well, my men found a chest full of Avery's gold on board your ship. It'd seem he hadn't buried it as some have claimed."

"But that's good news, isn't it?" asked Ironside warily.

"For us it is, but my men are adamant about keeping it for themselves. They've no desire to share it with your crew. They say you should be grateful that you won't remain stranded on this island, and they see it as a reward for retaking and returning your vessel," explained Wolf seriously. "A few even suggested keeping your ship, but as we have been friends for so long, it is something I could not allow."

"For that I thank you, John," replied the Swede, a little shaken by the frank revelation. "I just hope my men are understanding when they learn they've been denied a share in Avery's long lost treasure."

"Maybe it would be better if you said nothing," suggested the other captain.

"No, that's out of the question," answered Ironside firmly. "Such matters have a habit of getting out. Furthermore, my crew trust me and I do not wish to undermine any respect I might have gained in their eyes. They'll just have to accept the way it is."

"Let's hope so, as my men want to come ashore for a few days to relax and stretch their legs after being so long at sea."

"In that case, I'll delay informing my crew about you claiming the gold for yourselves until both ships are once again under sail," said Ironside bitterly. "We don't want the men at each others' throats, do we?"

"Very wise, Björn," smiled Wolf coldly. "I thank you for your understanding. Let's hope we soon find the galleon, so then everyone will be happy."

“Yes, let’s hope so,” replied Captain Ironside coolly. “In return, I’d like you to bring Avery and his people ashore. I think it’s time for a reckoning.”

Captain Wolfenden laughed and nodded his assent before finishing his wine and exiting the coolness of the small dwelling.

A reckoning

A couple of hours later the crews of both ships were assembled in a semi-circle around Avery and his men, who nervously huddled together in the centre. Meanwhile, the slaves that Long Ben had taken with him had been joyously reunited with their families. Captain Ironside stepped forward and soberly addressed all those present.

“You, Benjamin Bridgeman, better known as Henry Avery, and your men stand accused of the treacherous act of stealing away our ship by force and killing one of our shipmates in the process, thus wilfully condemning us to an eternity on this island.” After a brief, dramatic pause, the captain continued. “What do you say to these charges, Mr. Avery?”

“I must begin by saying I am a pirate and only did what any good pirate would have done. As for your dead man, if he hadn’t foolishly tried to resist, he’d still be alive,” replied Avery defiantly. “Besides, me and my men were desperate to return to England, whose bonny shores we have so sorely missed.”

“But you’d surely be hanged by the necks if near England you steered. Why didn’t you tell us the truth and ask if we would take you with us?”

“Why didn’t I ask? Firstly, we feared for our treasure.” There were a few surprised murmurs at the mention of riches. “Secondly, we are proud, old men, who would not lower ourselves to become mere passengers on such a fine vessel.” The old pirate paused and licked his lips. “And as for

returning to England, after all this time in isolation we'd be willing to risk the noose, but with all that treasure to grease a few palms, we were sure such a fate could be avoided."

The murmuring grew louder.

"Very well, Mr. Avery," said Ironside, turning to the crews, "but the question still remains what we are to do with you for your crime against us."

"Stretch their necks on the gallows tree!" shouted Bart Hogg enthusiastically. There were a few nods of agreement.

"No!" intervened Benton, stepping forward. "Pirates don't hang pirates. Even a dull-witted landsman like you should know that."

Hogg clearly tensed at the insult, but thought better of pushing the matter further.

"Behead them I could," proffered Yuki, placing his right hand on the hilt of his razor-sharp katana. "More honourable than hanging it is."

"Thank you, Yuki, but that won't be necessary," said Ironside quickly, but courteously.

"How 'bout we introduce t'ëm to t'e captain's daughter," suggested O'Malley.

"But the captain doesn't have a daughter," interjected Faustus. "And I don't see how that would be a form of punishment even if he had one."

"It's another name for the cat o' nine tails, that multi-tailed whip they love to use in the Royal Navy to chastise unruly sailors," explained Brownrigg before Benton managed to shoot off one of his opprobrious comments.

"Oh, really? I didn't know that," replied the surgeon, his face reddening. "That won't do at all, Neeve. It sounds far too brutal, and it'd probably be fatal for men of such an advanced age."

"What do ya suggest t'en?" asked the Irish women, seemingly disappointed.

"Well, I suggest just leaving them here when we sail. Never being able to see the motherland again would be punishment

enough, don't you think?" said Faustus, quickly recovering from his momentary embarrassment.

"That is a humane suggestion, Faustus, but what about the Africans?" inquired the captain. "Won't Avery and his men simply try to enslave them again?"

"Maybe we could take them with us," suggested Cassandra boldly. "We surely shouldn't condemn them to a life of isolation."

The air was filled with the buzz of voices discussing her proposition. Many were concerned that taking the ex-slaves on board the already crowded ship would result in an unbearable strain on supplies and tempers. The debate gradually tapered off when everyone became aware of Azuba pushing her way through the crowd of pirates to stand beside the captain.

"We are grateful for your charitable proposal, Cassandra, but we'll save you the anguish of any further disagreements. My people do not wish to return to a world dominated by the enslavement of our people. We wish to enjoy our new-found freedom. Besides, many of our number were born here and know nothing else." She turned to look at Avery and his men, giving them a hard stare. "These are old men who will soon leave this world anyway, even should you choose to spare their lives. Furthermore, now that we are armed, we won't take too kindly if they attempt to lay the chains of bondage on us once more."

There was a barely comprehensible muttering among the prisoners, who seemed to take offence at being labelled old men, still believing themselves to be in the prime of their lives.

"All right, I think it's time to take a vote," stated Ironside with authority. "First, we'll decide whether Avery and his men are to be left on the island. Should the majority be against it, we'll then vote on how they are to be otherwise punished. As the accused men's crimes were against the *Dream Chaser*, I propose only its crew should cast a vote."

Captain Wolfenden nodded his assent, ordering his men to sit while the others voted in standing. Ironside was pleasantly surprised that four-fifths of the crew voted to maroon their prisoners on the island, having half-expected this band of hardened pirates to opt for a more bloodthirsty option. If they had voted otherwise, he would have suggested execution by firing squad, which he deemed a relatively humane form of capital punishment. As it was, there were to be no violent reprisals that day.

"It's decided then. Avery and his men are to remain here," announced the captain. On hearing the moans and groans of the prisoners, he turned to face them. "Would you rather your lives be ended by a lead ball, or by some other murderous means?"

"No, that we wouldn't," replied Avery solemnly. "But the prospect of being the captives of the blacks for the rest of our lives doesn't appeal much to us, either."

"Well, if you learn to treat them with the respect of equals, maybe you won't have to endure this fate for ever, but, in the meantime, we'll construct a wooden pen for your confinement before we leave, so you won't be tempted to forcefully reclaim your prior position as soon as we are gone."

"I must say, that's a very harsh way to treat fellow Europeans," responded Avery grimly. He then smiled slyly as he continued. "But we accept our fate, and only ask you return to us the chest full of gold coins and gemstones that were on the ship."

A sudden furore erupted at the further mention of treasure. Captain Wolf's men remained silent and shifted nervously at the angry shouts of those who felt they might have been deprived of booty.

"It would seem the crew of the sloop has failed to mention my hoard of treasure," shouted Avery, grinning malevolently. "Would you let them cheat you of your share?"

Pandemonium broke out on hearing these words, as both crews separated and pulled apart, turning to face the other

with pistols and cutlasses in hand. All except Frederick Sauer, who failing to understand what was going on stood confused among the men of the *Mermaid*. Fortunately for him, no one had noticed, all attention being focused on the crew of the other ship standing menacingly opposite them. The ex-slaves scurried for cover as the two sides stood and stared threateningly at each other. Yuki had stepped protectively in front of Ironside gripping his sword firmly with both hands, while Faustus hurriedly led Cassandra to safety at the rear of their crew. Ironside realised he had to prevent a skirmish at all costs, as although his crew outnumbered that of his counterpart's by more than two to one, the company of *Vengeful Mermaid* consisted of some of the most savage and ruthless men he had ever encountered. Before he could utter a word, William Benton stepped between the two factions, his pistol still tucked in his belt.

"An end to this madness!" he bellowed. "Are many a good men to leave this world today on account of a few doubloons and pretty stones?"

"But Captain Wolfenden's crew seek to deprive the rest of that which should be enjoyed by all," persisted Avery. "His crew is smaller and you could easily take them. Are you and your men so chickenhearted, Captain Gunnarsson?" Encouraged by the increasing disquiet, Long Ben continued. "Kill them before they abscond with the treasure and your ship!"

Before anyone could respond, Benton slid his pistol from his belt and cocked it, stepped towards the provocative prisoner, took aim, and emptied the barrel point-blank into the suddenly terrified ex-pirate's chest. Both sides froze in shocked silence while the boatswain adeptly reloaded his weapon.

"Frederick Sauer! You're standing on the wrong side," said Benton calmly, breaking the tense silence. "Get back to your shipmates."

"Entschuldigung," muttered the gunner several times as

he shuffled unmolested through the mob back to his own people.

“Why did you just shoot Henry Avery?” asked a perplexed Ironside.

“Don’t ya see? That rascal was tryin’ to provoke us to wipe each other out,” explained William. “I’m sure he and his men would ‘ave taken advantage of the chaos to slip off wiv his treasure and one of the ships, probably the smallest.”

“But did you really have to shoot him dead?” inquired Captain Wolf with what appeared to be a hint of admiration.

“I certainly did. Blokes like that’ll never rest til they gets what they wants. No doubt, he would have reclaimed his position here through deviousness once we had gone, and enslaved the poor souls we just went to all the trouble of freeing. The rest of his men, to borrow some words from me old mate Mr. Faustus, be nothin’ but puerile ninnyhammers. As long as Avery lived, Azuba and her folks would ‘ave always had to sleep with one eye open.”

“Your action was drastic and wide asunder from what we agreed, William Benton,” stated Ironside harshly.

“But I have rid the world of the one who would see us at each others throats,” replied Benton steadfastly. “Now maybe we can discuss the matter like civilised pirates in a bloodless fashion.”

After saying his piece, the boatswain silently left the assembly, promptly disappearing between the trees at the edge of the settlement. The death of Avery and Benton’s pacifying words had taken the wind from the sails of the dispute between the two groups of sea robbers. Many on both sides had already relaxed and put their weapons away. Captain Wolf, who had not yet stood down, stepped forward.

“It seems that Benton’s swift act has helped to avert unnecessary bloodshed, at least for now, but there’s still the matter of Avery’s chest we found on *Dream Chaser* when we retook it. My men and I regard it as payment for recapturing and returning your ship. Without us, you’d be damned to

spend the rest of your natural lives here. The chest is now on board the *Mermaid* and we'd rather throw it in the sea than let anyone seize it from us by force."

"It might indeed solve our problem if the chest and its contents were thrown into the sea, but as much as it pains me, I must agree with Captain Wolfenden," said the Swedish captain, sheathing his sword as he stepped forward. "We should be grateful we've got our ship back and can continue our pursuit of the Spanish treasure galleon. Captain Wolfenden assures me that the treasure will be fairly distributed should we ever capture it. As for the death of Avery, I'll be able to sleep soundly knowing that old sea dog walks the Earth no more. Without his tyrannical leadership and with the fact that Azuba's people are now armed and outnumber the prisoners by more than four to one, those who remain here might be able to lead a fruitful and prosperous life."

The members of both crews slowly dispersed, some still bearing a grudge while others cracked open a cask of rum and quickly forgot the near fratricidal quarrel of moments before. Faustus got together a few men to dispose of Avery's body, while Brownrigg saw to it that the remaining prisoners were secured. Woody, pleased he wouldn't have to fight for his life, set about organizing timber for a prison pen. The captains exchanged a few words before Wolf returned to his ship with a handful of men, despite the agreement, not daring to leave his new found wealth unguarded.

Relieved the situation had de-escalated, Ironside sought out his wife, who he found talking and gesturing to two of his crewmen, both of whom had been slaves on a Guineaman the *Chaser* had taken not long before they had been forced to flee Nassau. Their names were Lee and Gidelon, if he remembered rightly, and neither spoke more than a smattering of English.

"What's going on, Cassandra?"

"Leo and Gideon want to stay on the island," answered the woman. "Although they're grateful you liberated them, they do not wish to spend the rest of their days swabbing decks

and cutting vegetables.”

The captain hadn't realised the two men were unhappy with their lot, believing them to be content with their occupation as freemen on board his ship. Sometimes he doubted that his judgment of others was sound enough for him to be a responsible captain. His knowledge of fully rigged ships and naval tactics might be hard to surpass, but he reckoned he still had a lot to learn about the ways of men, and of women even more so.

“Yes, of course. I don't want anyone on my crew who has no desire to serve,” replied Björn Gunnarsson, frowning and scratching his head. “We'll give them a pair of muskets. My conscience will be at ease knowing these two men will be here to watch the prisoners.”

“Always the practical one, dear,” chuckled Cassandra.

Eventually understanding that they had the captain's permission to leave the crew, the two delighted men ran off to find Azuba and share the news.

The two crews spent the next couple of days, which except for the occasional heated exchange of words were relaxing and peaceful, preparing to recommence their voyage. The ships were stocked up with food and fresh water, and Ironside saw to it that most of the gunpowder was transferred onto his ship, careful to leave enough for the muskets of the village's inhabitants. On the evening before they were to set sail, Captain Ironside took Benton, who had made himself scarce the last couple of days, to one side.

“I would like a word with you before we leave, Mr. Benton,” said Ironside sternly.

“About what, Cap'n?” replied the boatswain innocently.

“I just wanted it made clear, William, that you acted without regard to the decision of the majority when you shot Avery. You had no right to act so singly.”

“But I averted a disaster, did I not, Cap'n Gunnarsson?” answered Benton self-assuredly. “Better 'im dead than us, I say. If yer wants to punish me for me actions then so be

it, but I'll gladly endure disciplinary measures knowing me shipmates are unharmed."

The captain thought for a moment before answering, realising Benton was sincere, and had not acted out of spite or malice. "Your actions did indeed save the lives and limbs of many, so this time I feel obliged to thank rather than chastise you, but should any of your future endeavours jeopardise the ship and its crew, I'll not be so lenient."

"Right you are, Cap'n," said Benton, concealing his relief with cockiness. "Can I go now. I promised I'd help Woody put the final touches on the enclosure pen."

The crew's final evening on the island passed without incident, and the following morning, after a hearty breakfast, they said their goodbyes to those who had chosen to remain, while the flustered captain spent much of the morning urging the men to return to their vessels, not wanting to miss the ebb and fair winds.

Sailing on

Dream Chaser and *Vengeful Mermaid* were finally underway, heading in the direction they believed the galleon to have sailed in. Ironside was starting to doubt they'd ever sight the ship again, but refused to give up hope. That said, he would be more than happy to return to the familiar waters of the Caribbean even without the Spanish gold. Standing on the quarter deck with Benton and O'Malley, he hopefully scanned the horizon with his telescope, with which he was overjoyed to be reunited.

"Póg mo thóin, Cap'n Wolf and yer crew! Y'ain't not'in but a bunch of mean and selfish gombeen feckers, ye are," cried out the Irish woman, resentfully watching the sloop, which was sailing several hundred yards to starboard.

"What yer sayin' there, Neeve O'Malley?" asked Benton. "You almost speak as much gibberish as our surgeon."

"I said Cap'n Wolf can kiss me arse," snapped the irate

woman.

"I certainly share your sentiments on that account," replied the boatswain chirpily.

"I t'ink we should part ways wi't t'em buggers, I do, Cap'n Ironside. I don't trust 'em one bit, I don't."

"You are right not to trust them, Neeve," responded the captain sombrely. "But until we are back in familiar territory, I think it'd be better to stick together. There's safety in numbers."

"Don't you worry, Neeve," grinned Benton impishly. "We'll get our hands on that loot one way or another. You mark my words."

"If it weren't fer yer courageous actions t'at saved us from a bloody brawl, I'd say you ain't no better t'an t'em, Billy boy," scowled O'Malley.

Taking them as a complement, William Benton savoured the woman from the west of Ireland's ambiguous words, which had unleashed an unaccustomed sensation of warmth in his guts. Instead of offering one of his witty retorts, he simply stared out to sea, smiling to himself. Captain Ironside chuckled silently and decided to leave the two disgruntled pirates to rejoin his wife in their cabin. He found her darning one of his old shirts.

"You don't have to do that, dear. When you're not on board, I have to do it myself, you know."

"Well, judging by the state of your clothes, you don't do it often enough," teased Cassandra. "Anyway, I need a task to occupy myself with now we're back at sea."

The captain poured them both a small glass of wine each.

"You know, I'm still a bit worried that Azuba and her people won't be all right on that island," said Ironside, taking a sip of wine. "And what about Avery's men? What if they escape, or what if the ex-slaves put the prisoners to death out of vengeance? They might have been an unsavoury lot, but they were pirates like us after all."

"Azuba's people aren't ruthless killers like you pirates are,"

stated Cassandra assuredly. “And neither do they have the desire to mimic the brutal justice of the ruling class, I am sure. I think if those old men prove themselves, they might even be allowed to join the community as equals, not masters, now the balance of power has shifted. Should they fail to display a willingness to co-operate, then I’m sure they’ll get the treatment they deserve.”

“I hope you’re right, Cassandra.”

Björn Gunnarsson was pondering his spouse’s wise words and admiring her skilful needlework when they were disturbed by a frantic knocking on the cabin door. On opening it, they saw Monkey Boy Will standing before them looking ill at ease.

“What is it, Will?” asked Ironside, slightly unsettled by the boy’s expression.

“Mr. Brownrigg sent me to tell you that the mist is up again,” blurted out the nervous cabin boy.

“Thank you, Will,” replied Ironside as he stepped outside.

He found the anxious coxswain standing at the helm with Christof Andersen and Cyrus Shackley.

“The mist’s before us again, Captain,” reported Brownrigg tensely. “It rose so sudden, it did. We won’t be able to change tack in time to avoid it, as the wind and currents are too strong.”

“It seems we have no choice but to enter that damned fog once again and see where it takes us,” stated Ironside portentously.

The crew of *Dream Chaser* stood solemnly on the deck as they once more passed through the mysterious veil.

Epilogue

“So you’re not only telling me you met the famous, missing pirate Henry Avery, but you also claim to have killed him in cold blood, Mr. Benton,” blurted out Nathaniel Bagshaw in disbelief. “You can’t possibly expect me to believe that!”

“It be the God given truth, Mr. Bagshaw,” replied Benton loudly. “I swear it on me mother’s grave.”

“But they searched for him for over ten years after he successfully plundered the Grand Mughal’s ships and made away with a fortune. There’s even been a number of alleged sightings of the man. You’re not telling me he’s been on some distant and unknown island in the middle of nowhere all this time, are you?”

“Yes, that’s where he’s been all this time, I’m tellin’ ya,” answered the ex-boatswain adamantly.

“Well, that would indeed explain why the authorities never found him,” said the astounded journalist. “I did once read a book which asserted to be his memoir. It claimed Avery had become the ruler of a pirate kingdom in Madagascar. I dismissed it as pure fiction at the time, but according to your account he was really a king of sorts, albeit not in the place alluded to by the author of the book, and albeit not a real kingdom, but that I’m sitting opposite the man who shot him dead beggars belief.”

"I had to shoot the git to save me crew."

"To be honest, you probably did a good thing," responded Bagshaw. "Good riddance to that rogue, I say." After scribbling a few notes on a sheet of paper, the journalist continued the questioning. "There are two terms you used that, not being a man of the sea, I failed to understand. Maybe you can enlighten me to what Monmouth caps and Guineamen are."

"Well, a Monmouth cap be a rounded, knitted cap popular with seamen, although they're going a bit out of fashion now, I heard," answered Benton knowledgeably. "And as for a Guineaman, that be another name for a slaver's ship. I thinks Guinea is somewhere in Africa. It's where they gets all them slaves from."

"Thank you, Mr. Benton," said the reporter, jotting down what the other man had just said. "There is something that bothers me, though. On several occasions you said pirates don't fight other pirates, but at the beginning of your tale you said you pulled a knife on one of your shipmates, the coxsun I think it was. It appears only the intervention of this Captain Wolfenden prevented you from using it on him. Does that not somehow contradict what you said before?"

"Contradict?" asked Benton, wrinkling his nose on hearing the unfamiliar word. "That's a Mr. Quiddington word, that is."

"I mean, is that action not contrary to what you claim about pirates not fighting pirates?"

"That's different," replied Benton hastily. "He attacked me first, he did. And, besides, I only wanted to frighten the buggers with it. I weren't gonna use it on 'im, I swear."

"I see. And what about your views on slavery?" asked Bagshaw earnestly. "Your captain freed all those slaves on that island. What's your position on that?"

"I think it ain't fair to enslave those poor souls just 'cos they got a different skin colour. But I guess we're all slaves in some way. All, that is, except the nobility and pirates."

"In my opinion, it's an economic necessity," said the

journalist seriously. "Who's going to harvest all that sugar cane, tobacco, and cotton without them. You surely can't ask any civilised European to undertake the task. The blacks are better suited to hard labour than us, after all."

"It be a blessed life ye lead, being able to spend yer days reading books in yer fancy cotton shirt and sipping sugared tea and smoking yer pipe while others do the hard graft for ye."

William Benton ignored the other man's response, his interest shifting to a small package half-concealed by the journalists coat.

"One more thing before I go," said Bagshaw, taking out a pocket watch and studying it carefully. "That Irish Lass, Neeve, you seem rather fond of her, don't you?"

"That ain't none of yer business, Mr. Bagshaw," responded Benton, his face reddening. "I don't wish to speak about her with you."

"Fair enough, I don't want to pry into your private affairs. So, now I must be on my way. I would like to be home before it gets dark."

"I understand, Mr. Bagshaw. There be more unsavoury characters on the streets of London at night than on any pirate ship," said Benton, greedily eyeing the package, which the journalist now had in his hand. "That fer me?"

"As a matter of fact it is," replied the other man, handing the small parcel to Benton. "A little token of appreciation for your co-operation."

The pirate eagerly ripped the paper apart, revealing a small bottle of brown liquid and a piece of pound cake wrapped in a cotton cloth.

"I brought you a little rum, as I thought all pirates love it, and the cake was made by my own fair wife. I hope you like it."

"Thanking yer very much, Mr. Bagshaw," promptly slipping both items into his grubby jacket, where the gaoler wouldn't so easily find them.

"I'd like to return tomorrow to hear more of your adventures, if that wouldn't trouble you too much."

"I be a busy man, but I believes I can fit ye into me schedule," Benton smirked mischievously. "But only if you bring me more rum and cake, that is."

"Certainly, Mr. Benton, and I'll see to it that your conditions are improved somewhat, if I can."

"I'd be much obliged, I would," replied the prisoner, nursing the gift under his jacket as if it were a new born child.

"I'll return at noon tomorrow then," said the journalist, standing and putting on his jacket.

Nathaniel Bagshaw walked towards the door, this time refraining from taking William's hand. He knocked on the hard wood and a few moments later Tom appeared at the door. The gaoler summoned a guard to escort the guest off the premises, while he himself led the condemned pirate back to his dingy cell. William Benton was careful to walk so the other man would not notice his hidden, precious bundle. When he was once again locked in his cell and alone, he took a generous swig of the strong liquor and shoved a large morsel of cake into his mouth. Smiling to himself, he thought about how, despite his predicament, life wasn't so bad after all.