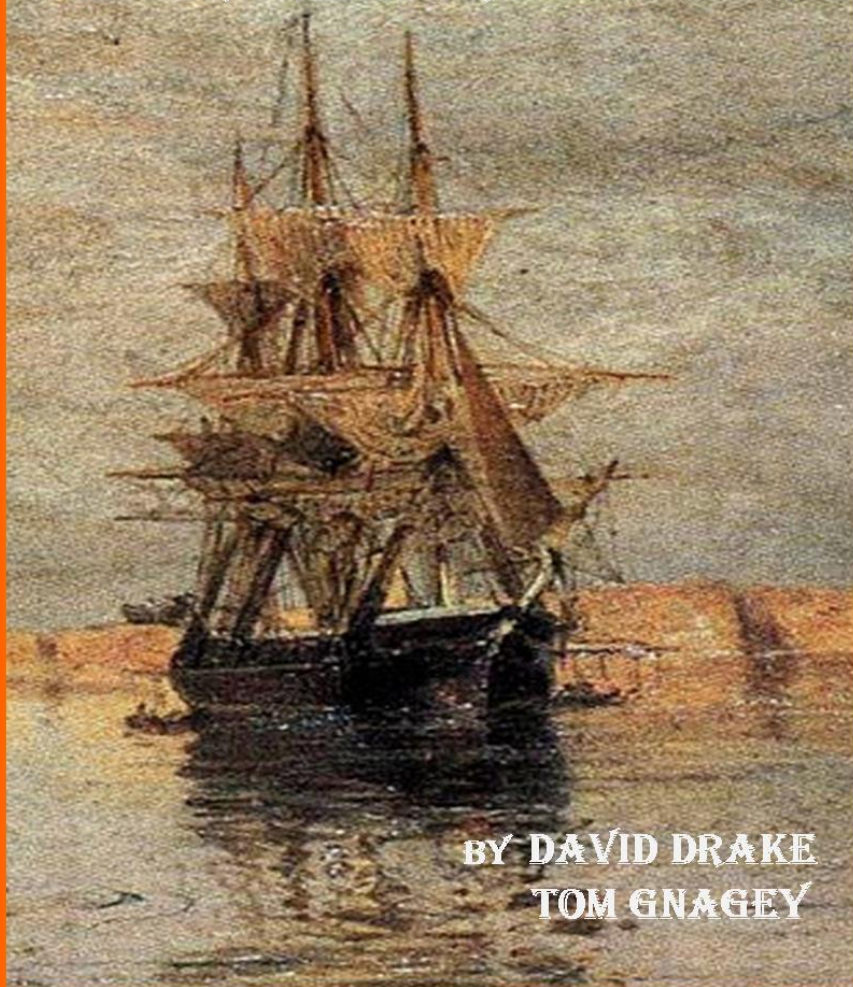


THREE BOYS' AMAZING ADVENTURE AT SEA

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PIRATES, TREASURE, AND DANGER



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THREE BOYS'
AMAZING ADVENTURE AT SEA
A story for ten to fourteen year olds

Tom Gnagey

The Family of Man Press

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NOTE TO THE READER:

The author often uses the *best* word, rather than the *easiest* word.

So, after some of the more advanced words
he puts a synonym in parenthesis
so the less experienced reader doesn't have to interrupt the
story
and go in search of a dictionary.
Happy Reading!

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CHAPTER ONE

The Beating

Neither of the boys had ever received such a beating as the one their Grandfather had just laid on them. They were cousins from different parts of England and in 1790 England and that meant they had not often been together. Their fathers decided that it was time they became better acquainted so had arranged for them to spend the month of June with their Grandfather in Liverpool, a port city in the north-western part of the country and about half way between their homes. Great ships with huge billowing white sails left from its docks every day, weather and tides permitting. They sailed to every port of the world carrying cargo and people. Most of the cargo was commonplace – coal, timber, iron, food and such. Some, however was exotic – gold, silver, silk, precious stones, expensive jewelry. Likewise, most of the people it carried were commonplace – the seamen who worked the ships. Some, however, were people of status: rich men, government officials, royalty, and traders. Such men were often accompanied by beautiful ladies dressed in fine-looking clothes and carrying fancy parasols.

The boys – Benton, age eleven and Wesley, age thirteen – had often dreamed of crewing on a magnificent sailing vessel and visiting distant ports where strange languages were spoken and intriguing mysteries lurked around every dank, dark corner.

That had been their topic of conversation that night as they prepared for bed when their grandfather stormed into their attic room, waving his fist and raging at the top of his voice.

“Which one of you stole my watch? Nothing has been stolen within these walls in sixty years. I will not have grandsons grow up to be common criminals.”

He turned and locked the door from the inside, dramatically dropping the large key into his pocket.

Wesley stepped forward.

“We did not take your watch, sir. Perhaps you misplaced it. We will be happy to help you look for it.”

The old man slapped the boy across the side of his head knocking him to the floor. Benton rushed to his cousin’s side,

looking up at the old man.”

“He is telling the truth, Sir. Neither one of us has ever stolen anything in our life.”

Their grandfather proceeded to beat them, Benton first since he was within easy reach. There were powerful slaps to the face and head, fists delivered to the torso and jaws. Neither boy had ever even contemplated that a grownup would treat children in that way. They had come from well disciplined, but love filled homes.

Eventually, the old man left. Benton heard the door being locked from the outside. Wesley had been beaten unconscious. Although finding it difficult to walk, Benny dampened a cloth from the pitcher on the night stand and knelt beside his cousin, cleaning the blood from his face – lips, cheeks, and chin. He could only imagine the bruises they must both have to their chests and stomachs. He spit up blood and moved to the mirror over the bowl and pitcher to examine himself. His face resembled that of Wesley – red and raw. He took a moment to clean it up and wash out his mouth with water. He discovered the bleeding was from the base of teeth that had been loosened by the repeated blows to his face.

The bell in the cathedral tower sounded ten o'clock.

“I don't seem to have any broken bones – can't be sure about my nose,” he said out loud as he felt his arms and legs.

He returned to Wesley with a pillow and gently supported his head as he slid it into place. He spoke to his cousin as if he were awake.

“We have to get out of here, Wes. I don't know where we can go, but even the alleys by the wharf (waterfront) must be better than this. Two problems: the door is locked and we're in the attic, three floors above the ground. And, oh, yes, we have both been pulverized to the point we may not be able to walk.”

A few minutes later Wes began to moan and his eyes fluttered open. Looking up from the floor he seemed puzzled. The frown that followed suggested his pain, and the nod that he remembered what had taken place. Their eyes met.

“You look awful, Little Cuz. Do I look that bad?”

Little Cuz – Benny – could only nod. He had had those

extra minutes to let the horror of their situation sink in. He waited for Wes's head to clear. Wes struggled to sit up. He closed his eyes and put his hand to his forehead against the pain and light headedness. Benny helped scoot him back against the wall.

"You got the worst of it, Wes. Any broken bones – ribs. He gave your ribs a terrible pounding."

"Don't know how to tell. They hurt like that word that rhymes with 'tell', I know that much. We got to get out of here."

"It's what I said."

"It's what you said to who?"

"To me I guess, hoping you could hear."

Wes looked directly into Benny's face.

"Did you know men did things like this to kids?"

"I've seen bruises on my friend Bart sometimes. He never confirmed it, but I'm pretty sure when his dad drinks he beats on him. I never asked."

"Let's both have lots of kids so we won't beat on them – wait – that didn't come out right."

"I understand. The more we have the more will be treated right."

"That's it exactly. Now, assuming we can actually move around, how can we get out of here?"

"Grandfather locked the door from the outside so going down the stairs is out."

Wes looked around.

"That leaves one choice – the window. Think the vines and trellises on the outside of this old house will hold our weight?"

"Those are fifty-year-old vines. They're two inches thick. If their tentacles – or whatever they are called that clutch onto the sides of the house – can hold up all of their own weight I'm betting they will hold us."

"Maybe one at a time. You are lighter so you will go first. Let's take a look and see what we really have going for us."

Benny helped Wes to his feet. Wes waved off help crossing the room to the window.

"If I can't get as far as the window I'll never make it down the side of the house."

Benny understood. He knew how bad it felt for him to move; he could only imagine the pain Wes was going through. Benny unlatched the windows and swung them open. He bent over the sill and looked down. There were tall trees out front so it was dark even in the full moon. That made making any assessment tentative (unsure) at best.

Wes also managed to take a look and came to the same conclusion.

“No way that I can scurry down those vines right now, pal. What do you think if we rest until say three in the morning before we try to escape?”

“Great minds think alike – it was my idea as well. That will give us almost five hours to recuperate.”

“Okay, then, to bed.”

“First, let me look at your ribs, Wes.”

Wes started to pull up his shirt. Even that move was unexpectedly pain ridden. Benny finished, all the way to his shoulders.

“Not good. The bruises are already showing. You are one black and blue mess and your skin is split open in a dozen places.”

“Do we need to clean them out?”

“The blood has already started to clot. Your shirt will be a bloody mess by the time we leave. Let me just clean things up a little.”

With that done, Wes spoke.

“Now you. Up with *your* shirt.”

Benny raised it, also with pain, but clearly much less than Wes.

“Only a few cuts. That’s good,” Wes said. “Lots of bruises, too, I’m afraid.”

Wes turned down the lantern and they both eased onto the bed on their backs.

“We have to set our heads so we get up at three or so,” Benny said.

“Probably won’t be able to sleep anyway,” Wes said. “We’ll be fine. We just need to rest.”

Benny awoke to a bright room. His first thought was that they had overslept. As it turned out, Wes was up walking the

room. He had turned the lantern back up.

“You couldn’t sleep, I guess,” Benny said.

“I managed a few hours. I find I am stiff from one end the other. How about you?”

“Let me see.”

He sat up on the edge of the bed and stretched.

“That didn’t go well,” he said wincing in pain. “Let me try standing.”

He took his time. Then he took several steps.

“I’ll make it fine. You?”

“I figure I have to. I packed clothes for both of us in our small handbag.”

“We can’t carry it while we climb down the vines,” Benny said.

“I have a plan. After you’re on the ground, I’ll drop it down to you. You’ll need to catch it so it makes as little noise as possible. Grandfather’s room is right below us.”

“Okay. You got what little money we have left?”

“Sure do. Four coins. You take two and I’ll take two in case we get separated. If that should happen, let’s try to meet at the cathedral as soon as we can.”

Benny nodded, noting to himself that his cousin had been doing some good thinking while he paced. The idea of getting separated hadn’t occurred to him. He suddenly felt quite afraid. He had one final question.

“Where do we head for, once we’re out of here?”

“The docks, I think. Should be lots of places to hide down there. They’re what, no more than three blocks west?”

“About that. Remember, we can’t run.”

“We’ll hunker down and keep to the shadows then. We’ll have a good hour until sunrise.”

For a second time, Benny opened the window and then looked back into the room.

“One more idea, Wes. Think we can move that heavy trunk at the end of our bed to the door? It will make it just that much more difficult for anybody to get in and find out we’ve left.”

“Let’s give it a try.”

With the trunk in place, Benny straddled the window sill and then slipped his inside leg over it to the outside. As he sat

there, he grasped a vine to his right then swung away from the window and caught another one with his left hand. He didn't have enough strength to scream even if he had dared. He was facing the wall. The vines were securely attached to the side of the house. Slowly and carefully he moved downward, looking back and forth, below and above. He wished he could let Wesley know it really wasn't all that difficult, but didn't dare risk being heard by their grandfather.

Benny's feet hit the ground. He looked up and waved his right hand back and forth over his head. Wes held the bag out as far away from the house as he could and let it fall – straight and true. Benny made a perfect catch trying not to show just how much it hurt. He saw the window above grow dark; Wes was on his way. He stopped often to rest, finding footholds on the trellises and leaning his head against the side of the house. At one point, he slipped and was holding on by only one hand. He was able to swing back facing the house and catch another vine. For safety sake, his plan had been to try and use vines Benny had not used, in case they had been loosened under his weight. Quite soon he lost his bearings and just took hold of whatever was available.

The strain on his chest had been nearly unbearable, but Wesley was strong of both body and mind. If he needed to continue through the pain that is what he would do. Eventually, he was standing beside Benny. He wanted to breathe hard and catch his breath, but that hurt way too much. He settled for more rapid, shallow ones.

Benny pointed to the street.

“Shadows from the trees over there will hide us on our way to the other side. Then we need to keep to the south side – it is all shadows in that next block.”

“Good plan. You lead the way. I'll carry the bag,” Wesley said.

“You can hardly carry yourself. I'll carry the bag. Put your hands on the back of my shoulders if you need to. My father says I'm strong as a mule and often just as stubborn. Here we go.”

Benny set a slow but steady pace. They crossed the street and at the end of the first block he stopped to allow a

minute or so to rest. Then, it was on down the second and the third. They paused again. Wes had suggestions.

“How about we shag off to the left, here? It’s pitch black there between the buildings. If I remember right, it’s all warehouses and then it opens onto the wharf and dock area. The wharf is piled high with cargo. Good for hiding while we set a plan.”

At the same moment, they both turned to look back at the big house one last time. A light came on in the room they had occupied and their grandfather’s silhouette appeared in the window. There was no way he could see them, but his mere presence sent chills up their spines. Even those *chills* hurt.

“Move on,” Wes said.

Benny nodded, though in the darkness it really couldn’t be seen.

Five minutes later they were standing on the huge wooden wharf. A dozen or more, three and four masted ships bobbed gently on the low waves as they rolled in from the ocean. Huge ropes secured them to the docks. It was a magnificent sight with the full moon slipping low in the western sky behind them. It was that hour in the day when the world lay consumed by nothing but black and white. It was a match to the boys in their full cut black pants and white shirts with puffy sleeves and tight cuffs.

A gruff voice barked at them from behind. They turned to see a large man standing there leaning on his musket (rifle). He had a full beard and wore a long coat, pulled back just enough to reveal his sword.

“No place for children at this hour . . . or at any hour. You will come with me and join my crew.”

He raised his gun. The boys grew terrified. Four blocks into their escape and they had apparently already been taken prisoner. Neither had any words.

Somebody else did, however. It was neither child nor man, though distinctly male.

“You no good, pickin’s from a fish fry. Leave my friends alone. You’ll bein’ answerin’ to my Captain Marrok if ya so much as lays a filthy finger on either one a ‘em. Be mindin’ yer own business, now. Git!”

The big man turned to his right and walked toward a dock. Apparently that Captain Marrok was not to be messed with. A boy, about their age emerged from the shadows. He was bare chested, bare footed and wore only black pants cut off on a ragged edge just below his knees.

"I'm Daggonet – Dag to my friends. I'm Captain Marrok's Cabin Boy on the *Southern Breeze*."

He pointed, but the boys really had no idea at which ship.

"I'm Wesley – Wes to *my* friends – and this is my cousin, Benton – Benny to *his* friends. Thank you, I suppose. We're new to all this being on our own, I'm afraid. If I were to guess I'd say you're an old hand at it."

"An you'd be right. That ol' swab was right, though. You really shouldn't ought ta be out here alone like you are, especially bein' as witless about it all as you seem to be."

"Witless?" Benny asked.

"Goin' from yer high class cut, I figure you might say, 'uninformed', 'green', 'novice', 'stupid about how things are'."

"Seems you speak two Levels of English, Dag. At any rate, thank you and if you have a suggestion we will gladly take it under advisement."

"Guess I don't speak yer brand a English as good as you thought. What?"

"We will consider any suggestion you have for us at this point in our scary lives."

"Ah! Scary. I figured."

"Shh!" Wes said.

He motioned for them to all bend low and pointed.

"The man coming down the road there snapping the horse whip is who we are trying to stay away from."

CHAPTER TWO

“Stowaways Get Whipped.”

“You boys set a quick pace behind me, now. Make quiet. Keep low.”

The boys followed him in and around the crates and barrels, and piles of sacks of flour and potatoes. Compared with *his* easy moves, *theirs* were stiff, awkward and painful. Their path took them in the general direction of the docks that extended far out into the bay from the broad wooden wharf. As their grandfather came closer they heard him raging and snapping the whip. They were each silently grateful it had not been the whip that had come their way earlier that night.

“There’s the gangplank. We’re almost home,” Dag whispered.

“Why is the end of the gangplank raised two feet above the dock?” Wes asked in a forward whisper.

“So, the rats won’t get on board. Rats is night varmint. Won’t see ‘em tryin’ it durin’ the day.”

*[*In this book yard and foot will used as a handy units of measures. In the 1700s in England there were several systems for measuring things. The inch, the foot, the yard and the mile came to America with the early settlers.]*

With an easy pull and push Dag was up onto the gangplank.

“That’s going to be a much harder task for us. We both just got the beating of our lives.”

Dag knelt at the end and offered his hands and arms. The comment about the beating didn’t seem to affect him in any way. Perhaps they were a routine part of his life. Wes urged Benny up onto the plank ahead of him. My how it hurt, but he was soon kneeling beside their new friend. Between the two of them they were able to lift Wes.

“Now, stay low. Don’t want Tristin to catch us sneakin’ in when I weren’t supposed to be out.”

“I thought the captain was Marrok,” Benny said, confused.

“He is. Tristin is the First Mate – has a wounded heart, I figure. He’s as mean as a Pappy Marlon (big fish) on a hook.”

Once on board he paused and looked around. Several hands were asleep on deck.

“Amid ship (in the middle) – there – under the cock boat,” Dag said pointing.

“I’m afraid we’re not literate in boat and sailing terms,” Wes said.

Dag tried a second time. He pointed, again.

“The long rowboat fastened there upside down. You’ll be safe up inside there fer the time bein’. My bunk’s clear aft at the tiller – er, back end lowest deck against the rudder – you know rudder?”

“Yes.”

“Hot and stiffin’ down there. I often stay up on deck on hot nights.”

He demonstrated how to slip in underneath the boat. They followed his lead.

“Plenty a room ta stretch out under here. Yer wounds need tendin’ to? I’m a pretty good sawbones (doctor).”

“Probably too dark to see,” Wes said. “Thanks though.”

“We need a plan,” Benny said.

“I have nothing, sorry,” Wes came back. “You, Dag?”

“The *Southern Breeze* will be sailin’ with the mornin’ tide. You’ll need ta be off by two bells – bells is confusin’ ta newcomers. In this case, it’ll mean five in the mornin’.”

“The problem remains,” Wes said. “Be off to where?”

“My life’s been on the ship since I was nine,” Dag said. “Don’t know much past the end a the wharf anymore.”

“Where’s the ship sailing to?” Benny asked. “Maybe we can get off at the next port.”

“Next port will be some island ta the south a North America. Gotta cross the whole Atlantic Ocean before that. That’ll be more than 4,500 miles.”

“How long will that take?” Wes asked.

“Five or six months God with us. Could be eight or more if we come upon long lulls or high seas.”

“So, between five and six months. That’s a long time?”

“Yup. It’s a pure privilege to be asea fer that long.”

“What is the purpose of the boat trip?” Benny asked.

“First, ‘taint no *boat*, ‘tis a *ship*. Second, ‘taint no *trip* –

'tis a voyage. Captain Marrok is seekin' the treasures of his grandfather, Captain James Rupert Marrok, the first. He was called Rupert."

"Your captain is what, the second, then?" Wes asked.

"The third, but never let him hear you say that. He ain't junior ta nobody. He is a great seaman in his own right. A educated gentleman, he is."

"How old a man?" Benny asked.

"Never says. I'm thinkin' middle thirties."

"Has he made this same tr . . . voyage before?"

"This is his first in that direction. He's lucky. He can afford ta outfit a ship. Hard ta find a sponsor ta chase after old pirate tales."

"Sponsor?" Benny asked.

"A Rich man ta provide the ship and pay the crew and stow it with food and supplies."

"And what does the sponsor get in return?" Wes asked.

"Some part a the booty – the treasure. I'm thinkin' more than half, or maybe he gets some settled on amount and the Captain and crew splits up what's left. Never really thought on it before. I, personally, got no need for wealth. Everything I need is provided right here by the Captain. I'm his cabin boy, like I said. I tend to his needs and he takes good care a me"

"That's all interesting, but it doesn't solve *our* problem," Wes said.

About that time their Grandfather returned with a number of young men carrying clubs. Looking out from under the boat they could see them begin a ship to ship search. It was still dark. Some of the men carried lanterns. Docked ships were not considered to be part of Liverpool so they had to ask permission to board and conduct a search.

"He got hoodlums with him – ruffians – riffraff," Dag said. "Always up to no good. Do anything for a coin. Still two ships away from us."

That had all been Dag. He continued.

"They'll look right here first thing. I don't suppose you two have ever climbed a Main Mast, have ya?"

"Main Mast?" Wes asked revealing more of their basic ignorance. "No. Like we said, ships are foreign territory to us.

Give us a plow and ox on a farm and we know our stuff. But here . . .”

“Think you can climb rope ladders?”

“Don’t know why not. If we have to, we’ll try,” Wes said.

“Follow me, then.”

“What about our bag?”

“Leave that to me.”

He picked it up and slipped through the narrow opening onto the deck. The boys followed him to a huge mast in the center of the ship – more than two feet thick at the deck.

“How tall is it?” Benny asked looking up. “Can’t see the top in the dark.”

“Better than thirty yards (100 feet). Come close now. See the ladders? They’re tied down here ta hold them steady. Up top’s the crow’s nest, like a six-foot solid wooden wheel laid flat around the mast. Plenty a room for the three a us. Be impossible to see us from down here. Doubt if the hoodlums will want ta do the climb.”

“Your bodies tanned?”

“What?”

“Your chests and back – tan?”

“Oh yes. We work under the sun on the farm ten hours a day.”

“Then off with your shirts. Carry ‘em down inside the front a your britches (pants). Less likely to be spotted than the white shirts.”

Without questions, the boys did as Dag had instructed. Up close in the moonlight he could see the cuts and bruises for the first time.”

“Dang, guys. You’re in terrible shape. I’m really sorry. Climb the side of the mast that faces away from the dock – it’ll help hide us.”

They climbed up into the blackness of the night. Benny first, followed close behind by Wes and finally Dag with the bag. Managing themselves onto the little landing was the most difficult part of the activity.

“Sit with your backs to the mast. Hold onto the wooden railing around us if you feel the need. May not look like the boat’s rockin’ much down below, but it’s plenty ta toss a full-

grown man into the drink from way up here.”

“Drink?”

“The water – the ocean.”

The boys nodded.

“Nice breeze up here,” Benny said.

“Nice in the summer. Awful in the winter.”

Without further explanation, they could understand how that would be.

The watch bell rang – one time.

“One bell,” Dag said. “That makes it about four thirty. “The watches (work shifts) change after four hours – that’s eight bells. We’ll be okay up here ‘til two bells – five o’clock.”

“I thought that’s when the boat left port,” Benny said.

“It is, but in port the early morning watch is usually sleepin’ time unless there’s some pressin’ danger.”

Again, the boys nodded, if only to themselves.

“We really need a plan, Wes,” Benny said.

“I know. I suppose we’ll just have to go back into the city and take our chances once grandfather and his men leave.”

“That may be soon,” Dag said. “Looks like they are boardin’ us now.”

“Will the Captain allow it?” Wes asked.

“It’ll be up ta whoever’s standin’ watch at the plank unless it’s something really big like a escaped killer. It looks like the crews all nappin’. They’ll hear about that.”

The moonlight shone directly down on them so the boys could easily keep track of what was going on from up above. Several boarded the ship. One man approached the main mast and rustled the rope ladders. He soon turned away and gathered with the others. They could hear them mumbling among themselves. They soon left the ship.

“One danger down,” Dag said.

“Just how many dangers are there?”

“Mostly just Tristin. The others have no reason to see you as a bother to them – so long as you’re off the ship before we sail.”

“Why would that matter?” Benny asked.

“You’d be two more mouths to feed. Food is precious – out at sea, you either got it or ya ain’t. I seen stowaways tossed

overboard before so the crew wouldn't have to share the food and water."

Benny put his hands to his throat in the universal sign meaning not wanting to die.

On the dock, their grandfather had climbed to the top of a low stack of wooden crates as if from there he were supervising the search operation. Nobody seemed to be paying any attention to him, but he was there, and from there he had a commanding view of the entire wharf area – that was the wharf the boys would have to cross to get back into the city.

The three of them discussed that very situation in hushed voices. Wes had an idea.

"Could we let ourselves down into the water and move along under the docks and wharf until we are far away from this spot?"

"Could," Dag said. "Wouldn't advise it. Once in that salt water your cuts will feel like they're on fire. It's used as a punishment on board. A man gets flogged. His back is opened up in lash cuts. Then, they rub salt into the wounds. It must be terrible the way they scream – on an on an on 'til they passes out."

"Can't use that idea then," Wes said.

"I suppose ya could stay on board. That would get ya far away from your grandfather."

"But lose eight months out of our lives. We'd miss a whole year of school," Benny said.

"More than that," Dag said. "There's the time we'll be there searchin' an then the voyage back here. Plan on more like two years. I'm figuring by then I'll be old enough ta get into the seaman trainin' program. I'll be on my way, then. It's the life I want fer myself."

"That's fine for you, Dag, but not for us," Benny said. "Wes wants to be an architect and I want to be a teacher."

"Not much excitement in them, ya think?" Dag asked clearly puzzled at the choices."

"Wouldn't be doing it for the excitement, I guess. More personal satisfaction."

It was obvious that no amount of talking would convince Dag that there was anything good about their long-term plans.

"I suppose it would be a great adventure, Benny," Wes said. Just two years. We could still come back to our dreams."

"I'm not comfortable with what you are suggesting. Think about our families not knowing what happened to us."

"I suppose the two of ya know how ta read an write," Dag said beginning to offer his assistance."

"Sure, don't you?" Benny asked.

"No time for that, yet. You can write a letter to that man and tell them what you're up ta. I can see that it gets delivered for ya."

"If Benny's not in favor of it, I won't press it," Wes said. "Probably just a dumb fantasy anyway. Me a sailor setting into the sunset in search of treasure. *Pirate* treasure, is it?"

"Yes. Rupert the first, was a feared pirate down in the Caribbean Sea."

"So, this is a pirate ship?" Benny asked a sense of unease growing in his tone.

"Not really. Like now. All peaceful. Flyin' the English flag."

"What do you mean *not really*?" Wes asked.

"Well, if, say, a pirate ship comes sailin' by an takes a likin' ta us, Captain Marrok might hoist the Jolly Roger (pirate flag) an try ta convince it ta leave us alone."

"How would he do that?" Benny asked.

"Put a couple of volleys across her bow, if she makes a move on us. Marrok don't like hurtin' people or sinkin' perfectly good sailin' crafts, ya see. He's a good man."

"I suppose that would deserve a long conversation if we were to stay," Wes said.

"By volleys you meant cannon shots?" Benny asked.

"Yup. The *Southern Breeze* carries ten cannon – five port and five starboard. Two extra in case any a them blows up when they is fired off."

"Port? Starboard?" Benny asked.

"Port it left facing forward. Starboard right. Stern is forward. Aft is the rear."

"Sounds like lots of things to learn if you're part of a ship's crew," Benny said. "And, if we stay, I'm going to want to know about that cannons exploding thing."

Dag pointed at the dock.

“Your crazy man is gone. I’m thinkin’ it’s now or never. We’ll soon hear two bells – five o’clock – an then the deck’ll be full a crew gettin’ ready to sail.”

“Okay,” Wes said.

He turned to Benny.

“I guess our plan is to cross the wharf and get lost in the city. Then, we’ll find some way to get ourselves back to our homes.”

“I guess that’s the plan – sort of a build it as we go plan the way it sounds,” Benny said agreeing with some reluctance.

“I’ll go down ta the deck first ta make sure the way’s clear,” Dag said. “But you follow right on my tail when I motions ta ya. When we hit the deck, now, you wait fer my signal. I’ll go over ta the gang plank an look things over.”

“We sure thank you for your help, Dag,” Wes said. “Sorry our friendship will only last for such a short time.”

“Have a safe voyage and get rich from the treasure,” Benny offered.

If anything, their pain continued to grow instead of lessen. The soft, new scabs, tore loose when they moved their skin. Surely once into the city they could begin setting an easier pace and have time to heal and get back to normal.

Back down on the deck they knelt on one knee in the shadows awaiting Dag’s signal. A tall man in a uniform came on deck from below and walked over toward Dag. It was Tristin, the first mate, although they had no way of knowing that at the time. He engaged Dag in conversation, which they couldn’t really make out. It sounded like the boy was being questioned – perhaps about why he was on deck so early. In just the short time they had known Dag they were certain he’d come up with some reasonable excuse.

Things began to happen on deck. Several crew members appeared with large lanterns, hanging them here and there as if preparing the area so the rest would be able to see at two bells when they were scheduled to make sail. One was hung not far from where the boys were crouching. It lit the area that had been their place of safety. One of the men saw them. He turned to the man in the long coat.

“Mr. Tristin. Looks like a couple a young stowaways, here.”

Dag remained silent. Wes figured if he were to say anything he'd probably be in big trouble right along with them. He hoped he would remain silent. He shouldn't be punished for their problem.

Tristin strode over to them in his long, dark blue, coat, three-sided black hat and shiny, high, leather boots.

“Who are you, lads?”

There was nothing gentle or kind in his tone.

“Two boys who just came on board to see what a beautiful big ship looked like – before it sailed away,” Wes said.

“It is truly a fine ship, Sir,” Benny added taking his cue from his cousin.

“And you always carry a bag when yer just sightseein' on board strange ships?”

Wes again tried with an explanation. They were still bent down, believing they needed permission to stand.

“On our way to our grandfather's place, a few blocks up on the slope. From out of town. Saw the ship and couldn't resist taking a look. Sorry if we intruded where we aren't welcome. I'm sure we haven't damaged anything. You can search us to see we didn't steal.”

“Stand up. What's that hanging out of your britches?”

He stepped forward and pulled out the shirts.

“So, you didn't steal anything. What might these be?”

“They are our own shirts. We took them off in the heat. You will see they fit us.”

“You and several in the crew.”

Wes saw Dag make a move as if to come to their aid. Wes offered him a quick shake of the head to warn him to stay back.

Tristin clasped his hands behind his back and listed their offenses.

“Unauthorized boarding of a ship preparing to leave port. Stolen items on their person. A traveling bag. Unaccompanied by an adult. Sufficient evidence to designate them as stowaways and to mete out punishment. For these crimes I declare three lashes to their backs from the cat-o'-ninetails. Tie

them to the main mast and proceed with the punishment.”

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CHAPTER THREE

Captain Marrok to the Rescue

The first inkling of a brightening sky in the east made silhouettes of the building beyond the wharf and brought something more than darkness to the boy's surroundings. A second, tall, uniformed man in a far fancier red coat, brass buttons, and hat with a large feather approached. It was the Captain.

"What's going on here, Mr. Tristin?"

Tristin explained what he had observed and the punishment he had set.

Captain Marrok moved in closer.

"Turn and face me," he said to the boys in nothing resembling harsh tones.

They obeyed. Their wrists were tied together to the mast above their heads.

"These are mere children, Mr. Tistin."

Once they had turned fully, there cuts and bruises became visible in the light of the lanterns.

"My god, boys. What has befallen you?"

He bent even closer to get a better look.

"Our grandfather beat us for something we did not do. We ran away fearing more," Wes said trying to be fully honest."

"And it appears you were about to get it again for something you did not do."

He gave Tristin an unpleasant look and addressed the man holding the whip.

"Untie their hands. What they need is ointment and gauze not another beating. Dag, take them to my quarters. Minister to them. Find them bunks. Let them sleep."

As they turned to follow Dag, a large contingent (group) of the hoodlums moved toward the ship. Their sharp featured grandfather was leading them shaking his fist high in the air. Somehow, he had located the boys. Perhaps someone on the docks had seen them boarding the ship – the old swab who had first accosted (stopped) them on the wharf, perhaps.

Dag spoke to the Captain.

"That man is my friends' crazy grandfather coming for

them.”

“Mr. Tristin,” the captain said. “Those men are not to be allowed onboard.”

Then he turned to Wes and Benny.

“It appears you have a big decision to make. I can release you to your grandfather or I will grant you asylum on my ship, where you will work out your passage as I see fit. Under the circumstances, it seems that I must have your immediate answer.”

Their grandfather was trying to force his way up the gangplank using his whip against the crewmen who grabbed it and threw it into the bay.

The boys looked at each other, then at Dag and finally back at Captain Marrok. Wes spoke.

“We will remain with you, Sir, and will be forever grateful for your kindness.”

The captain nodded at the two hands who were ready to pull the plank onto the deck. They seemed happy to dump the crazy old man into the bay after his whip. The crew cheered. Tristin bent down and whispered a threat to Wes.

“You made a fool of me in front of the captain. This is not over.”

A crazy grandfather or a crazy first mate? Wes hoped they had made the proper decision.

The Captain’s quarters were elegant, with pleated, heavy, red velvet drapes at the windows, a chandelier hanging over a table in the center of the room holding eight candles, several comfortable looking chairs, shelves filled with books along the side with the door, and two beds – one large and fancy and one narrow and plain. There were other things: several expensive looking chests, a globe in a floor stand, nautical instruments used in navigating, and a telescope on legs facing out the rear window. That window was ten feet wide and probably that tall. It leaned out from the floor and up toward the seven-foot-high ceiling. It was made up of dozens of small panes of glass.

Dag indicated the small bed.

“Sit. The ointments are in the cabinet.”

He began with Wes since his abrasions were clearly

worse than Benny's.

"That feels so much better. Thank you. You have a gentle touch. You would make a fine physician."

"We had a physician aboard last year an he let me assist him. I learnt a lot. He said what you said – the gentle touch part. He also said I was very smart an learned fast."

"The ship's lucky to have you, then," Wes said.

"You'd think so. Nudd wouldn't agree."

"What's a Nudd?" Benny asked.

"He was the sawbones before me the way I hear tell. Now, he's angry because the men come ta me instead a him. He's Tristin's lackey – the one who was about to lay the three lashes on ya out there."

"Lackey?" Wes asked.

"Does his dirty work – what Tristin thinks is below his station. A good one not ta cross – well, both a them."

Dag moved on to tend to Benny.

"How old are you?" Benny asked.

"I say I'm twelve."

"You say you're twelve?"

"Don't really know. As a baby, I was left in a basket at the door of a church. I guess I got passed around quite a bit after that. When the last couple worked it out so I could sail with Captain Marrok, he said I looked ta be about nine, so I've just counted from there. I made my first day on board my birthday."

"So, you've been on this ship for three years?" Benny asked.

"Goin' on four come November first."

"And you've never had any parents?" Wes asked.

"Of course, I had parents. Don't you know about babies?"

"Of course, we do. I guess what I meant was you haven't ever lived with them."

"Seems so. Generally, I done good without 'em."

Wes figured he had no way of really knowing how well he might have done if he had been able to live with them, but he didn't discuss the point.

"Sometimes I pretend like Captain Marrok is my father. He'd be a good one. He's got two faces, though. One's kind

and gentle and one's ferocious. Break the rules and it comes out in a hurry. I seen him knock a man five yards down the deck once with just one fist thrown ta his chin."

"I guess we need to learn the rules in a hurry, then," Wes said. "We've had enough from angry fists to last a lifetime."

"Really only two rules fer kids – do your work well, an don't steal. It's like that on any ship. Problems with either one a them things will guarantee a body terrible pain or worse."

"Or worse?" Benny asked.

"Once a man stole water when we was really low on it and he got hanged dead and tossed to the sharks – well, that's really a story one a the crew told me, but I'm sure it's true."

"What were those rules again?" Benny said. "Do your work and never steal, right?"

"Right. The Captain says those are the best rules to follow wherever you are in life. They'll always get you on fine with the folks around ya."

The boys nodded. It did make sense. Benny would add, 'Don't lie', but, again, he decided not to bring it up.

Dag had wrapped the upper part of Wes's chest with gauze because there were so many open wounds still seeping. He knew the gauze would help keep the flies away.

"By this time tomorrow them scabs will start itchin'. Don't go scratchin' 'em or all my good work'll be fer nothin'."

"We know about itchy scabs," Benny said.

"I'll give 'em a look-see in the mornin'. Probably need salve again by then. Legs and buttocks?"

"I don't know what you mean," Wes said. "Was it a question?"

"Any cuts and such on 'em?"

"Oh. No. Grandfather only pummeled us above the waist and mostly in front. It was like he enjoyed looking us in the face while he hurt us."

Benny closed the container.

"That's a big can of ointment you have," Benny said.

"Got more. Need a lot in case a whippin's. Gotta cover the stripes right off so they don't get ta festerin'."

"I didn't understand any part of that, I'm afraid," Benny said.

Dag looked puzzled, but tried to explain.

“Ya know whippin’ – with that cat-o-nine tails you seen – nine knotted cords fastened onto a wood handle. Usually ta the bare back. Awful pain. Cuts the flesh somethin’ terrible. A stripe is one delivery a the nine. Ya know, festerin’ I suppose.”

“Thanks. Yes. That happen often?”

“Depends on the crew and the conditions.”

“Conditions?” Wes asked.

“When food and water gets low there’s more likelihood a stealin’ ya can see. Things like that is conditions.”

The boys nodded. Punishment for them back in their homes had meant something like having to work an extra hour in the fields or not getting to ride along into town on Saturday with their father to get supplies. The realm of physical pain as discipline was brand new to them. They were coming to believe it was more wide spread than they could have imagined.

“We need ta get your tasks,” Dag said.

“Our tasks?”

“Your jobs – tasks. Everybody has some regular tasks ta carry out. Mr. Tristin hands out others as they’re needed. By the way, always call him *Mr.* Tristin. It’s just expected for the First Mate. He don’t take kindly ta anythin’ else and when Mr. Tristin don’ take kindly to somethin’ there’s always big trouble.”

The boys stood ready to follow Dag in search of Mr. Tristin. As they approached the door to leave the cabin, it opened in toward them. The Captain was there on his way inside. He removed his hat and took a minute to look them over in the bright light under the chandelier.

“Good job, Dag. Boys, I want you to come on deck and watch what goes on when we leave port. There won’t be much required of you today – need time to heal. Dag, here, will give you your tasks in the beginning.”

He looked at Dag.

“They are not to do *your* work for you. Understand?”

Dag offered a big grin up into the man’s face.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Dag turned to the boys.

“See. He knows me very well.”

They followed the smartly dressed man up the steps to

the deck. Tristin was at the wheel near the rear giving orders. The huge ropes that had been looped over posts, securing the ship to the dock, had been loosened and were being pulled onto the ship and set in neat coils on the deck. At the front, right – the bow, starboard – several men were turning a large wheel. Benny pointed.

“What’s that?”

Benny was never shy about asking questions!

“They are hauling in the anchor – you two know anchor?”

The boys nodded.

Dag pointed up into the masts. There were many hands holding onto ropes and walking along the booms up there untying the sails and letting them unroll and fill with the breeze. Within moments the ship was moving away from the dock into the still inky darkness of the Atlantic Ocean. They looked back at the slowly brightening city. They looked forward into the night that lay ahead. They each fought back tears – sorrow about leaving all they had ever known and fear about the uncertain future.

“You ever work up there?” Benny asked Dag pointing to the sails.

“In calms the Captain lets me go practice, sometimes. Something every crew member has to master. Bare feet is good up there. They fit the curved shape a the booms.”

“Booms?” Wes asked.

“Them round cross beams that holds the sails top an bottom.”

“How did the Captain know the wind would be blowing in the right direction to take us out to sea this morning?” Wes asked.

“Tide goes out, wind goes out. He’s got charts about that.”

“Seems like a Captain has to know a great deal,” Benny said.

“Oh, he does – every last thing about every last thing on the ship. Mostly, though, he has ta know about people.”

“I don’t understand,” Benny said.

“The crew. There’s one Captain and a lot a crew. He has to keep their respect and keep them happy and feelin’ safe

or he's got no power."

The boys figured they understood and nodded. They had heard tales of crews committing mutiny and taking the ship over from the Captain when they didn't think things were going right.

"If this Tristin is such a bad guy why does the Captain keep him?" Wes asked, feeling more and more uneasy about being trapped on a little ship in the middle of a big ocean with such a man.

"It's this way. Like I said, the Captain is liked and respected by the crew, but they fear Tristin. What they might not do just because they like Marrok, they *will* do because they fear Tristin. He's quick with the whip – well, ya already seen that. Sort a like a balance a power I guess ya could say between the Captain and Tristin."

Dag continued the tour of the ship and answered questions. After a while, the Captain came up beside them.

"What do you think of her?"

"Her?"

He smiled.

"The ship. A ship is always referred to as if it were a woman – her, she."

"I, for one, am very impressed with her, Sir," Benny said.

"Wesley?" he asked.

"Quite honestly, Sir, I have been battling the need to vomit ever since I set foot on her."

"You'll overcome that. Sea sickness. Stay close to the rail and let fly when you need to. Not unusual for newcomers."

"Thank you for that. I figured I might be the only one."

"I called you Wesley – was I correct?"

"Yes, Sir. Actually, named for the crazy man who caused us to end up here. Benny here is Benton. Most folks think it's short for Benjamin."

"That would have been my first guess. Thank you for setting me straight."

He turned to Dag, although he was clearly speaking to the boys.

"Dag, here, is my right hand man. He's called a Cabin Boy. I suppose you two may consider yourselves his assistants for the time being. Cabin boys are responsible directly to the

Captain. The crew will try to get you to do their work for them. Dag can show you how to handle that. When you've finished up here, Dag, bring them down to my cabin. We need to get better acquainted and then they need to sleep."

He strode off and disappeared down the steps to the area below deck.

Benny had a question.

"Does Captain Marrok have a first name, I mean, I know he does, but do we get to know it?"

"James – James the third I guess officially. Like I said, his grandfather, James Rupert Marrok was a Pirate – knowed just as Rupert. His father, James, was a merchant – a rich merchant I've heard. But never call him James. He is always just Captain or Captain Marrok or Sir. That's important. Most a the crew just go by one name. It's often not clear if that is a first or a last name or even if it's really theirs – *don't never ask!*

"Let me show ya the decks below. There is three main levels on this ship. This is the main deck up here. The suites – them is the fancy rooms with beds an curtains an windows are aft, just blow the main deck. The captain's is the largest. The First Mate's is quite a bit smaller an there are three more fer passengers. Those are all astern – to the very back a the ship. Just *fore* a them – just in front a them – is two decks – like floors in a house. The first one – just under the main deck – on this ship holds the supplies we use – food, salt, water, clothes, blankets, kindling, wood for the carpenter, gun powder, extra things, parts, like that. The cook's quarters an the galley is there – all that down the center a that deck."

"Galley?" Benny asked.

"Where the crew eats. And speakin' about that, crew never complains about the food – do that an ya can be cut from rations fer up ta a week. Ya eats all a what ya gets. Got that?"

Both boys nodded.

The gun deck surrounds that center part a the deck with the galley. We'll look at that after while.

"Below that deck is the orlop – the lowest deck – where we sleep an stow cargo we might be carryin' fer somebody – usually in crates or barrels. You'll get used to the stench (bad odor) down there soon enough."

“What about the bathroom?” Wes asked.

“Relieve your water over the rail. There’s pots on the lower deck. We call that area the ‘head’. Keepin’ them pots clean will be one a your jobs.”

“Yuk!” Benny said.

“Another rule: you do *what* ya are told ta do, *when* yer told ta do it. ‘Yuck’ to one a the men an you’ll find yourself flyin’ across the deck with a broke jaw. No exception.”

They had soon visited all the decks and even got a peek into one of the passenger rooms. It was a smaller version of the Captain’s, the fanciest sort of rooms either of the boys had ever seen. By contrast, the crew’s sleeping quarters was the worst place they’d ever seen and the stench – as advertised – was fowler than they could have ever imagined. Hammocks were strung three high. That would be where they slept. On that ship, at least, ‘bunk’ meant ‘hammock’. They would ask about that later.

“All the men have their own and don’t never crawl into one that ain’t yours. Mine is at the back where the air stays stale. Yours will be the two above mine. You will grow used to the conditions down here real soon. Be so tired most nights you won’t even remember climbin’ in. Like I been tellin’ ya, it’s a good life.”

Wes and Benny shared a look that said, ‘if this is considered a good life, we may have made the wrong decision, but here we are’.

“I guess it’s time ta see if the Captain has time fer us now,” Dag said. “From here on out, he will probably seem all business. Don’t look good if the crew thinks he’s playin’ favorites. I know I’m his favorite, but I don’t never advertise it. Good rule fer you two as well.”

They arrived at the door to the Captain’s cabin.

“Always remember ta knock and wait fer his permission ta enter, even if ya just been away on a errand fer him fer only a minute. His room is like his private country.”

Dag knocked.

“Come.”

He pushed the door open.

“Oh, boys. Good. Come in. Wes and Benny, before

we talk, put all your clothes in that box.”

CHAPTER FOUR

'Learning the Ropes'

[A phrase that came from learning all of the important 'rope' skills on a sailing ship.]

The boys showed puzzled faces and looked, first, at each other, then at Dag, who spoke.

"You'll only need britches – good strong britches. What you're wearin' will be worn through in a week leavin' rope burns from your button (navel) ta yer toes."

Just how either being nude or wearing tougher britches would guard his toes, Benny didn't understand, but he didn't question it.

Dag continued.

"While you and the Captain have your talk, I'll go fore and find you some excellent duds – use your old ones ta measure you out great fits."

He left with the pile of clothes in his arms. The Captain motioned for them to sit. He did as well.

"Where are you from?"

"We're both from farm families. I'm from up north of Bedford and Benny's from east of Bristol in the south. We are cousins, but because of the distance we have not seen much of each other."

"I guess you're seeing plenty of each other right now, then."

It was a joke about their state of undress. The boys agreed it was actually quite funny and joined him in a chuckle.

"Go to school?"

Benny figured it was his turn.

"Oh, yes, sir. We're there any day our fathers don't need us to work. The rest of the time our mothers set out studies for us every night."

"Favorite subjects?"

"I hope to be an architect someday so any subject related to that," Wes said.

"And I want to be to be a teacher so I am interested in all of them."

The Captain tossed Wes a book that had been sitting on

the table next to him.

“Open to page 36 and read for me.”

Wes opened it and read the first paragraph without so much as a hesitation.

The captain hitched his head as if to have him pass the book to his cousin. Benny accepted it and looked up at the captain.

“Page, Sir?”

“Just continue from where Wesley stopped.”

Again, the reading was perfect. Benny tended to be more dramatic and emphasized important words and phrases. The captain smiled and reached out for the return of the book.

“You are both fine readers. Benton, tell me what a *gargoyle* is?”

“A grotesque (ridiculous, ugly) statue that sits near the top of buildings.”

“And Wesley, a *Centaur*.”

“Half man – in front – and half horse – in the back. Always capitalized for some reason. I always thought one would be good to ride long journeys on because you could have conversations with it.”

The captain laughed out loud.

“Now, for the two of you – an arithmetic (math) problem. Wesley, you will be asked to answer first. Benton, you will agree or disagree with his answer. If you disagree, correct it. Ready?”

They both nodded, very much enjoying the activities even though they realized they were actually being given a test.

“Ten, plus 17, less 7, times two, plus 2, divided by 7.”

He looked at Wes expecting an answer. He got a grin.

“The answer is six, Sir.”

“Benton, do you agree or disagree?”

“I agree. When you said ‘divided by’ I thought you were going to say 6 and then the answer would have been 7.”

“Now one from history. Who was Alexander the Great? Benny.”

“He was a great general from Greece that conquered most of the known world by the time he was about your age, Sir. He died young, I believe.”

“And Wesley: The common name of the natives of the English Islands that worshiped trees.”

“The *Druids*, Sir. They were treated just terribly by the Christians when they came to conquer us – well, them – I mean England. They worshiped other things in nature, also – not just trees.”

“You are exceptional students for your ages. Now it is your turn. Decide on one question between you and ask me.”

They put their heads together and discussed possibilities for several moments. Finally, Wes spoke.

“Who invented the printing press and when?”

“I should have anticipated that from two book lovers. How about Johannes_Gutenberg around 1440. He was German and do you boys know what his actual profession was?”

Benny answered.

“I think he was either a silver smith or a gold smith.”

“I vote for gold smith,” Wes added with a nod and his right hand partly raised as if in a classroom.

The Captain smiled.

“Excellent. You are exceptionally knowledgeable young men.”

“You, also, are very knowledgeable, Sir, for a not so young a man,” Benny said, having conjured up a sentence that had gone places he had not intended. He hoped it hadn’t offended the Captain. He tried to save himself. “I meant it is not what youngsters our age would have expected of a ship’s Captain – no offense intended, you understand.”

It garnered little more than a broad smile. The captain thought in silence for some time before speaking.

“We have an interesting situation on board the *Southern Breeze*. Dag is a very bright boy with no formal education whatsoever. You two are, also, obviously bright boys who have had a surprisingly excellent education for farm lads. Two aspects of it strike me in an agreeable way: you two will continue your education here in my library. You will also teach Dag to read and write and do numbers and learn history and philosophy.

“You will report here every morning at first sun and study

for eight passes of the sand clock.”

He pointed.

“And how much time passes during one pass of the clock, Sir?” Wes asked.

“Half an hour. You will learn that eight passes equal eight bells, which equals the length of one watch. A watch is the length of the work periods generally assigned on a ship. The Ship’s bell sounds out every half hour – one bell through eight bells.”

“So, six watches in a day?” Benny asked more for clarification than because he needed an outright answer.

“That’s right.”

“And the rest of the day? How will we spend that?”

“You will follow Dag’s lead. He knows what must be done. Dag likes to keep busy. I don’t take to piddling, half done tasks, or any other form of slacking off.”

“Yes, Sir. This may not be so bad after all,” Benny said before he thought how that might sound.

The captain smiled.

“You have before you the opportunity for your greatest years. Squander (waste) them and you will lose a large chunk of your life. Thrust yourselves into them with zest (energy) and wonder, and you will grow in ways you have never before been able to imagine.”

“You love sailing, don’t you, Sir,” Benny asked.

“I do, lad. I can envision (imagine) no greater life.”

There was a knock at the door.

“Come.”

It was Dag with two pairs of britches.

“The larger ones are brown, ta match your hair, Wes. The others are black ta match yours, Benny. Chose some with extra around the waist so ya can grow. We’ll cut lengths a rope so ya can belt ‘em up when yer done here. Doesn’t pay ta lose britches while you’re climbin’ a mast.”

The captain spoke to Dag.

“You let them eight bells until noon. Have a plan for them by then.”

“Yes, sir. I figured the brass needs a good shinin’ up on the poop deck (in Latin, the word from which ‘poop’ comes

means stern or rear part of a ship). From there I can introduce them ta things a importance on the ship.”

The Captain nodded indicating his approval.

The boys stepped into their new britches and the three of them left. They followed Dag up to the supply deck where they arranged ropes for their waists. The boys had questions.

“What’s this eight bells we’re supposed to get?” Benny asked. “Nothing like the *nine tails*, I hope.”

“When the eighth bell sounds on a sift it means a man’s shift is over – he’s eight bells – off watch – maybe has time for himself. The captain meant you’d be off duty so you could sleep ‘til noon.”

“What’s the poop reference?” Wes asked.

It is the highest deck at the very rear of the ship – up above the captain’s quarters. It’s small, but them with a lookin’ glass can see clear ta the horizon ta scope out weather that may be settin’ in, and take note a other ships – land, an things like that. Passengers like ta sit up there when catchin’ the sun or feelin’ a breeze seems like a good thing. Crew is seldom there. Looks to be sloughin’ off (being lazy) if yer caught being up there. You’ll see it this afternoon when we do the polishin’.”

Dag handed them each a blanket before they went below to the crew’s quarters.

“Why blankets on such a hot day?” Wes asked.

“Double ‘em and spread ‘em over the rope hammocks. Lay on ‘em. It’ll be kinder on your skin ‘til it gets toughened up.”

With the blankets arranged they were immediately asleep.

Dag was back to awaken them at noon according to the Captain’s orders. He brought them food on two tin plates and cups of water. It appeared to be some sort of stew.

“Salty,” Benny said. “Not complaining, understand!”

They were sitting on the floor, backs against the inside of the ship.

“Everything’s salty. Salt keeps things from rottin’ so soon.”

“Why’s this floor flat if it’s the bottom of the ship. It’s pointed sort of, right?” Wes asked.

“That pointy bottom is called the keel. Between it and

this floor is the bilge. That's the area where water drains to after a rain or storm. See the holes in the floor, there and there and there. They lets the water down into it. There are bilge pumps we man from time to time to pump the water out. Where we're sittin' here is below the water line outside. Workin' those pumps durin' a storm will fall mostly ta us I'm thinkin', now that there's three a us."

"What happens when the bilge gets full," Benny asked.

"Ship slows down – gets really heavy – rides low in the water – hard to steer an maneuver. If it bubbles up into this deck through them holes, the ship's likely to sink."

"Good idea to keep it pumped out then, I guess," Benny said

"We have several very large, freshwater tanks. Filled when we hit a port and when it rains. Got ta be sure no sea water gets in it or there goes the water and if the water goes so does the crew. Drink too much salt water and you wrinkle up and die. Never seen it happen but heard tell."

They returned their plates and cups to the galley where they washed them off in a large tub and set them to dry.

"How you feelin' – scrapes and bruises-wise I mean."

"I'll be okay," Benny said.

"It is what it is," Wes said. "I understand we have an appointment on the poop deck."

"You'll find there's lot's a brass on this ship. The top a the rail on the poop's capped in brass. Lots a work. Got rags an polish in the bag here. Best ta keep 'em polished up. They get too dull and it doubles the work ta get 'em shinin' again."

"The air smells fresh up here," Benny said, sniffing as they arrived.

"Like I said, if there's a breeze this is where you'll get it – well, up the masts there's more, a course."

He took the cloth out of the sack and tore it into small sections.

"Hey, that looks a lot like my britches," Benny said.

"T'is. Good and soft. That's what ya need ta polish brass."

"But what will I wear when we get back to England?"

"By the time we're back there you'll be six inches taller,

ten pounds heavier, and not even the three of us could stuff your buttocks back into them. Be glad they can be put to good use. No room on a ship for things that can't be put to good use."

The boys soon caught on to the tricks of brass polishing – mainly don't apply more polish than can be rubbed off before it dries. It was a lot of work. Dag didn't settle for anything less than perfect and he wasn't bashful about pointing out the boy's errors. They were both strong for their ages – farm work did that for a guy – but the polishing motion was new. They understood they'd be sore by morning – well, sorer, that is.

"Not good," Dag said pointing ahead of the ship, on out to sea.

"What? Not good doesn't sound good," Benny said following the line of Dag's arm forward.

"Them clouds – black, high, an swirlin'. Got a storm out there."

"What do we do?" Benny asked.

"We do whatever the captain says to do. Probably haul sails and ride it out if it's comin' at us. Gotta keep the bow (front) headin' right into the waves. Get caught crosswise between 'em and we'll likely capsize (sink). We'll pull in behind her and follow along if it's movin' away from us. That'll set a strong breeze into the sails. Make good time. No matter what, the waves will grow high and pack a lot a wallop (power). Anybody on deck will be roped."

"Roped?"

Again, Benny put his hands to his throat. Dag managed a quick smile.

"Not that. A rope around his waist. Other end tied to the ship so if he gets washed overboard we have a chance a pullin' him back."

"What does 'haul sails' mean," Wes asked.

"Pull 'em in and tie 'em to their booms. If we're headin' into it, the haulin' will start immediately. The crew's had its eyes on it, you can be sure; they'll know what to do long before the orders is give."

"What's your best guess?" Benny asked. "Into her or followin' her?"

"Keep polishin' but keep an eye on her, too. See what it

looks like ta you.”

“I’ve been doing that,” Wes said. “Looks to me like its coming north east from south west. Maybe it’ll cross in front of us and move on north.”

“That’s good – my guess, too,” Dag said. “Storms follow the warm currents if there is any. Makes it really hard ta predict what path they’ll take.”

“Look,” Benny said. “Men are climbing the masts. Does that mean they’ll be hauling the sails soon?”

“Yeah. Real soon. Dangerous up there, now. See how them clouds is toppin’ out. Growin’ taller by the second. We call that, ‘billowin’. We’re in for it, I can tell ya that.”

“What do we do?” Wes asked.

“Well, since you two is under my command, I guess I get ta make the decision. We’re gonna head down ont a the main deck and see what orders come. There go the sails – bein’ hauled and tied in place. That means the order’s been give.”

The wind came up suddenly whipping the sails as if it were going to shred them into rags. The sky darkened. The waves grew high, just as Dag had predicted. The water, blue in the calm, became black, spewing white foam from across their high, rolling edges. They rose in height to meet the railing around the top deck and crashed across the planks. The boys suddenly understood why everything that was left on deck was *always* tied down.

“If you up-chuck, try ta miss yer pants or they’ll stink fer a week. Hold on ta the belt a the one in front a ya. Bend down and follow me.”

Down on the main deck they turned toward the stairway that led to the captain’s quarters and the decks below. From there they would be able to move forward through the galley. The wood beneath their feet became immediately slippery. They bent into the oncoming wind. It carried tons of water with it making it heavy and hard to fight as they struggled toward the opening.

Benny, holding on to Dag, saw it first.

“A huge wave coming right at us, guys.”

“Quick. Down the stairs. I can tell you that ocean water’s gonna pain your sores like the sting a the whip.”

Dag had just taken hold of the stair railing when it hit. The boys were covered and swept off their feet.

CHAPTER FIVE

Survival at Sea

The ship swayed from side to side so severely that at times it came close to taking ocean water across its rails. When that first huge wave passed over the deck the boys found themselves laying on the deck, strung out in a row still clinging tightly to each other's belts. There was no need for directions. They each scrambled down the stairway. Dag stayed near the top and closed the door above his head. It was almost water tight and enclosed the opening to keep out all but a few drips of water.

"Everybody okay?" he asked.

"If *okay* means not drowned, it looks like we are all okay," Benny said.

"We need ta get ta the pumps. One's fore (front) and one's aft (rear). We'll get you two set up here, aft; then I'll head up ta the bow and work that one. I'm more used ta it."

The pump had a long wooden handle on top. As it was moved up and down at one end, the pump sucked up the water from the bilge deck and forced it overboard. Dag demonstrated how the two of them should operate it – standing opposite each other across the long handle. He turned to leave.

"How will we know when to stop?" Benny asked.

"What's today, Saturday? You'll know by Tuesday."

It didn't seem like good news and the boys hoped he had been exaggerating. Up to that point, he hadn't shown much of a sense of humor, however, so they just got to work.

At the outset, it didn't seem like a difficult task – the long handle made it fairly easy. Into the second hour, however, their arms and backs were beginning to feel it.

"How about you rest a few minutes?" Wes suggested. "Then I'll rest, and we'll be back at it together full out."

"I'm thinking when Dag said to keep at it he meant for us to both keep at it, regardless."

"You're probably right. Less talk and more work, I guess."

After another hour, Dag returned. They had not expected that. They heard the storm still raging outside and the ship continued to toss back and forth and up and down at sever angles. Water was still running across the deck floor so, surely, they couldn't be finished with their job.

"Buck come ta pump up front. He sent me back ta help here. How's it goin'?"

"We have no way of knowing. We're just keeping at it."

"Good men. Move down a bit, Benny, and let me get in beside ya. It'll make it easier even if it's hard ta tell at this point. Once things are handled up on deck well be spelled here."

"How long we been at it?" Benny asked.

The others could tell his younger body was nearing exhaustion.

"Seven bells," Dag said.

"That's three and a half hours, right," Benny said.

"Right."

"You think the storm's calming down any?" Wes asked.

"It'll calm down as fast as it come up out here on the ocean. No way a tellin'. The clouds is so thick there's no seein' through 'em ta the other side."

"Do ships often tip over and sink in a storm like this?" Benny asked, really wondering if prayers were in order.

"Not with Captain Marrok and Mr. Tristin both mannin' the wheel together. A stronger and more stubborn pair you'll never find. They'll keep us true inta them waves. Don't you doubt that none. You'll learn to hate Tristin, but in a storm or a fight you'll want him at your side."

"Fight?" Benny asked. "Nobody said anything about fights."

"Like if a pirate ship boards us. Only happened once since I been on aboard. In the end we sent their ship ta the bottom with the cannons and left the lot of them in our wake (wave left behind a ship), bobbin' in the water offerin' up curse words like I'm sure you ain't never heard."

"You just left them there to drown?" Wes asked.

"Them or us. There was barely enough food and water left fer our crew. Sharin' it would a meant both crews would a died after a while. I know Captain Marrok was bothered by it,

but he had no other way, ya see. They's the ones that caused their own problem if you stop an think about it."

The boys grew silent and kept to their task. Their thoughts were similar: Storms, pirates, fights, food and water becoming short, working until you didn't think you could work for one more minute, dying when left behind in the middle of the ocean; it wasn't at all how they had thought it would be. Of course, in that moment in which they had to make the decision, they really hadn't had time to have thoughts about 'how it would be'.

At eight bells a big, burly (large and strong) man came to relieve them.

"You done good, here. Get yourselves eight bells. You'll probably be back at it next watch. Tristin said so."

Without a word to the man, Dag hitched his head for them to follow him. The boys' inclination would have been to at least say, 'Thanks', but that didn't seem to be the way of life at sea.

Several minutes later they were at their bunks. Up against the side of the ship like that they could hear the huge waves dashing against the wood – the wood that was the only thing protecting them. The hammocks were swaying back and forth. Dag crawled into his and lay on his back, hands clutching the outside ropes beside him to keep from being tossed to the floor. Wes boosted Benny up into his and managed himself into the center one. The boys positioned themselves the way Dag had done. They knew they would never be able to sleep under those circumstances.

The moment eight bells sounded their eyes snapped open. Dag hit the floor on the trot. Benny and Wes scrambled out of their hammocks and followed him.

"Why the hurry?" Benny asked.

"We're supposed to be ready to take over watch when eight bells sounds. We'll be late. We slept too long."

Thankfully the big man who was spelling them at the pump didn't seem disturbed over their sixty seconds of tardiness.

Four bells into their watch the ship suddenly stopped moving so erratically. They could hear men's voices, which had

been drowned out by the sounds of the storm.

“Okay, half time, now,” Dag said.

The boys understood as he slowed their pumping pace considerably.

“I will go check with Tristin to see what stations he wants us to stand now that things are getting back to normal. There will be things to do; make repairs, maybe mend sails, clean up the main deck. He’ll check the depth of the water in the bilge and order continued pumping according to what he finds.”

Dag left. The boys worked the handle.

“I think this is going better since we slept, Wes said.

“Yeah – but we’re working at half speed remember!”

“Oh, that’s right. Still, I’m feeling pretty good. You?”

“Honestly, I’m pretty worn out,” Benny said. “I was so surprised I had been able to sleep. I guess it’s like Dag said, you sleep when you’re exhausted regardless.”

Dag returned almost immediately.

“Captain Marrok wants to see us. Tristin will send somebody else to tend to this pump.”

They climbed up a ladder and through a hatch (door in the floor) to the main deck and were surprised it was well toward being dark outside. Benny pointed to the sky.

“Time flies when you’re breaking your back,” he said trying to be humorous.

Wes offered a quick smile. Not Dag.

Dag knocked at the Captain’s door.

“Come.”

He pushed the door open. They were greeted by a big smile and not much else. The Captain was changing into dry clothes.

“Come in. I’m told you three really came through for the old “*Breeze*” during the storm.

It took a moment for the boys to recognize his, *Breeze*, reference was to the ship. Wes and Benny broke smiles in recognition of the compliment. Dag remained sober.

“I needed all hands on deck (everybody working) to keep her afloat. You probably saved our hides working the pumps. Good work.”

None of the three felt it was their place to offer a

response. Benny managed a shrug.

“You will dine with me, here in my cabin tonight.”

He looked at Dag and swished him away with the back of his hand. Wes and Benny offered a puzzled look as if asking why he was told to leave. Marrok noticed.

“The boy will see to the food for us. He will be back.”

Dressed, he sat to pull on dry boots. The boys took that as proof he was rich. They had never had two pairs of shoes at the same time in their lives.

He continued speaking as he motioned them to him so he could examine their injuries.

“It seems I need to begin calling him by his name, Dag, rather than ‘the boy’ now that we have three boys onboard. Your cuts seem to be doing as well as can be expected after all you’ve put them through this afternoon. Help me arrange the chairs around the table.”

They moved to help.

“You received a bitter initiation into life on board a sailing vessel, I can tell you that. I assume you are back to normal.”

Wes made the response.

“What we have observed, Sir, is that what we need to be considering ‘normal’ keeps changing. If you are asking whether or not we were frightened, the honest answer is, yes – out of our skulls, sir!”

“I think he means terrified, Sir. If Dag hadn’t assured us that you and Mr. Tristrin could take the ‘Breeze’ through the worst Mother Nature could throw at us, I’m not sure how I would have made it – that’s honesty from us, like I assume you want.”

“*Honesty*. A strange concept. It’s always best to be honest except when it isn’t.”

“What?” Benny asked looking and sounding puzzled.

“Only living your life *thoughtfully* will explain that to your satisfaction. You still have lots of time to understand.”

He motioned for them to sit. They waited for him to take his seat first. That was how they had each been taught it should be done in their homes – adults first – father, their mother, then the children. Marrok seemed impressed.

“Before you leave my quarters tonight graze through my library and pick out the books you will begin tomorrow. I won’t

interfere with your choices, but suggest that over time you make sure you sample all areas of knowledge, from alchemy (experimentation) and philosophy (ideas) to history and mathematics. You will each develop special areas of interest, of course. On Sunday mornings, I will ask you to write one page telling me the most exciting or interesting things you learned that past week.”

“Does Dag know we are to teach him?” Wes asked.

“I have spoken with him about it. He is eager to learn, but reluctant to let other youngsters do the teaching. You see, in the process, he will have to reveal to you his weaknesses – all the things he does not know – and that is often hard for a person like Dag. He has had to be self-sufficient most of his life.”

“Thank you for telling us that,” Wes said. “We’ll make it work, you just wait and see.”

The food was wonderful: meat, three vegetables, bread with butter and jam. The captain clearly ate a whole lot better than the crew. The three boys were to gather there in the cabin at six the next morning to begin their studies.

“I have moved my things from the table to my desk.”

He pointed.

“Consider the table your home while you are studying. I will be in and out, but will try to not disturb you.”

“It is difficult for us to understand your great kindness to us,” Benny said.

“Yes. If word gets out how well you treat stowaways, you’ll be overrun with them,” Wes added, only partly in fun.

“Again, life will help you understand it. Remember this one thing that I believe with all my heart: Knowledge is Power and knowledge brings happiness. What better gift can one generation give to the next?”

The boys nodded, knowing they didn’t fully understand, but they were growing to feel safe in the man’s care.

They took their time selecting books and placed them on the table before leaving that night. The boys privately decided that although they would both assist Dag, it should be Wes who would take the lead. Being older than Dag they hoped it would ease the relationship and the problem the Captain had

explained. It was Benny, however, who made the first move.

“Dag, we haven’t had a chance to thank you for all the things you’ve already taught us about the ship and living on it. You have been very patient and we like the way you let us try things right off instead of just watching you. It’s the way the very best teachers teach their students – learning by doing.”

“You’re welcome. I’m having a good time doing it. Ya learn things fast. Captain Marrok says you’re goin’ ta teach me ta do school stuff.”

“We’d sure like to. It’ll be like a trade between us – you teach us living on a ship things and we’ll teach you learning from books things.”

“A good trade, I think,” Dag said. “I can count up into the hundreds. I figure my next step will be into the thousands. I can make my name.”

“Sounds like you have a good start on it, Dag. This is going to be so much fun.”

“I think it might be,” Dag said offering a genuine smile for the first time. “I’d like ta learn words in the books, too.”

“We figured that,” Benny said. “Wes and I picked out a book for you to start with. It’s a story about bandits attacking the carriage of a princess.”

“Is she pretty?” he asked before thinking, then blushed.

“One of the great things about reading is that you can make her as pretty in your head as you want her to be.”

Dag compared the thickness of his book with the much larger ones the boys had selected for themselves. He accepted that. He opened it and paged through it.

“Ya really think ya can show me how ta figure all this out?”

“I’m sure of it. And, of course, if we don’t, the captain says he’ll hang us both from the closest boom.”

Dag frowned and looked first at the captain and then at the boys. Their faces immediately broke into smiles and Dag understood it had been a joke. Jokes had never played much of a role in his life. His life had been hard – often unpleasant and frightening. The year before the Captain had taken him in, he had lived by himself on the streets of Portsmouth, a rough shipping city in the south of England. Most days he had been

hungry and every night he had been terrified. Life at its worst on the *Breeze* was a hundred times better than life on the streets in that city. Inside his head, he figured his life had begun the day Captain Marrok caught him trying to steal coins from his purse. Had it been most other captains, things would have turned out quite differently.

After leaving the Captain that evening, the three of them went up on deck. It was good to breath in fresh air. Everything looked and felt clean. They climbed on top of the cock boat, which they had hidden under when they first came aboard. It turned out to be one of Dag's favorite times and places to sit and think and watch the sky at night. Dag figured it was finally time for *him* to ask some questions.

"So, you lived on farms."

That was about all he knew about farms – that there were farms – so he hoped what he had said would prompt a response. Benny, the eager talker, began.

"Yes, farm boys. We raised sheep and cattle and had oxen for work and horses riding. Had fields of hay and wheat."

"About the same up where I lived," Wes said. "Father planted a new grain from the new world for the first time this year – some call it maze and some corn. It's been around quite a while. New to us, though. Grows on tall thing green stalks. Father said he thought it would take up too much land and produce too little product to be a regular crop."

"What kind a work did ya do on the farms?"

"Plowed fields before planting. Fed the livestock – sheep and cattle. Milked the cows. Made the garden in the spring and weeded it all summer. Built and fixed fences. Carried water for the stock and chickens. Then in August we helped cut and take in the hay and wheat other things we grew."

"I could tell ya was used ta workin'. That's good. I wasn't when Captain Marrok brought me on board. Before, I worked just ta survive I guess ya could say, but skills like stealing food and coins and findin' safe places ta sleep at night didn't count none here on ship."

"May we ask how you and the Captain got together – something about coins, was it?"

"Yeah. He was sittin' in a outdoor eatin' place near the

docks. He was all decked out in a long red jacket and puffy black britches tucked into high leather boots. I waited 'til he'd had a few pints (beers) then crawled up behind him and went after his purse a coins. Ship's officers always had lots a coins. Real careful like, I reached in his pocket an found his purse. I'd got away with it hundred's a times before. That time, though, he reached in his pocket an found my hand. I knew I was in fer a beatin'. I got 'em often. But you know what he done? He stood me up straight an looked me over. He asked what I wanted him ta call me. He opened his purse an put two coins on the table. He asked me about my parents, where I lived, an things like that. Then he said he'd give me a choice. He'd feed me supper and then give me the two coins an I could leave, or he'd feed me supper an then I could come an see his ship. If I liked it I could stay an work fer him. I thought it was some kind a lie, a course. But, then he sat me down in the chair beside him an ordered me food – first time I ever had jam on bread – an bread that weren't hard or moldy.

“After I finished, he asked me which it would be – the coins or going with him ta his ship. I didn't know how ta trust people back then so I stood up and asked him ta point out which ship was his. He did an I saw it. When he looked away I grabbed the coins an run away.

“That night while I was shiverin' under a bridge makin' ready ta try an sleep, three drunken sailors come along an started pushin' me around. They thought it was fun, but they really hurt me. I got a bloody nose an bruises. Then one a them asked me if I knowed how ta swim. I didn't, but I wouldn't speak to 'em. They picked me up by my arms an legs an carried me ta the end of a dock. They swung me back an forth between them an let me go sailin' out over the water. I knew I was all but dead. I remember that it didn't really bother me none. I figured dead couldn't be much worse than how I'd been livin'.”

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CHAPTER SIX

Pirates!

“So, it’s clear you didn’t die. How did you survive?” Benny asked.

“The men were so drunk they had very little strength an only tossed me a few yards out into the water. I managed ta struggle back ta a piling (support) at the dock an once I was sure they was gone I climbed it an was soon up on top. I just sat there with my feet danglin’ fer some time. The breeze made it cold and I begin shivering. I put my hands in my wet pockets ta keep ‘em warm. It didn’t help none and I discovered I had lost the two coins the Captain give me. I was about ready ta just slip back into the water and let myself sink ta the bottom forever when I noticed the lanterns bein’ lit on one a the ships anchored over at the wharf. It was the one the captain in the red coat had pointed out.

“I figured I could sink myself to the bottom a the bay whenever I wanted ta do it later on, but maybe I should give the Captain’s offer a try. If it was really just a trick so he could beat me, I’d took beatin’s before. If it was a honest offer, which I doubted all the way, I might get another meal at least or a second chance at his coin purse. I got up and walked ta the ship. A man from the crew stopped me at the gangplank and told me ta be gone. I marched right up ta him an told him I had come at the invite a the Captain in the Red coat. ‘Tell him Dag is here,’ I said standin’ up as straight as I could an foldin’ my arms across my chest.

“I don’t think he never would a done that – knowin’ what I know now about how the crew operates – but suddenly, there at the top a the gangplank stood the captain lookin’ right down at me. He motioned fer me ta come up ta him. I was still drippin’ wet. He put his arm around my shoulders and turned us toward several of the crew and he said, ‘This is my good friend, Dag. He is a member of the crew now – my cabin boy – and you will treat him with the respect we all give each other on this ship’.

“Well, right off three a the men stepped up and offered me their hand to shake. I’d seen men do it, but I’d never been a party ta it. I did my best. Later, when I asked Captain Marrok

if I done alright, he said I done fine. I can still feel that fine feelin' bloomin' in my chest when I think about it. That was the first compliment I ever got in my life. I will never forget it."

"Wow! What a story," Benny said.

"What a Captain," Wes said.

Dag turned to him and nodded long and deliberately.

"So far I think he's a lot better than the bottom a the bay."

He had been serious. The boys accepted it in that way.

Dag had another question. It came out of the blue.

"What do ya know about girls?"

It caught them off guard. Benny giggled. Wes put on a furrowed brow (forehead).

Benny spoke first.

"They are like a whole different animal from boys. They treat boys like we were all dumb and they are all smart. They hate all the things we love – fishing, wrestling, racing, tree climbin'. If they get a speck of dirt on them they run off to get cleaned up. They're always messing with their hair – touching it, brushing it and fixing ribbons in it. They wear a lot of clothes – layer after layer after layer. I always do my best to stay clear of them."

Wes smiled. At his age, he was beginning to have a different take on girls. He understood that happened when a boy got older. He offered his observations.

"Their skin is really soft and they keep it snowy white, even in the summer. If they like you they spend a good deal of time staring at you. If they really like you they will let you carry their books home from school. It's different talking with a girl than a boy – for one thing they do most of the talking and much of it is about things I don't understand. It's always quiet – somewhere between a whisper and regular boy talk. Mother is a girl – a grown up girl – and she is one of the finest people I've ever known."

"Yeah. Mine is, too. I guess girls change a lot when they grow up. I sure miss my Mother. Let's talk about something else."

"Time we hit the bunks, anyway," Dag said. "Thank you."

"Thank you for what?" Benny asked.

"Fer talkin' with me. It's the first time I really ever just

talked kid stuff with other kids before. I'm probably no good at it. Before I come here, moms and dads wouldn't let their kids come near me."

"You did really good, Dag. We like talking with you," Wes said.

"Yeah. One of the good things is going to be that we'll get to do lots more of this now that we'll be studying together," Benny said.

They slid off the little boat and started to their quarters. As they walked, Benny had a question.

"Why do you call the hammocks, bunks? In my experience bunks are a set of two beds fastened together one on top of the other."

"I don't know nothing about that. I just figured it was a crew's word that means 'bed'."

Wes nodded.

"You're probably right about that."

"My hammock here on the Breeze is the first bed I can remember ever havin' – one that is just mine, I mean."

At first, it made the boys feel sorry for him. Then, since he now had a place of his own, it made them feel good for him.

Having grown up on farms, the boys had learned to set their heads so they'd awaken at sunup. Humorously, that next morning all three of them hit the deck at the same moment. Even Dag saw it was something to smile about. He had a wonderful smile. The boys felt badly that he hadn't had chances to use it often during his life. Benny's grandmother had told him that a smile was one way people sent their love out into the world – free of charge. He had always believed that and spent a good portion of his time smiling at people.

(Love, by the way, was one of those things both boys agreed girls talked about all the time and boys rarely mentioned!)

* * *

During the following months, the three boys kept to their study schedule. They boys were amazed at how quickly Dag learned to read and write. Benny said it was as if there had always been 'reading seed' inside them just needed watering with a little direction. Wes and Benny were also amazed at the

number of books they were able to read when they set aside that large block of time every day. They settled into a very comfortable routine. They split 'Dag teaching time' between them. Dag came to smile more often and made attempts at humor. It became obvious to them that Tristin had been told to keep his distance. That, in itself, provided a great relief.

Sunday mornings the boys had breakfast with the captain and it always turned into a wonderful conversation about important topics. Benny proved to be an excellent teacher and Dag became comfortable with that arrangement. Much to Dag's amazement, Dag found his head was filled with questions he had never wondered about before: what was the moon and how did it get there, where did the sun go at night, why there were islands in the ocean, how were birds able to fly and fish breathe under water. It seemed every day he found new things to wonder about.

Wes, who had always been interested in building things, became interested in designing ships rather than buildings and offered several ideas to the captain about ways to improve the *Southern Breeze*. The Captain always listened and seemed genuinely interested. One of those was a system to power the bilge pumps so men didn't have to spend their time and energy operating them. He drew out the design and offered it to Captain Marrok. It placed a wheel with blades (like a small windmill wheel) just underwater at the rear of the ship. As the ship moved forward, that wheel was turned by the water. It, turned a series of shafts that turned a wheel that made the pump handle go up and down. Since it was always 'on' when the ship was moving, the bilge pumps only infrequently needed to be manned by crew members. The ship's carpenter helped him construct it. From then on Wes was something of a hero to the crew.

Benny became the comedian of the ship and could always bring smiles to the men's faces with a joke, silly song, or even a dance routine. Wes and Benny made sure that Dag always felt like he was the 'head' boy on the boat. When they first met him it was clear that was about the only claim to fame he had in life and it had become the thing he was the proudest of about himself.

At dawn, one Monday morning, while the young architect boy was 'architecting', the young teacher boy was teaching and the young head boy was 'head boying', they heard a call from the crow's nest.

"Ship – horizon to port."

The boys, the crew and the officers hurried up onto the main deck to take a look. The sun was still low behind them so the tiny, far away, image was difficult to make out. With full light, and as they moved closer, that would change.

Dag spoke to the boys.

"I overheard Tristin talkin' with Nudd that we're gettin' close to the Caribbean – that's where we're headin'. It's also where the worst a the pirates sail. I'm thinkin' there's a good chance that ship out there's one a 'em."

"What will that mean for us?"

"Can't never be sure. If it changes course an heads in our direction the Captain will have ta make some decisions – ta try an out sail it, ta hoist the Jolly Roger (pirate flag) an try ta scare it off – not sure about the other options. Was that the right word – options?"

"Sure was," Benny said.

Dag broke a quick smile. They continued watching from the poop deck where they had a good view as the event unfolded.

Two bells later the ship was close enough so the captain could make it out through his telescope.

"Rig for battle!" he called out as calm as if he were calling for his supper.

Tristin repeated it, louder and in a gruffer voice. The men scurried about the deck in ways the boys had not seen before. Tristin took over the wheel. The captain climbed to where the boys were and sent them to break out the medical supplies on the main deck. They were charged with taking care of any injuries that might come. Just below the main deck, on both sides of the galley, was the gun deck, which was where the cannons stood. Each cannon weighed between 1,200 and 1,800 pounds. They were made of brass and fired iron balls. Depending on the size of the cannon, balls weighed between six and more than forty pounds. Those on the *Southern Breeze*

fired nine pound balls that could travel 1,200 yards (the length of 12 football fields), although they were only really accurate within a few hundred yards. At ten foot intervals along both sides of the ship were rows of five small windows called ports in front of each cannon. They would be opened and, once loaded, the cannons would be rolled forward so their barrels peaked out through them. They were then secured in place with ropes. When a cannon fired, it produced quite a kick and sometimes broke away from the ropes holding it causing a great deal of damage as it shot backwards across the deck. That seldom happened on Marrok's ship. [*The terms 'loose cannon', meaning someone who unpredictably causes trouble, stems from that problem on the old sailing ships.*]

Cannon balls and pre-measured sacks of gunpowder were uncovered beside each big gun. Each one had its own crew that knew it like the back of their hands. The rear end of each one could be raised or lowered to change the trajectory (arc of the flight path) of the cannon balls.

In battles at sea it was typical for the two ships to set up parallel with each other (long sides of ships facing each other) so the cannons in each were in position to fire at the other ship. They would often set 100 yards off from each other to begin with and move closer as the battle proceeded. The ship with the cannons that fired the furthest had the advantage, of course. For a number of reasons, those big old guns were not extremely accurate – could usually hit the other ship, but probably not any particular point on the ship, like a mast. Smaller balls were more accurate, but did less damage.

That day the two ships kept to steady courses directly toward each other. It was soon clear the other one was, as Dag had suggested, a pirate ship. It was larger than the Southern Breeze. That meant it was probably faster with higher masts, larger sails and more cannons, but it also meant the Breeze could be maneuvered faster and more accurately. When they were 200 yards apart the other ship turned exposing its starboard side. They could see eight cannon ports to their five.

"I don't understand," Dag said. "The Captain is not turning our ship."

Wes was sure he understood, but didn't say anything.

They were soon within a hundred and fifty yards, then a hundred, then seventy-five.”

“What’s going on?” Dag said, clearly disturbed.

The other ship began firing. The cannon balls hit the water on both sides of them. The captain had moved clear forward on the main deck – very unusual. He leaned down and spoke into a tube. There appeared to be an explosion just below him.

“What’s going on?” Dag asked, by then clearly confused.

“Short version of a long story,” Wes said. “The captain took my suggestion and installed one cannon upfront at the stem (front edge) under the bowsprit (Beam that sticks out in front). Sailing straight on up close like this only exposes the narrow front of our ship to the enemy – much less of a target. That cannon is aimed at the water line of the other ship. If it works like we think it will that will open a good-sized hole low on the side, water will rush in, the boat will list (tip) so severely that their cannons will all be tipped and aimed down at the surface of the water instead of at us. Then, we turn and fire our five, port-side cannons, and destroy the vessel. So far it seems to be working. See that hole at their water line and watch, there ship listing.”

The captain gave the order and Tristin whirled the wheel until the ship was quickly parallel with the other one. The captain gave a second order: “Fire!” The captain had taken the ship in so close that the cannons could be extremely accurate. The main mast on the other ship was snapped like a twig and the sails fell into to water. The fore mast followed quickly and soon the Mizzenmast (rear mast). The other ship sat dead in the water.

“Will the Captain board her?” Benny asked.

“Doubt it. He’s not seekin’ trouble. Got his eyes on that treasure down in the Caribbean. My bet is we turn and re-set our course south west.”

Dag had nailed it. Southwest, it was – and immediately.

As the other ship listed onto its side, the pirates jumped into the ocean and swam away from their ship. They understood that when a ship sank, it caused a tremendous suction above it on the surface and pulled anything that might be there, under

the water with it. The men knew to get as far away as possible. Several Cock Boats had been launched and the men swam toward them.

Once the Breeze was well away, the Captain approached the boys as they put away the medical supplies. He addressed Wes, directly.

“Well, I think we just gave new meaning to the term ‘bow shot’ my boy.”

“Yes, Sir. Perhaps a bit more devastating than the original.”

[A bow shot was a shot aimed in front of a ship to warn it to stop.]

The Captain nodded and smiled. He looked from face to face.

“I’m not sure the world will survive when I unleash the lot of you on it.”

He left without further comment.

“What did he mean?” Dag asked.

Wes chose to answer.

“I figure he was just reminding us that bright and creative people like he believes the three of us are, must thoughtfully use our skills to make the world a better place – that we can make big changes in it that it might not yet be ready for.”

They remained silent as they stowed the supplies in the cupboard. Then Dag spoke.

“I think I have Captain Marrok ta thank fer first openin’ up my head ta the idea that I might be smart. I have you two ta thank fer setting me on the path ta knowin’ how ta use it.”

“And *you* to thank for using it so well,” Benny added not going to allow him to leave his own great effort out of the equation.

“I’ve been thinkin’ about all that. I can read now an I can write now. I think it’s time ta learn how ta talk, now. I want ya ta ‘fix’ my talkin’ every time I say somethin’ wrong. Will ya do that fer me?”

“Of course, we will – just in private. No need to put you on the spot in front of the crew.”

“No. Anywhere! There ain’t one member a this crew that couldn’t use the same kind a help. Anywhere, anytime, ya hear

me?”

“Okay. Of course, if that’s how you want it. How about we begin with just one or two things and then move on to others?”

“If that’s what ya think’s best.”

“Here’s an idea,” Benny said. “What is one thing that *you* think you need help with?”

“I never thought a that. Interestin’. Well, I’ve noticed you guys end lots a words in the ‘ing’ sound where I end ‘em in just the ‘in’ sound.”

“Let’s start there, then,” Benny suggested.

“I think I’m goin’ ta like this,” Dag said.

“*Going to*,” Wes said.

Dag’s face lit up.

“See, what did I tell ya?”

“*You*, not ya,” Benny said.

“Okay. Let’s see. *You are going to* be *helping* me with my *talking* an help me talk like *you* an the Captain.”

“*And*, not *an*,” Benny said.

“Just how many new words do *you* two think is a *few*, guys?”

They chuckled.

“It will be just, *you*, *and*, *ing*, and *to* for a while then,” Wes said.

“We won’t tell the Captain what yer doin’ – *doing* – *to* me, and we’ll see if he can tell, okay?”

“Our secret,” Wes said.

“That’s fine,” Benny said.

Dag continued.

“Okay. Thanks. Now I’m ready to learn more about girls. Seems I need to know about ‘em if I’m *going to* be ready when the Captain unleashes us on ‘em. Talk!”

Wes and Benny laughed ‘til tears came. Dag didn’t understand, but was happy to chuckle along.



CHAPTER SEVEN

An Island of Giant, Boy-eating, Ogres?

One Sunday morning at breakfast Captain Marrok turned to Dag.

“There seems to be something different about you since we set sail five months ago.”

“Wes says I’ve growed – grown – two full inches so far this voyage.”

He beamed knowing he had just made it into a game.

“Grown a good deal more than two inches in the way you talk I’d say.”

Dag looked at the other boys. His grin would not stop.

“Really, Captain?” Wes asked trying to keep a straight face and play along with Dag.

The Captain looked from boy to boy to boy and continued.

“This is exactly the sort of conspiracy I *like* aboard my ship.”

“Conspiracy?” Dag asked.

The Captain pointed at Wes.

“Plot.”

He pointed at Benny.

“Scheme.”

He pointed at Dag.

“Plot, scheme . . . *nefarious plan*?”

The boys clapped and laughed and the Captain smiled and chuckled.

“How in the world did you come up with the word ‘nefarious’ – evil or wicked?”

“I believe it’s come up several times in reference to a certain First Mate’s right hand man on a certain ship, sir.”

The captain raised his eyebrows, but said no more about it. Instead he unrolled a large map and motioned for them to gather in beside him at the table.

“This is the area called the Caribbean, or the Caribbean Islands or the Caribbean Sea. It lies here, south and a bit east of North America. Tropical weather, lots of rain, generally lush green growth, and sandy beaches. When we arrive you will

notice trees of a different sort from back in England – they are called palm trees. Some produce coconuts and some Bananas. Others grow dates and something called jelly fruit – delicious and nutritious. Those can all be eaten. Some of the palm plants don't have fruit. They grow in all sizes and shapes.

“Now, we are sailing toward that area from out *here* in the Atlantic Ocean.”

He pointed to a spot on the map. It seemed to the boys they were getting very close.

“Our first port will be *Charles Town* on this map. It sits on an island to the north side of several large islands.”

He pointed, again.

“It has been renamed *Nassau*, but local swabs (sailors) continue to call it Charles Town. It's a pirate haven (peaceful shelter), but the least dangerous I am told of several ports in the area. We will spend a few days there taking on supplies and letting the men have shore leave. Then we will sail south-south-east toward a group of small islands located around a larger one called *Great Inagua*. It is as far south as we can go and still be in what's known as the Bahamas territory. The one we are headed for is just south of that and is not on maps. It is tiny, but my report says it has fresh water and an abundance of plants and trees. I have heard there is a kind of large water bird there that is bright pink in color – *flamingo*, I believe it is called. Hundreds of kinds of birds are reported to live on the islands in that area. Hardly any people, however. At its center of our island is a steep, rugged, rocky hill reported to be over 50 yards high. That is surrounded by beaches of soil and sand that stretch from a few yards to twenty-five yards on out to the ocean. We do not speak of it in port. I have no idea how widely known it is. There is no port there. No inhabitants.”

“We've noticed both days and night have started to become warmer,” Wes said. “Can we assume more of the same in the weeks ahead?”

“Yes. It's called a tropical climate. Generally warm the year round. Much closer to the equator than England.”

“Equator?” Dag asked.

“The widest part of the earth going around it from east to west,” Benny said.

“Like a line drawn around the fattest part of a part of a ball,” Wes added hoping to add to Benny’s explanation.”

“Will we see the line?” Dag asked.

“Really, there is no line,” Wes said. “I should have said *imaginary* line.”

Dag nodded.

“We will not be going that far south,” Captain Marrok said.

“Do we get shore leave with the crew?” Benny asked.

If there was something new to be investigated, Benny wanted to be there.

“I will see that you get to shore, but with me. Charles Town is not a place for youngsters. I will even admonish (caution) the crew to stay in groups of at least four. True Pirates have no soul; they’d just as soon slit a man’s throat for a coin as shake his hand – probably prefer it, in fact. Life is not valued – not really even their own, I suppose.”

“Maybe we should just stay on the Southern Breeze,” Benny said, suddenly having a change of heart.

“No. It needs to be a part of your education. Goodness, boy, we’ve sailed most of five thousand miles from your home. Certainly, you want to see what it’s like here.”

“Oh, I really do, Sir. I’d just rather take my *un-slit* throat back to England with me.”

It was worth smiles all around.

The following Monday, around noon, they heard the call that they had all been waiting for from up in the crow’s-nest – “Land HO!” The lookout had spotted the island on which Charles Town sat.

By early afternoon they had dropped anchor fifty yards off the shore alongside nearly a dozen other ships. None of them were flying the flag of any particular country. The Captain had even had their flag of England lowered before sailing into port, thinking there was no reason to attract trouble. The crew left in the cock boat – eight at a time. Eight always remained on board to protect and maintain it. The Breeze sailed with a light crew of only 32 men plus the officers and boys. The largest ships of the day often carried 100 or even 150 on the ships of the royal navy.

At mid-afternoon, the Captain gathered the boys, and he, they, and three well-armed crewmen set out in the cock boat for shore. There were several docks. Just on shore was a wide area used as a street and storage area – serving much like the wharf in Liverpool. Inland from that was a row of buildings that stretched for blocks along the shore. They housed stores, businesses, craftsmen’s shops, places to eat, and hotels. The Captain directed them all immediately to the bath house. After five months at sea without bathing, Wes and Benny were appreciative of the opportunity. Dag disliked the idea, but he would do what the Captain asked.

There was a dozen, wooden bath tubs in a large room. Several boys kept them filled with warm water from vats heating over fires out back. Dag knew about bathing, but participated in it as infrequently as possible. The captain had a tub in his quarters and when the bilge carried rain water, he’d have the cook heat buckets of it and Dag would fill his tub. Often, after he had finished, the Captain would hand Dag a bar of soap and instruct him to clean up. That day Dag was in and out in a hurry. The other boys took their time.

While they bathed, the Captain and two of the men left. By the time the boys had finished he had returned with new clothes for them. Each received a new shirt, britches, a three-cornered hat, boots and two pair of long, white stockings.

“Why boots, sir?” Dag asked *clearly* not liking the idea of having to stuff his feet into *anything*.

“We’re going mountain climbing in a few days. The sharp rocks on the slopes will tear your feet apart – even though they seem to be leather hard on the decks. Notice how the boots have been deep oiled to keep them supple (flexible) even when they get soaked in water.”

“Why *two* pairs of stockings?” Benny asked.

“Feet and new boots don’t go well together. The boots will wear blisters on them and make it painful to walk. Wearing two pair of stockings at once should keep that from happening. I don’t want to start up that mountain with a crew of cripples. You’ll need to wear the boots pretty much full time between now and then to break them in.”

Dag watched Wes and Benny slip into their stockings –

he had never had any. He struggled with his won, but the boys let him figure it out. They had never thought that putting on stockings could present such a problem. Once he figured out the heel went on the bottom it went well. He wiggled his toes inside them and giggled – apparently, the new feeling seemed humorous. The same look-and-learn process was necessary with the boots. At least he had often helped the Captain on and off with his, so he had the idea.

“My, what a handsome group of young men I have here,” the captain said after they were dressed.

He turned to the three crew members.

“You men see to it that no roaming gang of women kidnaps them. We’re too used to having them on board to lose them now.”

It got grins all around.

Benny wondered why the Captain didn’t require the crew members to bathe. They smelled as bad as the garbage barrel. He didn’t ask.

Back outside the Captain gave them the option of getting haircuts. It had been many months and their hair hung to their shoulders. Wes and Benny nodded that they thought it would be a good idea. Dag knew about haircuts, but the only one he remembered ever having was the one the Captain had given him when he first came on board the *Breeze*. His hair hung part way down his back when it wasn’t rigged up (put into a pony tail). He agreed on the stipulation (condition) he could at least keep it down to his shoulders.

That finished, they walked the streets. The captain would point out certain features and the boys would ask about others. Wes and Dag seemed far too interested in the pretty women for Benny’s liking. The Captain noticed, but didn’t comment. It was the first time any of the boys had seen black people. They knew about them, but had no idea how they might look.

“They have beautiful skin,” Benny said.

“I bet they never have to suffer through those late spring sun burns we get,” Wes added.

“Or take baths,” Dag said.

Dag was thinking there were probably books in which he

could read about them. He had lots of questions. How did the skin get that color? Did it stay that color? Why hadn't he seen them before? Did they speak English? Were there black women – he had only seen men. There were more.

At five o'clock they had a meal at an open-air café – roast beef, boiled potatoes and beans. The boys were tired of five months of beans, but really enjoyed the rest. They had milk to drink. The boys had been raised on it, of course. It brought back good memories of home. Dag had only tasted it a few times. He savored each sip like it was the most special beverage in the world.

Benny ate fast. Wes and the Captain ate at a medium rate. Dag lingered over every bite as if it were the most delicious that had ever crossed his lips. Meat and Dag were nearly strangers. Wes and Benny smiled as Dag added lots of salt to everything.

On the way back to the boat, they stopped at a general store and the captain went in to make a purchase. He returned with a handful of sugar balls – a favorite candy of the day. Each was round, as large as a good-sized marble and almost as hard as one. Benny and Wes had tasted them before – not often, but they knew what they were and how good they would be. They popped them into their mouths. Dag looked his over for some time, smelling it and rolling it between his thumb and index finger. He tried to bite it.

"You'll break your teeth if you bite it," Benny said opening his mouth so Dag could see how it was done.

At first taste, Dag's face lit up. Meat, milk and sugar balls all in the same day. Life was good! (Well, there was that *one* downside – those dang boots!)

They remained on the ship in port two nights and set sail with the ten o'clock tide Wednesday morning. By then most of the crew had spent a good deal of time swimming in the. It did wonders for their aroma. The Captain was a wise man.

"Why we heading north, Sir?" Wes asked.

The boys were standing beside him on the poop deck as they got underway.

"I thought you said the island was to the south."

"Think about it," the Captain said smiling.

He often did that – answer a question with a question that helped the boys’ heads figure it out.

The boys grew quiet. Dag took the first stab at an answer.

“We been rubbing shoulders with pirates and cut throats who’d just love to get their hands on any ship they thought had wealth on board. They’d sail to catch that kind. By heading north, we are fooling them into thinking we are sailing to North America. Once out of sight of the port, I’m thinking the Captain will circle back south.”

The captain removed his hat and playfully exchanged it for Dag’s.

“I guess we only need one captain on deck. I’ll go below and take a nap.”

They laughed. When the captain reached to take back his hat, Dag held on to it which produced more laughter. That Dag kid was coming along just fine, Benny thought. Now, if he could just get his mind off girls, things would be nearly perfect.

At noon, the Captain went up on deck and motioned to the man at the wheel to turn west. An hour later the order was to turn south. The boys discussed the route.

“Remember the map,” Wes said. “I’m thinking that as we sail south we are skirting most of the smaller islands to the east that make up the Bahamas.”

About then a large land mass (Cuba) came into view straight ahead. The ship turned south-south-east and kept to a course some 300 yards to the north of it. It sat at an angle – south east to north west. At sundown, they tied up several of the large sails. The Captain explained that with no moon and sailing unfamiliar waters filled with tiny islands they needed to slow the ship to avoid running her aground. He set four men forward to keep their eyes peeled. Normally he might have just put down anchor and waited to go on the next morning, but with pirates everywhere he thought it was best to keep moving. By the time the boys were up and around the following morning they saw the masts were fully rigged with sails again. They spoke to the man at the wheel.

“Are we getting close?” Benny asked.

“Captain says we should be seeing a large island shaped

like a stocking due ahead, south-south-east.”

They lingered on the foreword deck for several minutes in hope of catching a glimpse of it before going to begin their studies in the Captain’s quarters. Soon bored with the endless stretch of sea ahead of them they went below.

“Is the stocking shaped island we’re looking for *Great Inagua* you told us about?” Wes asked.

“The very same.”

“Will we get close enough to see the pink birds?” Dag asked.

“We’ll make a point of it.”

“*Great Inagua* is a strange name. Does it mean something?” Wes asked.

“There are two islands named, Inagua – Great and Little. I am told Inagua means something like ‘interior water’ – ponds, perhaps small lakes. Springs for sure. Many are salt water. That’s where the brine shrimp thrive. The flamingos feed on them.”

“What language is, Inagua?” Wes asked.

“I’m told the actual name has changed gradually down through the years and is now some combination of English, Spanish, and French. I really don’t anything more accurate than that, Wesley.”

That was one of the things the boys all liked about the Captain – he never hesitated to say that he didn’t know something and never made up stories to cover his lack of knowledge. Benny figured his teacher back home, Mr. Terwilligar, could have learned a good lesson about that from Captain Marrok.

Several hours later they were back on deck as they neared the island. There were flocks of hundreds – perhaps thousands – of the big birds walking through the water on pencil thin, long legs near the shore. When they became spooked and took off in flight, it was as if a huge, brilliant-pink cloud had formed and first blew in one direction and then in another. It produced a deep shadow across the water.

“Why do they always return to the same spot?” Benny asked.

“I imagine that’s where the brine shrimp must be,” Wes

said taking an educated guess based on what the Captain had said. “Remember, the Captain said that inland there are many brine (salt) ponds apparently just teeming with those little critters.”

“Those shrimp any good for humans to eat?” Dag asked.

“I’ve heard the royal family eats shrimp,” Wes said.

At one point, a large, awkward looking bird landed on the deck and strutted around like it owned the ship. It had a huge bill that hung down almost to the deck. One of the hands told them he thought it was a pelican and that it stored the fish it caught in that big bottom part of its bill. It soon tired of the ship and flew away on wings that seemed gigantic when spread out.

Once past the island the boys returned below. While Dag described the pelican to him, the captain got out a second map. It was hand drawn on parchment (sturdy, old fashioned paper), folded many times, faded, and looked to be very old.

“This is the chart my grandfather drew of this area. So far it seems to be more accurate than the ones I purchased and brought along. See, here, is the Great Inagua we just passed at the toe – it stretches mostly east and west with the top of the stocking protruding north east. And this much smaller island that lies off its northeastern point is the one called Little Inagua. Our island is down here, south of them.”

“It really is just a speck, isn’t it,” Wes said.

The Captain nodded and turned the sheet over.

“This is my grandfather’s drawing of Marrok Island – he apparently named it after himself. See, it is basically round with the pointed mountain in the center and the beaches spreading around its base. He has marked two springs that flow fresh water from on the mountain sides – at least they did back when he visited it.”

“Where’s the treasure?” Dag asked.

“Treasure?” the captain asked, pretending to be surprised at the question.

“I’ve been thinking you wouldn’t outfit a ship and sail five thousand miles unless you was heading for something very special. What would be *that* special to a man whose grandfather was known to be a rich pirate? *Treasure* I figured.”

“My. Your brain has been working over-time, hasn’t it?”

Dag's full answer was a broad smile. He felt no need to agree with something that had been said if it had been correct so he usually just remained silent.

"Even after arriving at the island, there is one problem remaining," the Captain said. "This map does not show where the treasure was buried. Instead he drew a clue, here, see. I want you boys to see if you can figure it out. I'll leave the map here. Consider it your school work this morning."

"Why not just draw it on the map?" Benny asked.

"To make it so not just anybody would even know a treasure existed, I imagine."

It made sense.

He donned his hat and left for the deck. The boys gathered around the table to examine the map.

Wes described the clue: (The reader may want to draw it out.)

"Like an upside down 'V' and above it a small circle. Inside the 'V' is a line drawn right to left but not touching the 'V' – that's close to the top. Under that line are three, smaller, wavy lines, one under the other, and under them are five, very small squares. And the squares are inside a circle – a circle with a flattish bottom."

"More like a horseshoe with a line filling in across the open bottom than a circle," Benny said.

"Thinking about the way Captain Marrok described the island," Wes began, "I'm thinking that upside down 'V' is the mountain."

"That makes sense," Benny said. "You think that circle at the top – that could be up in the sky above the mountain – could be the sun?"

"I think it could be," Dag said. "Put up there so we'd know which side of the picture was the top. If that's *above* the mountain, then the rest of it is *on* the mountain don't you think?"

"Probably," Benny said nodding. "A line going across the mountain. Hmm?"

"Let's skip that," Wes said. "It's a straight line, but the three below it are wavy. What sort of lines are wavy?"

They sat in silence for some time.

"Hills?" Benny offered.

“Winding roads or trails,” Wes said.

“Shivering?” Dag said as if it were a question.
“Something cold, maybe.”

More silence.

Finally, Dag’s face lit up and he turned the sheet over.

“Look! Here and here on the old man’s map. Wavy lines. He put them out in the ocean like to mean the waves. Maybe it means water.”

“How interesting,” Wes said.

“Yeah. Good thinking, Dag.”

“Hey! If wavy lines mean water, then could a straight line mean land?” Benny asked.

“It could, but water under land?” Wes asked.

“Not under *land*. Say it, *water underground*,” Dag said.

“Like a spring, you mean?”

Dag nodded and frowned.

“Makes no sense, does it – hiding treasure under a spring.”

“Hmm?”

“Hmm?”

“Maybe not *under* the ground, but *below* the spring on the mountain side – down the hill from a spring,” Wes said.

The boys sat back in their chairs, arms folded across their chests and frowns growing across their faces.

Dag, being the practical one among the boys, tried to sum up what they thought they knew about the secret code drawn on the map.

“So, here’s what we’ve figured so far. The big pointed part is the mountain. The straight line is the surface of the land – just *where*, we aren’t sure yet. The wavy lines mean water – probably the springs – maybe ponds. We don’t know if that means under the water or below the springs like on the side of the mountain before you get up to one of the springs. Then there are all the little squares and we haven’t talked about them yet.”

“That pretty well summarizes where we are,” Wes said.

“What’s another word instead of ‘square’?” Benny asked.

“Rectangle?” Dag said. “Remember I leaned about them last week.”

“A square’s a rectangle, okay, but think of what is shaped like a square,” Wes said.

“Like a box, you mean?” Dag came back.

“Yes, like a box,” Benny said.

His face lit up.

“Like a box that could be carrying the treasure.”

“Treasure *boxes* are usually *chests*, right?” Dag added.

“Treasure chests! Yes!” Wes said. “Now we just need to find the location.”

“Yeah. JUST!” Benny said.

They sat quietly for a while longer. Wes began talking about it.

“So, the chests could be buried down the hill from a spring or it could be under the spring water, like sunk to the bottom of a pond fed by the spring. Are those our options?”

Benny spoke. “I think it is telling us that the water is under the land – why else have the land line?”

“Unless the line doesn’t mean land,” Wes said. “Maybe it means a big crack in the side of the mountain – like a slit or something.”

“Think about this,” Dag said. “Would a pirate sink chests filled with treasure and leave them for lots of years underwater? Wouldn’t that rust the treasure inside?”

“Interesting,” Wes said. “And the hinges and locks and the straps as well.”

“So, we leaning toward buried down the hill from a spring, then – underground?” Dag asked.

“I don’t know,” Wes said. “I do feel pretty certain the squares represent the treasure chests, and the wavy lines represent water of some kind.”

“The only water on the map was the springs,” Dag said.

“Doesn’t the water from the springs have to run off to someplace?” Benny asked.

“Like a stream, you mean,” Dag said.

“Yeah. The wavy water lines could mean a stream.”

“No streams on the map,” Dag said.

“Maybe everything wasn’t put on the map,” Wes said. “Maybe he just included what’s important to find the treasure.”

“We may have to wait until we get there, then, and see

what's what," Benny suggested.

"If the mountain is made out of rock, like the Captain said, then does it make any sense the chests could really be buried – I mean dig through rock?"

That had been practical Dag again.

"That's a good point," Wes said. "If it is all rock then that sends us back to the underwater idea."

"Has to be some ground for the palms to grow," Dag said.

"We've just ignored the circle around the boxes," Benny said.

"So we have," Wes agreed. "Any ideas?"

"A round hole in the ground?" Dag offered as a question.

"Or a round pond that's fed by the spring," Benny said.

"Or a big sack with the boxes inside it," Wes offered.

"So, paying attention to the circle doesn't help us anymore than ignoring it did," Dag said.

"We have to be missing something?" Benny said.

"At least we thought of three possible options for it," Wes said. "Since it was our assignment for this morning, let's write out what conclusions we've come to so we can give it to the Captain. I guess they are more like options than conclusions."

He had the best penmanship so he did the writing while the others offered the possibilities they had formulated.

They sailed on until just before nightfall when they came upon the east side of the island. From a distance, it did seem very small. From where they weighed anchor just outside a cove on the east side, it still seemed small as it was silhouetted (outlined) against the fading colors of the sunset. The drawing had been correct in all the major details – the beach, the palms around the base of the mountain, and the tall, steep, sharp mountain at its center. In the growing darkness, they could not make out much more than that.

"We'll go take our first look at sun up," the Captain said.

"Did the island have a name before your grandfather named it after himself?" Benny asked.

"It did."

The Captain paused dramatically, looking from face to face to face.

"Island of the Ogres."

“What’s a Ogre?” Dag asked.

“A huge, ugly, monster that eat boys for breakfast,” the Captain said continuing to be very dramatic about it. The boys weren’t entirely sure if he were teasing or not – either about the previous name or the preference Ogres had for boys.

He smiled, maybe to say he was just kidding. Maybe to say something else. None of the three of them felt certain that Ogres might *not* exist. For the first time in five months, none of the three of them slept very well that night.

They were up early, ready for what had all the trappings (indications) of a great adventure – a tropical island, a hidden treasure and, just maybe, dangerous monsters.

First, the Captain moved the ship into the small cove (inlet surrounded by land on three sides) that would protect it from the large ocean waves and any prying eyes that might pass close on ships.

It was just the boys, the Captain and four of the crew who took the cock boat to shore.

“Our purpose today is to become familiar with the island and locate those two springs,” the Captain said.

“What’s that?” Benny asked pointing to a spot near the top of the mountain.

Something shiny was glistening in the morning sun.

“Not sure. Perhaps some mineral outcrop – mica or quartz,” the Captain said.

He looked more concerned than he let himself sound. He nodded at the men as if to say, ‘keep an eye on that’.

Except for the Captain, the men had left their swords on board the ship, but each had their knives in leather sheaths (cases) at their belts. They moved their open hands to them as the Captain spoke. None of that made the boys feel safe and secure. The glint from the mountain continued off and on.

‘The ogre’s eyes?’ Benny wondered to himself.

‘The ogre’s belt buckle?’ Dag wondered to himself.

‘The ogre’s sharp teeth?’ Wes wondered to himself.

Their first activity was to walk the shore all the way around the island. It took close to an hour. The Captain figured that represented a distance of something just over two miles, which suggested it was between half and three quarters of a

mile wide. The sides of the mountain were mostly irregular rocky outcroppings with pockets of soil which allowed palms and other plants to grow here and there all the way to the top. They had come across one very small stream that worked its way down the mountain in a crisscross pattern, following depressions in the rock. At the bottom, it emptied into the cove where the ship sat. At the base of the mountain there were a variety of grasses growing – tall, short, greens through yellows to nearly white. There were all the kinds of palm trees the Captain had described earlier. They encountered birds, but no land based animals and very few insects – ants, of course – they seemed to live everywhere on the planet.

“Let’s follow the stream up the hill to its source,” the Captain said. “Boys first. May or may not be snakes living in the cool dampness close to the water. Another good reason for boots, Dag.”

Wes and Benny were both used to snakes. Dag knew of them, but, having lived in a city most of his life, had never actually encountered one. Not unexpectedly, Benny led the way – then Dag, Wes, the Captain, and, at the rear, the men from the crew.

The stream ran where the rock allowed it to run, therefore the back and forth pattern they had observed from below. There were numerous, low, waterfalls – from a foot to five feet high. The stream seldom became wider than two yards though in several places the water had puddled in rock basins to form ponds, the largest of which was three yards wide and twice that long. It looked to be no more than two yards deep in the center. The water wasn’t as hot as the air, but was certainly not cold. Wes and Benny hoped there could be a nice swim in their future. Water and Dag didn’t seem to be friends – a humorous situation the other boys thought since he was contemplating a life as a sailor.

Half way up the mountain the stream ended in a large pool. The water bubbled to the surface toward the rear, next to an overhanging rock, that looked to be the opening to a low, shallow, cave.

“A spring,” Wes said pointing to the bubbles. “Is it where the map shows it should be, Captain?”

“It is. Interestingly, the map does not show the stream. Either it wasn’t here seventy years ago, or he intentionally left it off his drawing.”

“The line in the drawing could be that ledge above this pool,” Wes said.

The Captain nodded, only noting the possibility and not confirming it was so.

The crewmen got down on their knees and scooped up cupped hands full of water to get drinks. Dag made a move to follow them. The Captain took hold of his shoulder and shook his head, gently. He handed him a canteen and put his fingers to his lips – meaning, of course, don’t speak about it. Wes thought he understood. If the men wanted to risk drinking the water that was their decision. The Captain and the boys would wait and see if it caused them any ill effects before drinking it themselves.

Dag was okay about it. He didn’t understand all that, but the Captain had never led him wrong.

Benny had a suggestion. He directed it in the form of a question to Captain Marrok.

“Since one of our ideas about the location of the chests is downhill from the spring or water, can we take some time to work our way down and see what we find?”

“Makes sense to me. While you do that I have another assignment for Cedric and Rand (two of the three crew members that were with them).

The boys moved carefully and deliberately down the hill. The men moved up – to investigate the area from which the glints of light had come. Using his spy glass the Captain slowly surveyed the horizon to see if there was company in the area that might be thinking of paying them a call. It is why the *Southern Breeze* was anchored with a side of guns facing out to sea – in case they might be required to defend themselves.

“What are we looking for?” Dag asked after a few yards.

“I have no idea,” Wes said. “Some indication that something had been buried, I guess.”

“After seventy years?” Dag asked.

His response quickly put things in perspective (made good sense) and made their search suddenly seem futile

(useless). Still, they kept looking. After half an hour they had descended almost to the beach without finding any indication of a clue.

“Well, that was fun,” Benny said. “We found out there are flowers and lots of black rock. Best thing, there are *no* girls to be found anywhere.”

Wes came up behind him and put him a playful head lock. Dag, recognizing it as play – a concept that was still quite foreign to him – landed a volley of pretend punches to his stomach. It was worth smiles and chuckles.

“You’re both lucky, you know,” Benny said after being released. “I could have bitten Wes on his forearm and kicked Dag where he’d not want to be kicked.”

They turned and looked up the hill for the Captain. He was talking with the men who had returned from their side trip on up the hill. He motioned the boys on down the hill and he and the men started down after them. When they met on the beach, it was Benny with the important question.

“Well, did you find a monster or other *nefarious* being?”

He winked at Dag who had used the term earlier. The men remained silent. Marrok spoke.

“Apparently nothing – probably, like I figured, sun shining off some minerals.”

Wes recognized, but didn’t point out, that the Captain’s phrase was meaningless. If there were minerals then there *was* something – not nothing. He figured by nothing he really meant no person or other unfriendly sort of being they needed to be leery of (concerned about).

If asked, both Wes and Dag would have to admit that so far, the day had been a big disappointment. Benny, on the other hand, enjoyed smelling the several flowers he had picked. It was mid-morning.

“Where’s the second spring,” Wes asked.

Marrok removed the picture/map from his pocket. The boys moved in close.

“We were just at that one, I believe,” he said pointing to the map. “Up here to the south and a bit higher is the other one. Just around the corner of the mountain on the south face I’d say. What do you think?”

The boys studied it for a long moment. Wes nodded. The others did as well. Dag had a question and he pointed at various spots on the map.

“What’s the funny X’s mean?”

“They are called asterisks (*),” Benny said.

He apparently had nothing to add that helped answer the question. They looked at the Captain.

“Some maps use those to mark trees or plant growth. I’m thinking that’s what they mean here. Of course, after all these years that may have changed quite a bit.”

Benny took a closer look and then surveyed the mountain side.

“Several of the marks around the spring on the map and there are lots of real old trees around the spring up there on the mountain.”

The others looked back and forth from the paper to the hillside. They nodded. Dag had a question.

“How did the soil get to the island anyway – it being rock?”

“Probably got blown in from the mainland,” the Captain explained. “The prevailing winds in this area come from the south east. That would make the dust and such come from South America. It would be very fertile soil. Fine particles will travel thousands of miles on the right breeze pattern. Then the moving air hits the side of a mountain, slows down, and drops what it is carrying.”

“How far from South America to up here?” Dag asked.

“Oh, I’m not sure. My guess would be somewhere between 400 and 800 miles.”

“We read that England is about 400 miles from south to north,” Dag said. “That’s a long way for dirty air to travel.”

The others smiled at the way he phrased it – they would never laugh at him. The three of them were amazed at how smart Dag was. He learned faster than the other boys – that was fine with them. They admired him and respected him for it.

“So,” Benny asked, “we going to go in search of the other spring now?”

“Why don’t you boys go on alone and see what you can find. The island seems perfectly safe. Tell you what, Wes, do

you know how to use firearms?”

“Been hunting with a musket my whole life, just about, sir.”

“You take this pistol. Keep it under your belt unless you need to use it. Don’t cock it until you are ready to fire. If you should need us, fire it. There are caps, powder and balls in this pouch. You alright with that?”

“Certainly. Thank you for having such confidence in me.”

Wes had to wonder, however, if the Captain really *did* have reason to think they might be in danger.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Caught Between a Wall of Water and Pirates

The boys talked among themselves.

Dag: "Do we climb up at an angle toward where we think the spring is?"

Benny: "I'd say we walk the beach around north until we think we're below it then do the climbing."

Wes: "I think Benny's suggestion is the safest. There's lots of loose rock on that mountain that we could trip over or lose our footing from."

That made sense to Dag and he had no further comment.

The Captain handed Dag the canteen *with* a comment.

"From the condition of our esteemed colleagues here it appears the elixir of life is safe to consume."

They moved out. Dag had to ask.

"Colleagues mean crew members?"

"In this case, yes. Means co-workers or people you work with. I think the captain used the word so the other men wouldn't understand he had really used them like water testers to see if it was safe."

"Smart of him, and you, too, for figuring it out. What about all those other words I never heard of?"

Benny tried: "Elixir means a solution or liquid – water in this case since water is the only liquid actually necessary for life."

Wes added: "Esteemed means valued."

"There sure is – are – lots of ways to say the same thing, ain't – aren't – there?"

"There are, and the more words a person knows, the more interesting he can make his conversation."

They continued walking the beach. Finally:

"I think this is about the spot," Wes said looking up the slope.

"And I think that's it," Benny said pointing to a spot near the top.

"Why you say that?" Dag asked.

"Just look! It's like an oasis up there – see all the palm

trees and tall grass and other plants. Like a green brush stroke on a black canvas. Vegetation needs water and springs supply water.”

It made complete sense. Without the need for more words or even nods, they started the climb. That face of the mountain was less steep than the one overlooking the cove. It took no more than fifteen minutes. Benny had been right. It was much smaller in size and flow than the other spring. The pond was deeper and only half filled. There was no stream flowing from it.

“Suppose it only produces enough water to keep the pond half full?” Dag asked.

“It looks that way. That would only be like a trickle, wouldn’t it?” Benny asked.

Wes nodded. Dag frowned. Dag often frowned when his head was working on a new thought or idea.

“There might be a crack in the rock at the bottom of the pond that lets some of the water run through into the mountain.”

He looked back down the hillside.

“See what I see?” he said, pointing.

“Probably not,” Benny said. “Tell us.”

“I’ll do like Captain Marrok does. What do you see on the hillside that seems odd?”

The other boys smiled. It was exactly like Captain Marrok would do and it worked. Wes answered.

“Clumps of plants every five or ten yards all the way to the bottom – almost in a straight line from right here. Almost none for thirty yards on both sides of it.”

“Like they are being fed by an underground stream – but it doesn’t come out anywhere,” Benny said.

“I think it might come out – but down under the ocean,” Wes said.

“What makes you think that?” Dag asked.

“Two things: first, unless the plants are really using all of it, which seems unlikely, it has to go somewhere and clearly wherever that is, isn’t visible to us – rock doesn’t absorb water. Second, look at the water along the shore. What do you see right below the line of plants and trees?”

“Water,” Dag said, then his face brightened. “Two kinds

of water, see. In close right beyond the line of plants is a dull kind of water. It's surrounded by shiny water like the rest of the ocean."

"Hmm," Benny said. "I don't get it."

"I have an idea, but really don't know if it could be so," Dag said.

The others turned toward him to listen.

"Well, sea water has salt in it. Salt, like Cookie uses on food, is white crystals. Crystals reflect light. The water from the spring is pure water – not salty – so maybe it doesn't reflect light the way salt water – the ocean water – does. It would seem duller by contrast."

"You're so smart," Dag," Benny said. "You leave Wes's and my brain in the dust every time you turn on your brain."

Dag shrugged. He was what he was and knew no different. The boys had already had the conversation with him about the difference between smart – knowing a lot of things – and being highly intelligence – being able to learn new things fast. He figured they had to be referring to the second of those since the other boys knew about a whole lot more than he did – yet. He was still trying to prove all that to himself.

"It is something we can prove when we get back down to shore – taste that dull water," Wes said.

"While we're up here we need to explore what we have found," Benny said. "I noticed something while we were climbing up here. From about twenty yards away, this opening back into the side of the mountain where the pond starts is shaped like that horseshoe, closed at the bottom. You can even see it from up close like we are, now."

They stepped back a few yards and took a close look. Everything Benny had said was true. The pond began someplace back inside the opening and extended out onto a flat terrace. The opening was like a small cave opening – solid rock all around and about four feet high. It was dark inside so they couldn't tell how far it ran into the mountain.

"I got two candles if they will help," Dag said pulling them out of his rear pocket. Got no fire, though."

"We can make fire," Benny said. "Gather some dry grass, Dag. Take your belt off, Wes. It has the biggest metal

buckle on it.”

Dag did not understand, but he did as he'd been asked. Wes struck his buckle against a rock and sparks flew. In only moments, the grass was on fire.

“Light one candle from it, Dag,” Wes said.

The wick glowed and then burst into flame.

“Put the other one away for later,” Wes said. “Now let's see what we got here in terms of a cave.”

The single candle didn't provide much light, but they could make out the general layout of the cave. Along the near side (the boy's left) was a rock ledge that varied between a foot and three wide as it went back into the cave. The pond became long and narrow along the right side. The cave appeared to extend back some distance. So did the pond. There seemed to be lots more water flowing than they at thought at first.

“I'm going inside,” Wes said. “You two stay out here and keep a look out.”

“For what?” Benny asked.

“Anything that shouldn't be here. I don't know. Whistle if anything goes wrong. I'll do the same from inside.”

He crouched down and entered the cave. He called back what he was seeing.

“Drier than the caves back home. Ceiling six or so feet in here. I can stand up. I feel a draft from behind me – from the opening. Must be some air outlet up above that sucks air inside. The water seems to stay fairly deep – maybe as much as two yards in some places. Except for one thing it seems like a regular cave that just goes on and on. The pond stops here – about ten yards from the opening.”

“What's that one thing that seems different,” Benny called.

“This big old Ogre snorting fire at me!”

“An Ogre? Really?” Dag said.

“No. Just funning you. Wait. There is one very odd thing here.”

“A baby Ogre?” Dag asked.

Wes and Benny both chuckled although Dag was clearly wondering.

“You'll never believe it.”

“How can we if you aren’t going to tell us what it is?” Benny said.

“Two things. A mostly empty barrel of tar and the remains of a camp fire – and I mean a recent one. The ash is still new, loose, not compacted like it would be if it were years old.”

“I think you better get out of there,” Benny said.

“And right now,” Dag added.

“I’m sure there’s nobody in here now,” Wes said. “I’m going to look just a little further back.”

He grew quiet. The others grew concerned, and then, suddenly, really concerned.

“Hey, look,” Dag said pointing just off shore. “A ship flying the Jolly Roger. It’s dropping anchor and lowering a cock boat. Water must be shallow so it can’t come closer. They stopped a hundred and fifty yards out.”

Having heard all that, Wes hurried toward the front. He looked the situation over and hurried the boys into the cave out of sight. He took the pistol from his belt, cocked it and fired into the air just outside the opening. He ducked inside. It was a good news/bad news thing. It was good in that Captain Marrok would have heard the distress signal. It was bad in that so had the pirates.

They remained close to the entrance where they could keep an eye on the ship and yet, hopefully, not be seen by them.

“They don’t seem to be looking up here,” Benny said.

“If this is a regular stop for them they probably know about the cave,” Wes said.

“Why would a little useless island like this be a regular stop?” Benny asked.

“Water,” Dag said understanding the real priorities for sailors.

“I wonder if they’ve seen our ship in the cove,” Wes asked knowing there could be no accurate answer. Still, Dag tried.

“They came toward the island from the south west. Our ship is on the north-east side. I doubt if they saw it.”

That made sense although it did nothing to help their

immediate situation. They continued to watch the cock boat as it landed. The men pulled it up onto the shore. It was large, carrying twelve men and two barrels. Seeing the ease with which the men handled the barrels the boys figured they were empty – just like they would be if they were coming after water.

The news got worse. With two men carrying each barrel they started up the mountain toward the cave. They each had swords hanging at their sides and knives at their belts.

“How many men you figure would be in the crew of a ship that size,” Wes asked Dag.

“Fifty, maybe seventy-five if they’re roamin’ for a fight.”

“Translate, please,” Benny said.

“Sailing around looking for a ship to rob.”

“Will they be unfriendly to Captain Marrok and our crew?”

“You can count on them to be unfriendly to every ship – except maybe an English or Spanish ship of war. They’d be way out gunned by them.”

“It looks like ten cannon ports,” Wes said. “That seems like a lot.”

“A war ship may have as many as twenty-four on one side – two rows of them up and down. And they’re big cannons that fire 30 or 40 pound balls. Takes a *really* big ship to carry all that weight. And they carry Marines – the finest swordsmen in the world.”

“So, would Captain Marrok engage these pirates in a fight on land?” Benny asked.

“Not under usual circumstances, but with us involved I’m not sure. He wouldn’t just give us up to them. Our crew is packed with the best fighters, I can tell you that. Seen them beat down crews twice their size.”

At that moment, they heard a voice from behind them in the cave. It was high pitched yet clearly a man’s. They turned. It was speaking.

“Now don’t ye be sceered, none lads. Old Ware, here, never done hurt a lad in his whole life.”

The boys were stunned. The man was old – really old and really, really skinny. His disheveled (untidy), gray hair came to the middle of his back. He wore only what once had been a long, probably white, shirt. It hung halfway to his knobby

old knees. He was barefoot. On a leather thong around his neck dangled a spy glass. Wes immediately figured it was probably the glint of the sun off the lens that they had seen when they first landed on the island.

Suddenly the remains of the fires further back in the cave made sense. It still didn't explain the tar. It still didn't explain the man's presence on that island. It gave rise to the idea he had been there for many years. Benny managed a response.

"Ware, you say. I'm Benny. These are Wes and Dag."

"From the three masts in the cove over east."

It had been a statement from the old man, but Benny responded as if it had been a question.

"Yes. The *Southern Breeze*. A fine ship with a seasoned crew and excellent Captain."

Ware looked back and forth between the other two boys.

"Can't they speak?" he asked in a confidential tone directed just at Benny.

"Oh, yes. I'm the one that jabbars on, though, so they just let me do the talking sometimes."

"Fancy duds."

Ware moved in close to Benny and felt his shirt.

"The captain just bought them for us – up at Charles Town."

Wes had been keeping one eye on the pirates who were slowly making their way up the hill.

"You know the men from the other ship out there?" he asked.

Ware moved past them so he could take a look.

"Brainard's bunch. Bad, bad, bad. They'll take ya to their ship and make soup out a ya. Gotta git ya outta here."

"Sounds good to us," Benny said. "The getting out part. You have a plan?"

Ware motioned for them to follow him back into the cave. Dag handed Benny the candle and the others followed him. The ledge got wider and the pond narrower. Eventually they came to a spot where the water poured over the edge of the floor like a small waterfall, running down right into the mountain. There were several torches standing against the wall – unlit. One end of each had been plastered with a thick coat of tar. Just beyond

the hole in the floor was a small fire burning what appeared to be the trunk of a small, dried palm tree. The flame stayed low. Light from it brightened the area, which was clearly the old man's home with a low stack of palm fronds (leaves) for a bed and kindling for fires.

Ware set about lighting a torch from his fire. It burned with a bad smell and lots of smoke. He pointed to the waterfall. They looked over the edge and discovered a series of rocks that had been set in place to make steps that led down alongside the falls. He started down the steps holding the torch. The boys looked at each other. Seeing no good alternative, they followed the old man into the mountain.

To the left side of the falls was a narrow opening into a tunnel. It ran back in the direction of the ocean. The water flowed in a shallow stream. Ware stepped off into the water. Clearly it was only a few inches deep. The tunnel varied in height from barely four feet to over eight in some places. It also varied in its slant down toward the beach from hardly any to quite a bit. Obviously, it would be considerably easier to go down than to come up.

Each boy had his own thoughts:

Benny: If it ends up under ocean water like we thought, how do we get out? I can't think being trapped down there could be a good thing.

Dag: The old man is crazy. I don't trust him. I wonder if he's the only person on the island.

Wes: Ware may be touched in the head, but his heart seems to be in the right place – to save us from the bad guys. I wonder how long he's been here and if he'd leave with us on the ship given the choice.

The going was slow. The only sound was the trickling water as it flowed across and around rocks that sat along the way in the stream. Wes, who loved to fish kept an eye out for them. He was soon convinced there were none to find.

Eventually they came to just what they had all feared. The tunnel dipped just ahead where the ceiling got so low that it touched the surface of the water – deep water – floor to ceiling water. A dead end? It was a frightening moment for the three boys. What if the pirates had seen them at the opening to the

cave? What if they found the tunnel and followed them. What if they really would capture boys for whatever reason – to make them work on the ship, most likely? They would find themselves pinned between the wall and pool of water with the pirates behind them. Worst of all, what if the Captain had not heard the shot Wes had fired.

Wes reloaded the pistol and was ready to use it. He was determined to fire at the first body that appeared out of the tunnel behind them. At least he could get one of them.

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CHAPTER NINE

“I Think I Know Where the Treasure Chests Are.”

Before they could hold the necessary conversation with Ware – ‘Now what?’ – they heard voices behind them, far up the tunnel. Could it be that somehow the Captain and his men had dealt with the pirates and were coming for them? They listened.

“They’re not speaking English,” Wes said.

“More like Spanish, I’d say,” Dag offered.

Ware nodded, agreeing with Dag.

The boys turned around and stared at Ware.

“Follow me into the water.”

“Wait. What?” Benny said.

“We hold onto each other’s shirt tails and walk through the water.”

His explanation was not satisfactory. Again, it was Benny.

“More. Walk through the water? Makes no sense. Our heads would have to be under the water.”

Ware seemed genuinely surprised they wanted a further explanation. He thought for a moment, his long index finger against his cheek. His eyes darted back and forth. His face brightened as if he suddenly understood their reluctance. He spoke.

“The water is two yards deep. Holding your breath for less than thirty seconds and walking through the pool under water will get you to fresh air at the ocean.”

None of the boys figured they wanted to risk their lives on the say-so of a crazy old man. Ware seemed to understand. He raised his finger into the air, slipped down into the pool and disappeared. The voices continued to grow louder from back in the tunnel. The pirates seemed to be coming their way.

“If he doesn’t come back we won’t know if he made it or drown,” Dag said.

They grew silent. Some action was essential if they wanted to evade the pirates. They looked around for hiding places. There were none. Dag selected a good-sized rock to use in his defense. He had survived more than once by landing

a blow from a rock to a bad guy's head.

Before Wes or Benny could voice a suggestion, there he was – Ware, crawling out of the pond. In one hand, he held a sea shell. He held it up then handed it to Benny and spoke.

“It's from the beach outside. We must hurry now. A deep breath. In the water, you should lean far forward. It will speed the trip. Keep hold of the one in front of you.”

“The shell is warm like the ocean water, not cool like this water,” Benny said. “It's from outside, alright.”

Again, the strange old man slipped into the pool and motioned them in beside him, indicating for them to line up for the trek through the water under the ledge. Benny looked into Wes's face as if to get his indication that it was the right thing to do. Wes proposed a plan for them to follow.

“Once under the water, we'll count to thirty – thirty seconds. Do it like, ‘One, praise the King, Two, praise the King – you get the idea. If we aren't out of the water on the other end by thirty we'll turn around and come back. We can all easily hold our breath for that long.”

The other boys nodded, frightened of trying it and frightened of not trying it. Ware joined with the nods in as if he approved. They lined up in the water – Dag after Ware, then Benny and Wes. Shirrtails it was. They were ready and just in time. Wes put out the torch in the water, but kept hold of it with one hand. At that point it was no longer his source of light, but his weapon. They all noticed it at the same moment – there in the dark, the water in the pool glowed. Perhaps the old man was right. Light from outside was filtering through the water toward them. For it to do that, it couldn't be very far. They heard the voices growing louder and saw the flickering light from a torch not twenty yards behind them in the tunnel. There in the total darkness they couldn't be seen. Ware submerged under the rock ledge, which sat down against the pool water. The others followed in turn.

As promised, thirty, ‘praise the king's’, later they had all surfaced, but not where any had expected. They were in the ocean, alright, but they were ten yards from shore and very near the beached cock boat that had brought the pirates.

Dag, the true survivor among the boys gave the order.

“Into the boat. Head back to the *Breeze*.”

Within the minute, they were each manning a set of oars. From all indications, they had not been seen from the new ship or by any of the pirates who had come ashore. They had all apparently joined in the search to find them and were in the tunnel.

“Hug the shore,” Ware said.

It made sense – gentler waves and more cover.

He sat in the rear seat and pulled a mighty set of oars. Five minutes later they were rounding the island to the east, virtually out of sight of the ship and anybody up at the pond. Rushing to meet them along the shore were the Captain and a dozen crew members, swords drawn.

“Pirate ship,” Dag shouted, pointing. Brainard’s, says our new friend here. You know of him?”

“No. Probably a local. Where did you pick up the old man?”

“He found us up on the mountain. He saved our lives, probably. Calls himself, Ware.”

“You continue on to the ship, but keep the boat in the water in case we need to get more crew out here. How many are on the island.”

“A dozen,” Wes said. “Came ashore for water. Knew right where to find it. Clearly been here before. Ware knew the ship right off.”

Ware nodded as if to verify Wes’s words.

As the boys turned the boat out toward their ship, Ware got out and waded back to shore. Whether he wanted to stay on the island or had some problem about being on the ship was not immediately obvious.

The Captain ran though the options in his mind.

‘We can’t have them stay on the island and interfere with our search for the treasure. We don’t want to engage their ship in a battle. They surely have us outgunned and outnumbered.’

He moved with his men in close to the foot of the mountain and then on around it until they were in plain sight of the ship and the shore where the cock boat had been. After a few minutes those that had been after Ware and the boys ran down the hill from the cave up above, screaming and waving

their arms. At the water's edge, they kept going and began swimming out toward their ship. Neither the Captain nor the crew understood what they were saying.

Ware, who had followed them, tapped the Captain on his shoulder.

"Spanish. They say the cave is haunted and that the boys they had seen were ghosts who disappeared right before their eyes. They are making it clear they refuse to return to the island."

The captain nodded at the old man.

"Thank you. Let's see how seriously Captain Brainard takes their claims."

Within fifteen minutes they saw the anchor drawn onto the deck. The sails were unfurled and filled with wind. The ship moved off to the south-south-west – the direction from which it had come. Pirates were notoriously superstitious. They'd not stay and fight an enemy they could not see.

The Captain sent four men up the mountain to take positions on all four sides to keep watch and determine if the ship returned. He left a few others on the beach, then he returned to the ship. Ware disappeared onto the mountain.

The boys were waiting, eager to relate their adventure to Marrok. They each contributed what they thought was important to complete the story. Finally, Benny offered an important possibility.

"I think I may know where the treasure is."

They all turned to him, puzzled faces meeting his. The other boys were sure they had not seen anything resembling five chests. The Captain wondered why it had taken that long for him to speak of it.

"So?" Wes asked urging Benny to go on.

Benny spoke to Wes and Dag.

"When we were under water, where were our feet?"

It seemed a strange question.

"On the bottom of the pool," Dag said.

"More like on a row of large flat rocks," Wes said as he thought about it. "At the time, I wondered if Ware had put them there sometime in the past to make it easier to get through the pool."

“I’m thinking they were not big flat rocks,” Benny said.

“What then,” Dag asked. “Oh! The flat tops of the chests maybe you think?”

“It seemed to me the surface of them was . . . I don’t know how to describe it . . . sort of squishy, maybe?”

“Yeah. Looking back, I guess I felt that too,” Wes said. “Think it was moss or some kind of algae?”

“No, and I realize this is *really* unlikely. I’m thinking – well, wondering, really – if clever old Grandpa Marrok, coated those chests in tar to make them waterproof before he sunk them there in the pool under the ocean.”

“You’re right, unlikely,” Wes said.

“But remember what you found close to where Ware made his fire – a tar barrel with only a little left in the bottom of it. He was using what was left to make his torches.”

“This just gets more and more interesting, gentlemen,” the Captain said. “I have, in fact, heard stories of pirates coating wooden crates in tar for that very purpose before burying them in the ground. Hmm?”

“We’ll need to go back,” Dag said.

“We will, indeed,” Marrok said. “Do you think you can find it again?”

“Probably from the ocean side,” Wes said. “If not, for sure from inside the cave.”

“We’ll need half inch rope – several fifty foot lengths – and lots of man power,” Dag said, already beginning to figure out just how to go about removing them.

“What about Ware?” Benny said. “He may believe it’s his.”

“In that case I will need to speak with him,” the Captain said. “I imagine we can work something out. Do you think he will leave the island with us?”

“We had very little time to get to know him, Sir,” Benny said. “Maybe we need to go back and have a conversation with him before you try talking to him.”

“He’d probably like some salt pork and beans,” Dag said. “I think he’s been alone on the island for a long, long time. He wore out most of his clothes, and his voice got hoarse after just a few minutes of talking with us – like he hadn’t used it for a

long time.”

“Insightful, young man,” the Captain said.

“I don’t know that word, Sir - *insightful*.”

“Great thinking!”

Dag nodded. “Then thank you, I guess.”

“I don’t want you young men on the island at night. Never know if that ship may be coming back. The men on the hill will be blind in the dark unless a ship is foolish enough to run with lanterns on deck. They’ll signal with their pistols if anything seems suspicious.”

“That reminds me, Sir,” Wes said. “Please take your pistol back. Not something I want to carry. It’s loaded.”

After they ate they put together some things to take to Ware – a set of clothes, the salt pork and beans that Dag had suggested, a pot and pan from the galley and a knife from the weapons closet. If he decided to stay, the Captain said he could spare a keg of tar to keep the old man’s torches alive.

“How about a good-sized hook and heavy line so he can fish in the ocean,” Wes suggested.

The Captain nodded.

The boys bedded down up on the poop deck. From there they could see through the railing a good ways in all directions. The Captain kept two lookouts up in the crow’s nest so they could keep watch 360 degrees around the ship. He also doubled the size of each watch over night – they were armed with muskets and swords. They heard no grumbling about it from the crew. The cannons were uncovered and rolled into place along both sides – ready for an attack from the sea or shore.

The boys found they were exhausted after their big day on – and inside – the mountain and were immediately asleep. So much for keeping watch! Like usual they awoke with the sun. That morning they took both of the cock boats so nearly half the crew could be ashore – fully armed and ‘smelling’ the treasure.

The Captain had made it clear to each man when they signed on that half the treasure was to be his – he furnished the boat, the supplies and the information. The rest would be divided equally among the members of the crew. There could

be bonuses for exceptional contributions. The boys did not know if they would be considered full-fledged crew members or not, but it was the adventure that had become important to them rather than any reward that might come after it was over.

They rode with the Captain in the smaller boat that made shore first. Marrok sent crew members north and south to make sure they were still alone on the island. The boys led the Captain and six men toward the dull water pool at the shore around on the south side of the mountain. The first decision that needed to be made was whether to enter the underground pool from the ocean or the cave.

“Can you find the opening here in the ocean?” the Captain asked.

“I imagine if we go under the water and look around we can find it,” Wes said answering for the three of them.

“Ware would know for sure,” Benny said looking over the mountain side, hoping to see him.

“So far he hasn’t come out to play this morning,” Dag offered in all seriousness.

The other boys smiled. Like humor, Dag had virtually no experience with play during his early life. It had been consumed with just surviving. Benny had tried to explain the difference between work and play by saying work was what you had to do and play was you did just for fun. It hadn’t helped. Dag’s response was, “But I really enjoy everything I do here on the ship so I guess instead of working, I’ve been playing all these years.”

Benny’s father had once told him that if he selected a field of work that he enjoyed, it wouldn’t seem like work at all. He figured his father meant what Dag seemed to have learned all by himself.

The boys removed their new boots and stockings. They had left their new shirts on the ship. Benny was the first to wade out into the water. It remained shallow – only hip deep – for some ten yards. At that point – quite humorously to the other boys – he took one more step and plunged below the surface, as if he had fallen into a hole.

“I get the idea Benny’s found what we’re looking for,” Wes said.

They had stopped and were waiting for him to bob to the surface. Several long moments passed. Wes became concerned and moved to the spot where he had disappeared. He kept watch over the rock ledge, shading his eyes against the glare so he could see down into the water. The tunnel opening clearly sat right below him. Benny's head appeared, sputtering.

"This is the spot alright. The actual opening must be five yards wide and then narrows to less than three – up under the shore I'm thinking. Inside the tunnel that far, at least, it's bright enough to see pretty well. We know it continues to be a little bit light clear back to where the pond starts at the end of the tunnel."

Wes had a suggestion. He addressed the Captain.

"Sir, I have an idea. The objects that we believe are the trunks – chests – are near the beginning of the pool in the tunnel in the cave. If we work from inside the tunnel, we can dive down, secure ropes around each one and then pull them out this way. We can surface quicker working from in there and make it all go faster and probably safer. Also, we can take torches with us from the cave. If they are held out over the pond there at the end of the tunnel, they should provide light down into the water to make the work easier."

"Play," Dag said. "Make the *play* easier. This is fun not work."

The other boys shrugged, agreeing. The Captain smiled.

"It sounds like a good plan. Two of you climb up to the hill and get in position from inside. Do we need more torches from the ship?"

"No, sir. Ware had several lined up along the wall of the cave," Wes explained.

"The one who stays here with me will carry one end of the rope into the underwater cave – what did you call it?"

"The pool, I guess," Benny said.

"The pool, yes. We'll tie it around his waist. That will slow him down quite a bit, I think. Perhaps one of the stronger men should do that."

"I'm sure I can handle it," Wes said. "I'll feel better if all the men are out here protecting us."

The Captain nodded. Wes had turned fourteen a few

months before. His body had matured a good deal during those past five months. Muscles had formed. He had grown several inches. His shoulders had broadened. He was certainly as much man as he was boy at that point.

Dag and Benny slipped back into their boots.

“Give us a half hour to get in place,” he said.

They hurried up the mountain to Ware’s cave.

“If you find Ware, tell him I want to talk with him,” the Captain called after them.”

Wes and the Captain worked out a signal. When the men out there felt the rope being tugged hard four times, they should begin pulling – slowly.

“I’m sure you have a reason to make it four rather than just one,” the Captain asked clearly interested in what the boy was thinking.

“Well, I’m thinking while we are tying the rope onto the chests, we may jerk the rope – all part of the process. Making it four quick jerks should stand out from any little ones of that nature.

“The brains you three carry with you continue to astound me.”

Several men arrived from the ship with large coils of rope – the kind Dag had specified. Ware was in the cave. He had been watching them down below through his spy glass. After a short conversation about needing torches and wanting to return to the pool at the end of the tunnel, Benny told him the Captain wanted to talk with him. He also said they had brought him some supplies. At the mention of salt port his hollow old eyes brightened. He helped the boys light a torch and provided three more which they could light down below. As the boys began wading their way down through the tunnel, Ware finger combed his hair as if sprucing up for the meeting with the Captain. He left through the front of the cave.

From just below the surface of the water just off shore, Wes kept an eye back into the water, thinking he might see it brighten once the torches were in place. Then he would begin his swim. Presently, he surfaced again, and told the Captain it was time. Ware arrived at the same moment. He chose to stand some distance away as if feeling some caution was in order.

The captain approached him. They sat on large stones and talked.

In the water, Wes pulled a considerable length of the rope in beside him and tied it around his waist. He took several big breaths and submerged. The rope was, indeed, quite heavy. He chose to swim rather than walk, thinking the narrower profile of his body against the water would require far less energy. He was correct. It was about an even trade off – less energy was needed, but lots more weight to pull. He found, however, that even the pull of his strong arms and the push of his strong legs and feet only allowed slow progress through the water. He hoped his air lasted.

CHAPTER TEN

I Peed My Pants the First Time!

Wes pulled harder with his arms. He kicked harder with his legs. He thought his lungs would burst. At the count of seventy-five his head popped up above the surface of the pond. Benny greeted him.

“Imagine meeting you here! Did you remember the rope?”

It even seemed humorous to Dag. They had wedged the ends of the torches into crevices in the rock walls so they protruded out over the surface of the water.

“Is it lighter down there,” Dag asked.

“Yes. A whole lot lighter. Whoever had the idea deserves a medal.”

No one could remember whose idea it had been.

“Let’s get down there and make sure those lumps really are chests,” Benny said quickly out of his boots again.”

“I could see there were five humps along the bottom just like you remembered. They are covered in sediment so I couldn’t make out what they were. I have one caution for us. We must stir up that sediment as little as possible or the water will get so clouded we won’t be able to see to work.”

He looked up and Dag: “I mean, *to play*.”

He winked and Dag smiled in return.

“Okay. Yes. Good point,” Benny said as he slipped, gently, into the water. “Water’s warmer than the air in the cave,” he said. “I hadn’t noticed that before.”

“Me in the water or out here?” Dag asked.

“How about staying out. We’ll come up and make reports. When we need things, you can be the runner. If anybody starts coming down the tunnel you get in the water and prepare to leave in a hurry. Just seeing you in the water will be our signal to skedaddle.”

Dag understood and came to think of himself as the lookout – always an important job he knew. It had been Wes’s suggestion because he knew Dag couldn’t swim and earlier, he had clearly been extremely uncomfortable – more like terrified – in the water. Because of that, he had, undoubtedly, been the

bravest of the three of them on their walk out of the tunnel and into the ocean.

“Ready?” Wes asked Benny.

“Yup. The first one is right below us. We can see the hump it makes through the water.”

“Wes began taking several deep breathes.”

“Why you take more than one?” Benny asked. “I saw you do that before.”

“Doctors say it builds up air in your blood and lets you go longer without new breaths.”

“Fascinating. Okay. I’ll try it, too.”

They took three big ones together then sank, head first to the bottom. They carefully brushed away the deposit of soil, sand, dust and who knew what else. They looked each other in their faces and smiled, nodding as they surfaced with the good news. It was Benny who broke the news, of course.

“Dag. Chests alright. Covered in tar. Can see the impressions of the metal bands around them and the padlock.”

He turned to Wes.

“I think we need to begin at the other end to rope and remove them so they aren’t in each other’s way. Does that make sense?”

“Sure does. I had the same thought. This new rope the Captain gave us to use tends to float so I think we’ll both need to work at tying it around each chest. I’ll hold it down around the chest so it won’t float away, and you tie a good tight knot.”

“Your hands are bigger and stronger than mine,” Benny said. “I’ll hold it in place and you do the tying.”

Wes nodded. It made sense. He untied the rope from his waist and handed it to Benny who held the end tightly in his fist.

“Ready?”

Benny nodded.

“That breathing thing really does help. I didn’t even need to breath by the time we came back to the surface.”

Wes nodded.

“Surface anytime you need to. It may take several dives before we get a system worked out between us down there.

Benny nodded.

“Breaths and go, then.”

It was darker at the far end, but their young eyes quickly adapted. Benny looped the rope around the sides of the chest. Wes took the free end while Benny held the rope tightly against the chest. He positioned the rope so the knot would be in front – toward the ocean. That way it would be pulled straight out. Benny shook his head and pointed up. They swam back to the ledge and surfaced.

“What?” Wes asked.

“We have the rope around the sides. When the men pull on it the bottom of the chests will scrape along against the bottom and hit stones. I’m afraid such old trunks will be pretty fragile. What if we tie around it in the top to bottom direction? Then, when they pull it, it will like slide along on the rope across the bottom of the pool.”

“Your head just never stops working, does it?”

Benny grinned, really thinking it had been sort of a dumb comment. If his brain ever stopped working it would mean he was dead. He didn’t mention it, however.

“I have a idea,” Dag said. “Leave enough extra rope so after you tie it around top to bottom you’ll have enough left to tie it top to bottom around the other way at the very front. That rope across the bottom – side to side – will steady it so it doesn’t tip back and forth as much. You think?”

“Another fantastic idea,” Wes said. “Looks like I could have left my brain at home today.”

Benny *really* wanted to comment on *that* doubly stupid phrase, but again he decided against it. There would probably be a discussion later – assuming Wes didn’t leave his brain somewhere!

It took four dives to complete the first chest. They learned a good deal about how to do it so the others should go faster. They surfaced for air before giving the signal by jerking on the rope. Wes went down alone to do that.

Out at the shore line, they wondered what was taking so long but waited more or less patiently. They had been waiting five months for that moment. They felt the tugs and immediately began pulling on the rope.

Down below, Wes swam along for a ways to make sure

their system would work.

Ninety seconds later he surfaced back at the ledge.

“What took you so long?” Benny asked clearly concerned.

Wes smiled.

“I found a mermaid down there and just cozied up to her for a while.”

Benny reached down and dunked his clever cousin. There were laugh’s all around.

Dag spoke.

“Our clever plan has one little problem, gentlemen.”

“What?” they asked together.

“Where’s the next rope?”

It brought more laughter.

“Glad it was only a *little* problem,” Benny said, still laughing at their error.

“I’ll go get it,” Wes said.

“You barely made it made it back with it the first time,” Benny said. “I think we need a better plan.”

“And I have one. Instead of dragging the weight of the rope through the water behind me, I’ll wrap it around my upper body before I start back. Then I can let it out behind me a little at a time while I’m moving forward. That should do away with almost all the heavy drag that kept tugging at me from behind that first time. What do you think?”

“Seems it was a good thing that you *didn’t* leave your brain behind this morning,” Dag said, mostly serious.

Benny agreed, but insisted that Wes rest a few more minutes before making the underwater swim to the ocean. Wes’s plan worked every bit as well as he had expected it to.

Ten minutes later they were back at the bottom of the pool attaching the second chest.

They found that the bottom of the last one was in bad shape so they bound it several times before tying it up to be removed. As they watched that one begin to slide away Wes looked up from the water at Dag.

“Well, that’s it. I guess we’ll meet you back outside, down at the shore.”

“Oh, no! I’m going with you through the water. The first

time we did it I was so scared I peed my pants. In the water it really didn't seem to matter much. I need to do it again to prove I can do it without shaking all over."

"You don't need to prove anything to us, Dag. We already know you're three times as brave as the two of us put together."

Benny nodded. Dag clearly did not understand, but didn't go into it. His mind was made up. Benny tried to give him a way out.

"You might ruin your new boots coming through the water like that."

Dag spread the biggest grin the other boys had ever seen on his face. He spoke.

"I been trying to ruin these dang boots since the minute I had to put them on."

It was cause for extended laughter.

Wes hitched his head for the boy to get into the water with them.

"Why don't you lead this time?" Benny said.

Without a moment's hesitation, Benny moved to the head of the line. Apparently, he felt that put him in charge.

"Three deep breath ins, submerge, bend forward and walk."

Wes and Benny smiled at each other, breathed, submerged, bent forward and walked, exactly according to the orders from young Captain Dag.

As they surfaced out in the ocean they were met by cheers and waving hats from the crew. That possibility had not entered their heads – three great brains or not.

The chests were lined up on shore still unopened. That surprised the boys.

"Figured you should be here when we opened them," the Captain said, "considering you found them, you devised the plan to remove them and you retrieved them. Old Grandpa Marrok would be proud of you, sons."

Ware was also there looking on. The boys were glad to see he didn't seem to harbor any ill will about them taking them, but really didn't understand it. Later the Captain would explain that the two of them had talked it through. Marrok explained the

treasure belonged to his grandfather – Rupert Marrok, the pirate of some fame in those parts. He showed Ware the map and picture Rupert had drawn so many years before. Between those things, Ware agreed it belonged to the Captain.

“Well, what we waiting for,” Marrok said. “Let’s get that first one open to see if we really have anything worth taking home. We’ll open the others on the ship.”

It was the first time the boys had even considered it might *not* be the treasure. They each felt his heart begin pounding hard. One of the crewmen forced a crow bar into the padlock and pried it apart. It had deteriorated and fell into pieces with very little effort. The Captain motioned for the boys to do the rest.

With their knives they cut through the layer of tar that sealed the lid against the bottom. The three of them worked their fingers under the lip of the lid and tugged. Slowly it began moving. Presently, the lip sat just above the top of the bottom. They paused as if offering a prayer to the god of all treasure chests to let it be filled with wonderful things. With one more tug, they managed it all the way open.

A second cheer went up from the crew. It sparkled. It dazzled. It lit up the day. Necklaces, rings, bracelets, broches, silver coins, gold coins, chunks of gold – even a gold crown studded in diamonds. It was beyond anything the boys could have dreamed of because they had never seen such things.

The Captain leaned down and picked out three rings, each with a colored stone. The blue one he slipped onto Wes’s finger. Then he put the green one onto Benny’s and the red onto Dag’s. He turned back to the chest and picked out three necklaces, golden chains each dangling its own large colored stone. He stood, walked over to Ware and slipped all three of them over his head and shook his hand. The old man’s eyes sparkled and his grin returned. He bowed slightly to the Captain – his way of saying thank you.

Dag spoke first – directly to the Captain.

“Thank you, of course, but tell me one thing, do I have to keep wearing it?”

Everyone chuckled. The Captain moved to his side and put his arm around his shoulders.

“Daggot, my boy, if you work as hard a ruining that ring so you won’t have to wear it as you have your boots, I don’t give either one them another week.”

Everybody laughed again.

Dag didn’t have a satisfactory answer to the question he had posed.

“So?” he asked pressing the issue.”

“Remove the boots. Remove the ring. Be comfortable.”

Dag grinned up at him and sat on the sand immediately pulling off the sopping wet boots.

“I will keep them in case we come across another mountain, Sir. Can I keep the stockings on? I like them.”

Marrok nodded and smiled. Dag stood and handed the ring back.

“I’ll keep this in my safe for you. Someday you will meet a young lady and want her to have it.”

Dag didn’t fully understand, but if that’s what the Captain thought, he wouldn’t doubt it. The two older boys suddenly had thoughts of cozying up with mermaids – all quite private thoughts, of course.

Several of the men brought the cock boats and loaded the chests, which were carefully transported to the Captain’s quarters on the *Breeze*. The next day they would set sail back to England.

Ware decided to stay on his island – a decision that didn’t surprise anyone – but he did ask if he could feel the deck planks of a ship under his feet just one more time. He was invited to feast with the crew that noon. The boys could not believe how much food that skinny old man could put away.

“That should last him until February,” Benny whispered.

The boys giggled. Ware ate. The men of the crew thought about the life of ease that awaited them once back in England. The Captain considered how best to assist the boys once the journey had ended.

With the feast over, most of the crew members found a comfortable place on deck and dozed off. Wes and Benny asked the Captain to keep their rings for them as well.

* * *

They were in the Captain’s quarters when they heard it.

They rushed up on deck.

“Pirate ship off the cove to the east. Gun ports open. Jolly Roger flyin’. Turnin’ in toward us.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

One Final Surprise!

The boys followed the Captain up to the poop deck where he focused his spyglass on the ship.

“Brainard, again. Ware told me a good deal about him. I think we can use one of his strategies to our advantage – against him. Get me Tristin, Dag.”

As Dag flew down the steps to the main deck, Ware came up them.

“Good, Ware. Will you help with strategy? You have no obligation to stay on board during the skirmish (fight), you understand.”

Ware didn’t respond to the offer to leave, but stayed so they figured he had made his decision. He thought for just a moment and then spoke.

“Brainard’s known ta sail in very close, head on, ta show a narrow silhouette – nearly impossible ta hit. Then at about fifty yards he swings ta port, stops dead in the water and begins firing. At that range he soon has the other ship shattered beyond staying afloat. I always thunk if the other ship knew that, it could turn its cannons angled in a bit toward the center aimed right at ‘bout sixty yards out ahead. You only got five on a side, but keep that center one straight on and the other four angled to hit him at sixty yards, just before he turns. Yer bound to put at least three or four balls into his belly that way.”

Tristin arrived and overheard the conversation.

“Got that Mr. Tristin? See to it. At most we have five minutes.”

Three of those starboard cannons were new. They had worked very well against the previous ship they had encountered, months before.

The crew members had already placed themselves at their stations for battle. The cannons, which had been made ready the night before, were easily repositioned. Each gun crew new its weapon well, and could aim it to within a yard of the sixty the Captain had ordered.

Wes whispered something in the Captain’s ear. He

nodded and whispered back. Wes left down to the main deck and ran to the center cannon crew. Dag and Benny could see he was having an animated (lively, with gestures) conversation with them. Then, he returned to stand with the boys.

“What?” Benny asked.

Before he could offer an answer there was a second call from up in the crow’s nest.

“Land force gathering on shore.”

The captain swung around to take a look. There looked to be a dozen, perhaps eighteen pirates moving out from the base of the mountain toward the water. Having put Tristin in charge of firing on the ship, he ordered all unoccupied hands to the side facing the shore.

“Dag, deliver my order for the port side cannon crews to begin firing. Catch them on the shore before they get back into their boats.”

“You other men get muskets from the armory and fire at will.”

Within minutes the railing on that side was teeming with armed crew members. It took nearly half a minute to reload a musket after firing. Those men were experts and improved on that a bit. The boys stood behind them and reloaded the guns as they were handed back – trading them for ones ready to fire. Benny, the most experienced and accurate of the three with a musket had an idea. He moved to the lower steps that lead up to where the captain was directing the defense. He dragged three muskets with him. Nobody was paying attention to him, including the other boys.

Benny drew his bead. He pulled the trigger. The nearest cock boat sprung a leak and under the weight of six men it quickly scuttled (sank) leaving the men and their weapons stranded in the water. He drew a second bead on the second cock boat with the same result. And then the final one.

Meanwhile, the Captain kept a close watch on the oncoming ship. With the wind at its back it was moving rapidly. One hundred yards. Seventy-five yards. Sixty yards. Tristin gave the signal. Four cannons fired. Four cannon balls found new homes inside the pirate ship, blowing huge holes in its sides. Presently, as the ship drifted to within fifty yards, the

Middle cannon fired. It hit the stem (the pointed, most forward part) just under the bowsprit (that beam that stuck out in front of a ship). Suddenly the ship exploded with wood, fire and smoke shooting high up into the sky. The fore section fell away and water rushed into the open hull of the ship, taking it to the bottom of the cove within minutes. Very few of the crew had time to abandon ship.

That forward area under the Bowsprit was generally considered the most difficult part of the ship to hit with cannon fire so it is where explosives and kegs of gun powder were often stored. That hadn't worked so well for Brainard.

At the end of the battle, Marrok's crew had rounded up only seven survivors. They were put in chains in the brig (jail on board) and would be set free on some other island a good ways away so they would pose no threat to Ware.

Later, with the boys and Ware at the Captain's side at the table, he took out his map and his ink and pen. He drew an arrow to that isolated speck of an island and relabeled it – it would no longer be known as *Marrok Island*, but, instead, *Ware Island*. It would remain their secret, of course, not wanting the old man to get any more unwanted visitors. Ware nodded and offered a smile, showing his appreciation for the gesture. For just a moment, it made sly, old, Ware wonder if maybe he should have showed them where the other dozen treasure chests had been hidden. He shrugged and made his way back to the main deck.

The boys rowed Ware to shore. There were hugs all around. As they were turning to re-board the cock boat, Ware motioned them to him. One by one he removed a necklace and placed it around one of their necks.

“For your wives someday. Promise me that?”

They nodded. They would do their best to make it come true. Ware turned and began the climb back up *his* mountain, past *his* banana and coconut and palm fruit trees, to *his* cave, with *his* fire, and *his* pool. Very briefly each boy figured that sort of life had many advantages.

Benny's fantasy lasted the longest: ‘No Girls! Yay!’

The other boys' fantasies were much shorter lived: ‘No girls. Booooooo!’

The End

[It might be fun for you to write a story about what you think happened to the boys after they left the island.]