

CHAPTER 28: IN THE ENEMY'S CAMP



The red glare of the torch, lighting up the interior of the block house, showed me the worst of my apprehensions realized. The pirates were in possession of the house and stores: there was the cask of cognac, there were the pork and bread, as before, and what tenfold increased my horror, not a sign of any prisoner. I could only judge that all had perished, and my heart smote me sorely that I had not been there to perish with them.

There were six of the buccaneers, all told; not another man was left alive. Five of them were on their feet, flushed and swollen, suddenly called out of the first sleep of drunkenness. The sixth had only risen upon his elbow; he was deadly pale, and the blood-stained bandage round his head told that he had recently been wounded, and still more recently dressed. I remembered the man who had been shot and had run back among the woods in the great attack, and doubted not that this was he.

The parrot sat, preening her plumage, on Long John's shoulder. He himself, I thought, looked somewhat paler and more stern than I was used to. He still wore the fine broadcloth suit in which he had fulfilled his mission, but it was bitterly the worse for wear, daubed with clay and torn with the sharp briers of the wood.

"So," said he, "here's Jim Hawkins, shiver my timbers! Dropped in, like, eh? Well, come, I take that friendly."

And thereupon he sat down across the brandy cask and began to fill a pipe.

"Give me a loan of the link, Dick," said he; and then, when he had a good light, "That'll do, lad," he added; "stick the glim in the wood heap; and you, gentlemen, bring yourselves to! You needn't stand up for Mr. Hawkins; HE'LL excuse you, you may lay to that. And so, Jim"—stopping the tobacco—"here you were, and quite a pleasant surprise for poor old John. I see you were smart when first I set my eyes on you, but this here gets away from me clean, it do."

To all this, as may be well supposed, I made no answer. They had set me with my back against the wall, and I stood there, looking Silver in the face, pluckily enough, I hope, to all outward appearance, but with black despair in my heart.

Silver took a whiff or two of his pipe with great composure and then ran on again.

"Now, you see, Jim, so be as you ARE here," says he, "I'll give you a piece of my mind. I've always liked you, I have, for a lad of spirit, and the picter of my own self when I was young and

handsome. I always wanted you to jine and take your share, and die a gentleman, and now, my cock, you've got to. Cap'n Smollett's a fine seaman, as I'll own up to any day, but stiff on discipline. 'Dooty is dooty,' says he, and right he is. Just you keep clear of the cap'n. The doctor himself is gone dead again you—'ungrateful scamp' was what he said; and the short and the long of the whole story is about here: you can't go back to your own lot, for they won't have you; and without you start a third ship's company all by yourself, which might be lonely, you'll have to jine with Cap'n Silver."

So far so good. My friends, then, were still alive, and though I partly believed the truth of Silver's statement, that the cabin party were incensed at me for my desertion, I was more relieved than distressed by what I heard.

"I don't say nothing as to your being in our hands," continued Silver, "though there you are, and you may lay to it. I'm all for argyment; I never seen good come out o' threatening. If you like the service, well, you'll jine; and if you don't, Jim, why, you're free to answer no—free and welcome, shipmate; and if fairer can be said by mortal seaman, shiver my sides!"

"Am I to answer, then?" I asked with a very tremulous voice. Through all this sneering talk, I was made to feel the threat of death that overhung me, and my cheeks burned and my heart beat painfully in my breast.

"Lad," said Silver, "no one's a-pressing of you. Take your bearings. None of us won't hurry you, mate; time goes so pleasant in your company, you see."

"Well," says I, growing a bit bolder, "if I'm to choose, I declare I have a right to know what's what, and why you're here, and where my friends are."

"Wot's wot?" repeated one of the buccaneers in a deep growl. "Ah, he'd be a lucky one as knowed that!"

"You'll perhaps batten down your hatches till you're spoke to, my friend," cried Silver truculently to this speaker. And then, in his first gracious tones, he replied to me, "Yesterday morning, Mr. Hawkins," said he, "in the dog-watch, down came Doctor Livesey with a flag of truce. Says he, 'Cap'n Silver, you're sold out. Ship's gone.' Well, maybe we'd been taking a glass, and a song to help it round. I won't say no. Leastways, none of us had looked out. We looked out, and by thunder, the old ship was gone! I never seen a pack o' fools look fishier; and you may lay to that, if I tells you that looked the fishiest. 'Well,' says the doctor, 'let's bargain.' We bargained, him and I, and here we are: stores, brandy, block house, the firewood you was thoughtful enough to cut, and in a manner of speaking, the whole blessed boat, from cross-trees to kelson. As for them, they've tramped; I don't know where's they are."

He drew again quietly at his pipe.

“And lest you should take it into that head of yours,” he went on, “that you was included in the treaty, here’s the last word that was said: ‘How many are you,’ says I, ‘to leave?’ ‘Four,’ says he; ‘four, and one of us wounded. As for that boy, I don’t know where he is, confound him,’ says he, ‘nor I don’t much care. We’re about sick of him.’ These was his words.

“Is that all?” I asked.

“Well, it’s all that you’re to hear, my son,” returned Silver.

“And now I am to choose?”

“And now you are to choose, and you may lay to that,” said Silver.

“Well,” said I, “I am not such a fool but I know pretty well what I have to look for. Let the worst come to the worst, it’s little I care. I’ve seen too many die since I fell in with you. But there’s a thing or two I have to tell you,” I said, and by this time I was quite excited; “and the first is this: here you are, in a bad way—ship lost, treasure lost, men lost, your whole business gone to wreck; and if you want to know who did it—it was I! I was in the apple barrel the night we sighted land, and I heard you, John, and you, Dick Johnson, and Hands, who is now at the bottom of the sea, and told every word you said before the hour was out. And as for the schooner, it was I who cut her cable, and it was I that killed the men you had aboard of her, and it was I who brought her where you’ll never see her more, not one of you. The laugh’s on my side; I’ve had the top of this business from the first; I no more fear you than I fear a fly. Kill me, if you please, or spare me. But one thing I’ll say, and no more; if you spare me, bygones are bygones, and when you fellows are in court for piracy, I’ll save you all I can. It is for you to choose. Kill another and do yourselves no good, or spare me and keep a witness to save you from the gallows.”

I stopped, for, I tell you, I was out of breath, and to my wonder, not a man of them moved, but all sat staring at me like as many sheep. And while they were still staring, I broke out again, “And now, Mr. Silver,” I said, “I believe you’re the best man here, and if things go to the worst, I’ll take it kind of you to let the doctor know the way I took it.”

“I’ll bear it in mind,” said Silver with an accent so curious that I could not, for the life of me, decide whether he were laughing at my request or had been favourably affected by my courage.

“I’ll put one to that,” cried the old mahogany-faced seaman—Morgan by name—whom I had seen in Long John’s public-house upon the quays of Bristol. “It was him that knowed Black Dog.”

“Well, and see here,” added the sea-cook. “I’ll put another again to that, by thunder! For it was this same boy that faked the chart from Billy Bones. First and last, we’ve split upon Jim Hawkins!”

"Then here goes!" said Morgan with an oath.

And he sprang up, drawing his knife as if he had been twenty.

"Avast, there!" cried Silver. "Who are you, Tom Morgan? Maybe you thought you was cap'n here, perhaps. By the powers, but I'll teach you better! Cross me, and you'll go where many a good man's gone before you, first and last, these thirty year back—some to the yard-arm, shiver my timbers, and some by the board, and all to feed the fishes. There's never a man looked me between the eyes and seen a good day a'terwards, Tom Morgan, you may lay to that."

Morgan paused, but a hoarse murmur rose from the others.

"Tom's right," said one.

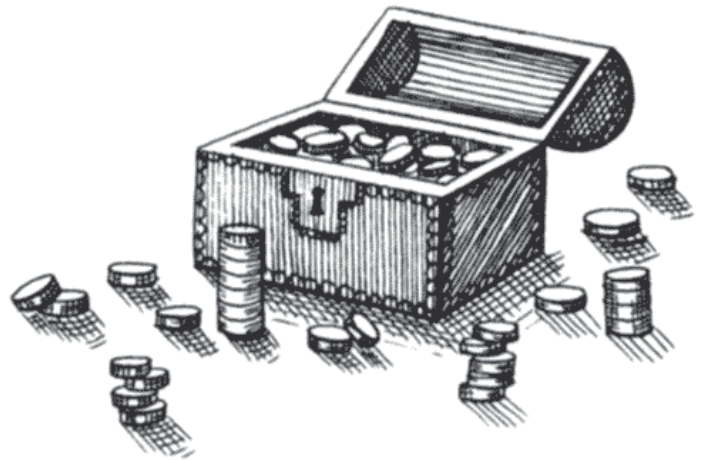
"I stood hazing long enough from one," added another. "I'll be hanged if I'll be hazed by you, John Silver."

"Did any of you gentlemen want to have it out with ME?" roared Silver, bending far forward from his position on the keg, with his pipe still glowing in his right hand. "Put a name on what you're at; you ain't dumb, I reckon. Him that wants shall get it. Have I lived this many years, and a son of a rum puncheon cock his hat athwart my hawse at the latter end of it? You know the way; you're all gentlemen o' fortune, by your account. Well, I'm ready. Take a cutlass, him that dares, and I'll see the colour of his inside, crutch and all, before that pipe's empty."

Not a man stirred; not a man answered.

"That's your sort, is it?" he added, returning his pipe to his mouth. "Well, you're a gay lot to look at, anyway. Not much worth to fight, you ain't. P'r'aps you can understand King George's English. I'm cap'n here by 'lection. I'm cap'n here because I'm the best man by a long sea-mile. You won't fight, as gentlemen o' fortune should; then, by thunder, you'll obey, and you may lay to it! I like that boy, now; I never seen a better boy than that. He's more a man than any pair of rats of you in this here house, and what I say is this: let me see him that'll lay a hand on him—that's what I say, and you may lay to it."

There was a long pause after this. I stood straight up against the wall, my heart still going like a sledge-hammer, but with a ray of hope now shining in my bosom. Silver leant back



against the wall, his arms crossed, his pipe in the corner of his mouth, as calm as though he had been in church; yet his eye kept wandering furtively, and he kept the tail of it on his unruly followers. They, on their part, drew gradually together towards the far end of the block house, and the low hiss of their whispering sounded in my ear continuously, like a stream. One after another, they would look up, and the red light of the torch would fall for a second on their nervous faces; but it was not towards me, it was towards Silver that they turned their eyes.

“You seem to have a lot to say,” remarked Silver, spitting far into the air. “Pipe up and let me hear it, or lay to.”

“Ax your pardon, sir,” returned one of the men; “you’re pretty free with some of the rules; maybe you’ll kindly keep an eye upon the rest. This crew’s dissatisfied; this crew don’t vally bullying a marlin-spike; this crew has its rights like other crews, I’ll make so free as that; and by your own rules, I take it we can talk together. I ax your pardon, sir, acknowledging you for to be captaining at this present; but I claim my right, and steps outside for a council.”

And with an elaborate sea-salute, this fellow, a long, ill-looking, yellow-eyed man of five and thirty, stepped coolly towards the door and disappeared out of the house. One after another the rest followed his example, each making a salute as he passed, each adding some apology. “According to rules,” said one. “Forecastle council,” said Morgan. And so with one remark or another all marched out and left Silver and me alone with the torch.

The sea-cook instantly removed his pipe.

“Now, look you here, Jim Hawkins,” he said in a steady whisper that was no more than audible, “you’re within half a plank of death, and what’s a long sight worse, of torture. They’re going to throw me off. But, you mark, I stand by you through thick and thin. I didn’t mean to; no, not till you spoke up. I was about desperate to lose that much blunt, and be hanged into the bargain. But I see you was the right sort. I says to myself, you stand by Hawkins, John, and Hawkins’ll stand by you. You’re his last card, and by the living thunder, John, he’s yours! Back to back, says I. You save your witness, and he’ll save your neck!”

I began dimly to understand.

“You mean all’s lost?” I asked.

“Aye, by gum, I do!” he answered. “Ship gone, neck gone—that’s the size of it. Once I looked into that bay, Jim Hawkins, and seen no schooner—well, I’m tough, but I gave out. As for that lot and their council, mark me, they’re outright fools and cowards. I’ll save your life—if so be as I can—from them. But, see here, Jim—tit for tat—you save Long John from swinging.”

I was bewildered; it seemed a thing so hopeless he was asking—he, the old buccaneer, the ringleader throughout.

“What I can do, that I’ll do,” I said.

“It’s a bargain!” cried Long John. “You speak up plucky, and by thunder, I’ve a chance!”

He hobbled to the torch, where it stood propped among the firewood, and took a fresh light to his pipe.

“Understand me, Jim,” he said, returning. “I’ve a head on my shoulders, I have. I’m on squire’s side now. I know you’ve got that ship safe somewheres. How you done it, I don’t know, but safe it is. I guess Hands and O’Brien turned soft. I never much believed in neither of THEM. Now you mark me. I ask no questions, nor I won’t let others. I know when a game’s up, I do; and I know a lad that’s staunch. Ah, you that’s young—you and me might have done a power of good together!”

He drew some cognac from the cask into a tin cannikin.

“Will you taste, messmate?” he asked; and when I had refused: “Well, I’ll take a drain myself, Jim,” said he. “I need a caulker, for there’s trouble on hand. And talking o’ trouble, why did that doctor give me the chart, Jim?”

My face expressed a wonder so unaffected that he saw the needlessness of further questions.

“Ah, well, he did, though,” said he. “And there’s something under that, no doubt—something, surely, under that, Jim—bad or good.”

And he took another swallow of the brandy, shaking his great fair head like a man who looks forward to the worst.