

I.

Loss, I can account for. Indignity, I can endure. Death? Very well, I accept.

Many a turn of sea and wandering sun my eye has seen; they have strewn silver upon my hair and laid furrows in my brow. I have never flinched from spray of salt or spray of blood. I have never shrunk from unfavourable odds. Fear has never wrapped cold around my breast.

Until now.

I suppose that is why I feel driven to put pen to paper. And I hope a little leeway may be given a man for his reflections, when the sea is no longer his horizon. The island on which I find myself is enveloped by a persistent fog; yet it never spills upon the land, leaving a clear space through which the island breathes sunlight for most of the day. When the sun sinks low, it burns dimly through the fog-bank, turning it to gold. We call it the first twilight.

This is when the watch-fires are lit. No man waits to be told; each goes to his place without word or signal. Our number is not what it was, and we do not range as once we did. We hold the ground we can, and no more.

Eventually the sunlight is quenched within the deep wall of fog, and the sun seems sunk into a black gulf beneath the stars. Hands idle, the mind wanders. Each man, I believe, becomes feelingly aware of his life's flow, and listens to its winding murmur.

A fortnight ago, as near as I can reckon, we were still masters of our way, and the sea lay wide before us. We had slipped clear of a Spanish frigate by out-pointing her all night, and though she had hulled us once, we were in good heart.

At first light, we sent the carpenter over the side and had him up again, wet through and out of breath.

“The larboard quarter’s stove in,” said he, “and she’s making water fast. We’ll have to fother her but she’ll have the sea in her if pressed.”

“Take what hands you need,” said I.

The carpenter went at once to his work. I turned then to the master at the helm:

“Let her lie easy, Mr. Easton. No more canvas than she’ll bear. We’ll need her whole till we can put her on a quiet bottom.”

One of the foremast hands, a man who had traded in these waters before he took to the black flag, spoke up to say there was an island not far off with a snug bay under the lee, high land round it, and a beach fit to take a ship. The word passed quickly among the men, and there were no voices against it.

“Very well,” I said. “I shall inform the captain.”

“Aye—he’ll show us the way of it,” muttered someone near the mainmast, and there was a low stir of laughter.

The laughter stopped abruptly when the boatswain stepped in behind the man, fetching him a hard whack across the back with the belaying-pin.

“Hold your tongue, you hang-dog, or I’ll hold it for you.”

The man staggered forward, but turned back once he had his feet under him. A quick answer seemed to rise to his lips, but his glance ran the length of the deck and found no encouragement there. He spat, said nothing, and went back to his duty.

I shook my head and went to the captain’s cabin. The captain was often there with his books, but when I entered he stood staring fixedly

out through the stern window. He seated himself and listened without comment while I laid before him the decision reached by the hands on deck. His mouth was barely visible under his drooping straw-coloured moustache. When I had finished he rubbed a hand across it, and said:

“I have not yet commended you and Mr. Easton for how admirably you conned her out from under that frigate. The men and I owe you a good turn, I’m sure.”

“Aye, well, the wind stood us in good stead.”

He pinched his eyes, a deeper weariness than mere fatigue stealing into his face.

“You seem out of spirits,” said I. “What’s the matter?”

“I shall do you the courtesy of plain-speaking on my side. I’ve had long practice taking a man’s measure, and never very far out either. I think, if a vote be held to-day, that there would not be half a dozen among us who would vote to keep me in command.”

“There’s always Mr. Hale,” said I. “In fact, he was just scolding a man for . . .” I broke off with a cough. “In sober truth, though, I don’t hold with that conclusion. Rather, I think it would be difficult to find half a dozen of the crew who would turn a man out of his own ship.”

The captain’s fingers opened from his chin in a small, incredulous spread. “They’re pirates.”

“For my part,” I said, “I consider it a breach of the articles. This ship was bought with your own fortune; I should count any attempt to take her for unlawful theft.”

“Good man. Thank God that I had the sense to sink my dignity and let you act for me when I could not. Before you came along, I had a mighty good mind to throw up my hand altogether. I put a good face on

it, but I lived in a constant fear that if the fit took them, I should be put on shore in some unpleasant place. You have honoured me by sharing my burden, you really have.”

I glanced at the opened bottle of rum on the table. “I’m your friend—and I’ll stand your friend.”

It was not the first time he had heard me say as much. I had been the master of a merchantman when another pirate crew dragged me off my ship and marooned me for fighting back too hard. When Captain Langley had heard tell of my fate, he came about and took me off. I have not forgotten it.

“What would you have me do?” he said.

“With what?”

“I’ve waited long enough for my hour, don’t you think? It hasn’t come. I used to think I could brazen it out, but the truth has begun to weigh upon me . . .”

I nodded, wondering quietly what had become of his plain-speaking.

“Ah,—I’m a bad hand at making a speech,” he said. “Perhaps you will take for granted all I’d like to say?”

“I am certainly trying.”

He sighed. “If only she were sound enough to take a few more prizes, all might yet be well. You see, I mean to have you all paid enough to purchase the ship of me on terms you can meet. Then I shall accept it as even dealing between us and chuck it up.”

“That makes your meaning clear enough.”

“And shall it come off, you think?”

Before I could answer, we were disturbed by a loud shout:

“Sail ho! Standing after us!”

And with those words, the hour for soft counsel had passed. Even though we ran out together, if the frigate was again upon us, the burden of command would fall to a single voice—and we all knew whose that must be.

A man of a different constitution might here, a fortnight later in the sleepless watches of the night, find some remorse of conscience to keep him company: I shall not. My belief is this, that were this black coin tossed a hundred times in succession, it would land each time upon the same face.

Darkness encroaches upon me from every corner of the island, but it must not encroach upon my mind. The wind blows chill from the sea, driving the fog in pale tatters across the land to dampen the earth—but not my resolve.

Out there somewhere in the sightless dark, the captain lies close. He dares not strike so much as a spark to warm his hands, for if my watchers should spy the flame, we should have him by first light.

The coin has been tossed.

II.

If I should offer advice for posterity, it would be this:

Never encircle your enemy on four sides, for without a route of escape they will fight to the death.

We had given the Spaniards the slip again, though at great risk. A pirate sloop has this advantage over her hunters, that she can be tolerably waged against any of the King's ships, and take risks an expensive warship cannot afford. In our condition, we could not gamble with speed; but we could put her into dangerous play over the shoals.

We felt our way through with little water to spare under the keel, and once clear, stood out for the island as it was charted.

The bay proved as snug as it had been described to me, tucked between two bold headlands. The beach lay rather black with volcanic ash and rock, but the sea had done its work, rounding the stones at the water's edge and wearing down those below enough that a ship might pass without tearing her belly out. The island lay clear in the sun. There was no fog as far as the eye could reach.

As the guns were struck and the cargo brought ashore, the captain resolved to form a small party to look inland for water. He seemed to draw some confidence from the feel of earth beneath him, though he was no more made for rough country than for the life he had chosen at sea. He took with him Jorge Ramirez, who alone among us had knowledge of the place, and a few armed hands besides.

The work went steadily on. I was on the beach when one of the hands we had set to watch appeared upon the heights. He came on at a run, and the sight of him set a cold stirring in me under the clear sun. Presently he put his hands to his mouth, and the wind carried down that

familiar, wretched cry:

“Sail ho! Standing in from the north!”

The work faltered. Voices broke out around me:

“What? Have they a blood-hound with them?”

“Hang it! Is it the Don again?”

I ran upslope to him and followed him to the lookout spot. The sea moved in long, slow folds, the wind fretting its surface here and there, and I should never have picked out that tiny, bright nick of white on the horizon had he not set my eye upon it. That is why a sharp lookout is worth more than many guns.

“Are you sure she’s standing in?”

“Aye—she’s making way.”

“Has she the wind with her?”

“She has sail enough and comes on steady. She’ll not be ‘ere for a couple o’ hours yet, but she is coming.”

I kept my eye upon the little speck as it rose and sank with the swell through the haze. The horizon trembled in the heat. My sight blurred.

“If it’s the Don,” said the lookout, “we’ll be at her mercy.”

“Look sharp and mark her course,” said I, and turned back down the slope.

The reports came at intervals; but before long a heavy squall moved across the northern sea, trailing darkness upon the water. The outer fringe brushed the island, and a scatter of cold drops rattled in the leaves above us. By then the speck had grown to visible canvas even to my eyes, only to be lost behind the hanging rain.

It did not matter. There was no pause, as the guns were run back into the boats and rowed along the curve of the bay. They were landed again

beneath the headlands and hauled upward by main strength and tackle until, at last, their mouths were turned upon the sea.

I stood there when the ship took shape once more out of the thinning rain. At first she was no more than a dark blur within the grey; then she rent the veil of her husk and slipped free. A ragged mist hung in the wake of the squall, still clinging to her like a ghostly shroud. The canvases heaved and swelled in the unsettled gusts. There was no mistaking her. She was our hunter.

End of Preview.

Thank you for reading to the end! This is the first chapter and a half of the prologue for the adventure. Follow on Kickstarter to get notified when it goes live.

[Something Buried, Something Due: Kickstarter Page](#)