

CHAPTER 30: ON PAROLE



I was wakened—indeed, we were all wakened, for I could see even the sentinel shake himself together from where he had fallen against the door-post—by a clear, hearty voice hailing us from the margin of the wood:

“Block house, ahoy!” it cried. “Here’s the doctor.”

And the doctor it was. Although I was glad to hear the sound, yet my gladness was not without admixture. I remembered with confusion my insubordinate and stealthy conduct, and when I saw where it had brought me—among what companions and surrounded by what dangers—I felt ashamed to look him in the face.

He must have risen in the dark, for the day had hardly come; and when I ran to a loophole and looked out, I saw him standing, like Silver once before, up to the mid-leg in creeping vapour.

“You, doctor! Top o’ the morning to you, sir!” cried Silver, broad awake and beaming with good nature in a moment. “Bright and early, to be sure; and it’s the early bird, as the saying goes, that gets the rations. George, shake up your timbers, son, and help Dr. Livesey over the ship’s side. All a-doin’ well, your patients was—all well and merry.”

So he pattered on, standing on the hilltop with his crutch under his elbow and one hand upon the side of the log-house—quite the old John in voice, manner, and expression.

“We’ve quite a surprise for you too, sir,” he continued. “We’ve a little stranger here—he! he! A noo boarder and lodger, sir, and looking fit and taut as a fiddle; slep’ like a supercargo, he did, right alongside of John—stem to stem we was, all night.”

Dr. Livesey was by this time across the stockade and pretty near the cook, and I could hear the alteration in his voice as he said, “Not Jim?”

“The very same Jim as ever was,” says Silver.

The doctor stopped outright, although he did not speak, and it was some seconds before he seemed able to move on.

“Well, well,” he said at last, “duty first and pleasure afterwards, as you might have said yourself, Silver. Let us overhaul these patients of yours.”

A moment afterwards he had entered the block house and with one grim nod to me proceeded with his work among the sick. He seemed under no apprehension, though he must have

known that his life, among these treacherous demons, depended on a hair; and he rattled on to his patients as if he were paying an ordinary professional visit in a quiet English family. His manner, I suppose, reacted on the men, for they behaved to him as if nothing had occurred, as if he were still ship's doctor and they still faithful hands before the mast.

"You're doing well, my friend," he said to the fellow with the bandaged head, "and if ever any person had a close shave, it was you; your head must be as hard as iron. Well, George, how goes it? You're a pretty colour, certainly; why, your liver, man, is upside down. Did you take that medicine? Did he take that medicine, men?"

"Aye, aye, sir, he took it, sure enough," returned Morgan.

"Because, you see, since I am mutineers' doctor, or prison doctor as I prefer to call it," says Doctor Livesey in his pleasantest way, "I make it a point of honour not to lose a man for King George (God bless him!) and the gallows."

The rogues looked at each other but swallowed the home-thrust in silence.

"Dick don't feel well, sir," said one.

"Don't he?" replied the doctor. "Well, step up here, Dick, and let me see your tongue. No, I should be surprised if he did! The man's tongue is fit to frighten the French. Another fever."

"Ah, there," said Morgan, "that comed of sp'iling Bibles."

"That comes—as you call it—of being arrant asses," retorted the doctor, "and not having sense enough to know honest air from poison, and the dry land from a vile, pestiferous slough. I think it most probable—though of course it's only an opinion—that you'll all have the deuce to pay before you get that malaria out of your systems. Camp in a bog, would you? Silver, I'm surprised at you. You're less of a fool than many, take you all round; but you don't appear to me to have the rudiments of a notion of the rules of health.

"Well," he added after he had dosed them round and they had taken his prescriptions, with really laughable humility, more like charity schoolchildren than blood-guilty mutineers and pirates—"well, that's done for today. And now I should wish to have a talk with that boy, please."

And he nodded his head in my direction carelessly.

George Merry was at the door, spitting and spluttering over some bad-tasted medicine; but at the first word of the doctor's proposal he swung round with a deep flush and cried "No!" and swore.

Silver struck the barrel with his open hand.

"Si-lence!" he roared and looked about him positively like a lion. "Doctor," he went on in his usual tones, "I was a-thinking of that, knowing as how you had a fancy for the boy. We're all

humbly grateful for your kindness, and as you see, puts faith in you and takes the drugs down like that much grog. And I take it I've found a way as'll suit all. Hawkins, will you give me your word of honour as a young gentleman—for a young gentleman you are, although poor born—your word of honour not to slip your cable?"

I readily gave the pledge required.

"Then, doctor," said Silver, "you just step outside o' that stockade, and once you're there I'll bring the boy down on the inside, and I reckon you can yarn through the spars. Good day to you, sir, and all our dooties to the squire and Cap'n Smollett."

The explosion of disapproval, which nothing but Silver's black looks had restrained, broke out immediately the doctor had left the house. Silver was roundly accused of playing double—of trying to make a separate peace for himself, of sacrificing the interests of his accomplices and victims, and, in one word, of the identical, exact thing that he was doing. It seemed to me so obvious, in this case, that I could not imagine how he was to turn their anger. But he was twice the man the rest were, and his last night's victory had given him a huge preponderance on their minds. He called them all the fools and dolts you can imagine, said it was necessary I should talk to the doctor, fluttered the chart in their faces, asked them if they could afford to break the treaty the very day they were bound a-treasure-hunting.

"No, by thunder!" he cried. "It's us must break the treaty when the time comes; and till then I'll gammon that doctor, if I have to ile his boots with brandy."

And then he bade them get the fire lit, and stalked out upon his crutch, with his hand on my shoulder, leaving them in a disarray, and silenced by his volubility rather than convinced.

"Slow, lad, slow," he said. "They might round upon us in a twinkle of an eye if we was seen to hurry."

Very deliberately, then, did we advance across the sand to where the doctor awaited us on the other side of the stockade, and as soon as we were within easy speaking distance Silver stopped.

"You'll make a note of this here also, doctor," says he, "and the boy'll tell you how I saved his life, and were deposed for it too, and you may lay to that. Doctor, when a man's steering as near the wind as me—playing chuck-farthing with the last breath in his body, like—you wouldn't think it too much, mayhap, to give him one good word? You'll please bear in mind it's not my life only now—it's that boy's into the bargain; and you'll speak me fair, doctor, and give me a bit o' hope to go on, for the sake of mercy."

Silver was a changed man once he was out there and had his back to his friends and the block house; his cheeks seemed to have fallen in, his voice trembled; never was a soul more dead in earnest.

“Why, John, you’re not afraid?” asked Dr. Livesey.

“Doctor, I’m no coward; no, not I—not SO much!” and he snapped his fingers. “If I was I wouldn’t say it. But I’ll own up fairly, I’ve the shakes upon me for the gallows. You’re a good man and a true; I never seen a better man! And you’ll not forget what I done good, not any more than you’ll forget the bad, I know. And I step aside—see here—and leave you and Jim alone. And you’ll put that down for me too, for it’s a long stretch, is that!”

So saying, he stepped back a little way, till he was out of earshot, and there sat down upon a tree-stump and began to whistle, spinning round now and again upon his seat so as to command a sight, sometimes of me and the doctor and sometimes of his unruly ruffians as they went to and fro in the sand between the fire—which they were busy rekindling—and the house, from which they brought forth pork and bread to make the breakfast.

“So, Jim,” said the doctor sadly, “here you are. As you have brewed, so shall you drink, my boy. Heaven knows, I cannot find it in my heart to blame you, but this much I will say, be it kind or unkind: when Captain Smollett was well, you dared not have gone off; and when he was ill and couldn’t help it, by George, it was downright cowardly!”

I will own that I here began to weep. “Doctor,” I said, “you might spare me. I have blamed myself enough; my life’s forfeit anyway, and I should have been dead by now if Silver hadn’t stood for me; and doctor, believe this, I can die—and I dare say I deserve it—but what I fear is torture. If they come to torture me—”

“Jim,” the doctor interrupted, and his voice was quite changed, “Jim, I can’t have this. Whip over, and we’ll run for it.”

“Doctor,” said I, “I passed my word.”

“I know, I know,” he cried. “We can’t help that, Jim, now. I’ll take it on my shoulders, holus bolus, blame and shame, my boy; but stay here, I cannot let you. Jump! One jump, and you’re out, and we’ll run for it like antelopes.”

“No,” I replied; “you know right well you wouldn’t do the thing yourself—neither you nor squire nor captain; and no more will I. Silver trusted me; I passed my word, and back I go. But, doctor, you did not let me finish. If they come to torture me, I might let slip a word of where the ship is, for I got the ship, part by luck and part by risking, and she lies in North Inlet, on the southern beach, and just below high water. At half tide she must be high and dry.”

“The ship!” exclaimed the doctor.

Rapidly I described to him my adventures, and he heard me out in silence.

“There is a kind of fate in this,” he observed when I had done. “Every step, it’s you that saves our lives; and do you suppose by any chance that we are going to let you lose yours? That would be a poor return, my boy. You found out the plot; you found Ben Gunn—the best deed that ever you did, or will do, though you live to ninety. Oh, by Jupiter, and talking of Ben Gunn! Why, this is the mischief in person. Silver!” he cried. “Silver! I’ll give you a piece of advice,” he continued as the cook drew near again; “don’t you be in any great hurry after that treasure.”

“Why, sir, I do my possible, which that ain’t,” said Silver. “I can only, asking your pardon, save my life and the boy’s by seeking for that treasure; and you may lay to that.”

“Well, Silver,” replied the doctor, “if that is so, I’ll go one step further: look out for squalls when you find it.”

“Sir,” said Silver, “as between man and man, that’s too much and too little. What you’re after, why you left the block house, why you given me that there chart, I don’t know, now, do I? And yet I done your bidding with my eyes shut and never a word of hope! But no, this here’s too much. If you won’t tell me what you mean plain out, just say so and I’ll leave the helm.”

“No,” said the doctor musingly; “I’ve no right to say more; it’s not my secret, you see, Silver, or, I give you my word, I’d tell it you. But I’ll go as far with you as I dare go, and a step beyond, for I’ll have my wig sorted by the captain or I’m mistaken! And first, I’ll give you a bit of hope; Silver, if we both get alive out of this wolf-trap, I’ll do my best to save you, short of perjury.”

Silver’s face was radiant. “You couldn’t say more, I’m sure, sir, not if you was my mother,” he cried.

“Well, that’s my first concession,” added the doctor. “My second is a piece of advice: keep the boy close beside you, and when you need help, halloo. I’m off to seek it for you, and that itself will show you if I speak at random. Good-bye, Jim.”

And Dr. Livesey shook hands with me through the stockade, nodded to Silver, and set off at a brisk pace into the wood.