

Masterworks of Adventure:

Pirates

**Robert Louis Stevenson, Rafael
Sabatini,
Emilio Salgari, Jeffrey Farnol
Robert E. Howard**



Masterworks of Adventure: Pirates

Treasure Island

Robert Louis Stevenson

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The Black Corsair

Emilio Salgari

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Jeffrey Farnol

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Black Bartlemy's Treasure

Jeffrey Farnol

To My Nephews
James Jeffrey Farnol
And
Ronald Ewart Oakeshott

Prologue

THE FRENCHMAN BESIDE ME had been dead since dawn. His scarred and shackled body swayed limply back and forth with every sweep of the great oar as we, his less fortunate bench-fellows, tugged and strained to keep time to the stroke.

Two men had I seen die beside me, yet Death ever passed me by, nay, it seemed rather that despite the pain of stripes, despite the travail and hardship, my strength waxed the mightier; upon arm and thigh, burnt nigh black by fierce suns, the muscles showed hard and knotted; within my body, scarred by the lash, the life leapt and glowed yet was the soul of me sick unto death. But it seemed I could not die—finding thereby blessed rest and a surcease from this agony of life as had this Frenchman, who of all the naked wretches about me, was the only one with whom I had any sort of fellowship. He had died (as I say) with the dawn, so quietly that at first I thought he but fainted and pitied him, but, when I knew, pity changed to bitterness.

Therefore, as I strove at the heavy oar I prayed 'twixt gnashing teeth a prayer I had often prayed, and the matter of my praying was thus:

“O God of Justice, for the agony I needs must now endure, for the bloody stripes and bitter anguish give to me vengeance—vengeance, O God, on mine enemy!”

So prayed I, hoarse-panting and with the sweat trickling down whiles I stared at the naked back of him that rowed before me—a great, fat fellow he had been once, but now the skin hung in numberless creases whereon were many weals, some raw and bloody, that crossed and re-crossed each other after the manner of lacework.

“Justice, O God, upon mine enemy! Since Death is not for me let me live until I be avenged; for the pain I suffer so may I see him suffer, for the anguish that is mine so may I watch

his agony. Thou art a just God, so, God of Justice, give to me vengeance!”

The sun rose high and higher over our quarter, beating down upon our naked backs and adding greatly to our torments thereby, waking the pain of old stripes and lending an added sting to new.

Ever and anon would come the sharp crack of the drivers’ whips followed by the squealing cry of quivering flesh (a cry wherein was none of the human) the which, dying to a whine, was lost in the stir and bustle of the great galleass. But ever and always, beneath the hoarse voices of the mariners, beneath the clash of armour and tramp of feet, beneath the creak and rumble of the long oars, came yet another sound, rising and falling yet never ceasing, a dull, low sound the like of which you shall sometimes hear among trees when the wind is high—the deep, sobbing moan that was the voice of our anguish as we poor wretches urged the great *Esmeralda* galleass upon her course.

The oar whereto I was chained along with my three bench-mates had at some time been badly sprung, so that the armourers had made shift to strengthen it with a stout iron fillet some six inches wide. Now it so happened that my grasp came upon this fillet, and, with every stroke of the oar, day after day, week in and week out, it had become my wont to rub the links of my chain to and fro across this iron band, whereby they had become very smooth and shining.

The words of my prayer were yet upon my lips, when, chancing to look upon one of these links, I beheld that which set my heart a-leaping and my riotous blood a-tingle to my fingers’ ends; yet ’twas a very small thing, no more than a mark that showed upon the polished surface of the link, a line not so thick as a hair and not to be noticed without close looking; but when I bore upon the link this hair-line grew and widened, it needed but a sudden wrench and I should be free. This threw me into such a rapturous transport that I had much ado to contain myself, howbeit after some while I lifted

my eyes to the heaven all flushed and rosy with the young day, for it seemed that God had indeed heard my prayer.

Presently, along the gangway amidships, comes none other than that accursed Portugal, Pedro the whip-master, who, espying the drooping form of the Frenchman beside me, forthwith falls a-cursing in his vile tongue and gives a prodigious flourish with his whip. Now by reason of much practice they do become very expert with these same whips, insomuch that they shall (with a certain cunning flick of the lash) gash you a man as it were with a knife, the like of which none may bear and not cry out for the exceeding pain of it. "Ha, thou lazy dog!" cries he, "Think ye to snore and take your ease whiles Pedro is aboard?" And with the word the long lash hissed and cracked upon the Frenchman's naked back like a pistol-shot.

And lo! he (that meseemed was dead) stirred. I felt the scarred body leap and quiver, the swooning eyes opened, rolling dim and sightless and the pallid face was twisted in sharp anguish; but, even as I watched, the lines of agony were smoothed away, into the wild eyes came a wondrous light, and uttering a great, glad cry he sank forward across the oar-shaft and hung there. Hereupon this accursed Pedro betook him to his whip, smiting right heartily, but, seeing the Frenchman stirred not and perceiving, moreover, the blood to come but slow and in no great quantity, he presently desisted and bade us cease rowing one and all.

This sudden respite from labour served but to teach me how stiff and painful were my limbs, more especially my left wrist and ankle where the fetters had worn great sores.

The wind was fallen light and there rose that hot, sickening reek, that suffocating stench that is like unto nothing on earth save one of these floating hells, and the which, if a man hath but smelled it once, he shall nevermore forget.

After some while, back cometh Pedro with certain of the armourers, and (having by divers methods learned the Frenchman was in sooth dead) they struck off his fetters, hand and leg, in the doing of which they must needs free me

also (since we were chained together, he and I) and, binding a great shot to his feet, made ready to heave him overboard.

And now, seeing no man heeded me, I snapped asunder the cracked link and was free, save for the heavy chain that cumbered my leg. Stooping, I lifted this chain and crouched to spring for the bulwark; but now (even in this moment), remembering all that I had suffered at the hands of this most accursed Pedro, I turned, and wrapping the broken oar-chain about my fist, crept towards where he stood to oversee the armourers. His back was towards me and I was within a yard of him when he turned, and, seeing me, uttered a shout and raised his whip, but ere the blow could fall I leapt and smote him. My iron-bound fist took him full betwixt the eyes, and looking down upon his crushed and spattered face as he lay I knew that Pedro the whip-master would whip men no more these many days.

Then (not minded to die by the whip or upon a pike-head) turned I and sprang for the ship's side, but the chain about my leg hampered me sorely, and ere I could mount the high bulwark I was beset from behind. So would I have faced them and died fighting but fierce strokes battered me to my knees, fierce hands wrenched and tore at me, and grown faint with blows I was overborne, my hands lashed behind me, and thus helpless I was dragged along the gangway and so up the ladder to the poop where, plain to all men's sight, a whipping-post had been set up. Yet even so I struggled still, panting out curses on them, French and Spanish and English, drawing upon all the vile abuse of the rowing-bench and lazarette since fain would I have them slay me out of hand the rather than endure the miseries and anguish of my lot. Yet this might not be (since slaves were hard to come by and I was mighty and strong) wherefore I struggled no more, but suffered them to strike off my broken fetters and bind me to the whipping-post as they listed. Yet scarce had they made an end when there comes a loud hail from the masthead, whereupon was sudden mighty to-do of men running hither and yon, laughing and shouting one to another, some

buckling on armour as they ran, some casting loose the great ordnance, while eyes turned and hands pointed in the one direction; but turn and twist me how I might I could see nought of any strange sail by reason of the high bulkhead beside me.

Of a sudden all voices were hushed as up the poop-ladder comes the commander Don Miguel in his black armour, who, looking long and steadily to windward, gives a sign with his gauntleted hand, whereon divers of the officers go off hot-foot, some to muster the long files of arquebusiers, others to overlook the setting of more sail and the like. And now was a prodigious cracking of whips followed by groans and cries and screaming curses, and straightway the long oars began to swing with a swifter beat. From where I stood in my bonds I could look down upon the poor, naked wretches as they rose and fell, each and all at the same moment, in time to the stroke.

For maybe half an hour the chase was kept up and then all at once the decks quivered 'neath the discharge of one of the forward culverins; and presently, as the great galleass altered her course, obedient to the motion of Don Miguel's hand, I beheld, some half-league to windward, the towering stern of the ship we were pursuing, whose length gradually grew upon me as we overhauled her until she was fairly in view. She was a small ship, and by her build I did not doubt but that she was English; even as I watched, up to her mizzen-peak fluttered the English flag. And hereupon a great yearning came upon me, insomuch that of a sudden her high, weather-beaten sides, her towering masts and patched canvas grew all blurred and indistinct.

Thrice already our guns had roared, yet (though she was now so close that I made out her very rope and spar) she made no sign. In a little our guns fell silent also, wherefore, looking about, I beheld Don Miguel standing beside the tiller yet with his impassive gaze ever bent upon the foe; and, as I watched, I read his deadly purpose, and a great fear for the English ship came upon me, and I fell a-praying beneath my

breath, for we carried a weapon more terrible than any culverin that was ever cast, the long, sharp ram below the water.

The English ship was now so near that I could see the yawning muzzles of her guns, while her high, curving sides seemed to tower over us. As I gazed, with my heart full of a pitiful fear for her, I saw a head appear above her quarter railing, a very round head whereon was a mariner's red cap. Came a puff of smoke, the sharp crack of a caliver, and one of the officers beside Don Miguel threw up his hands and, twisting on his heels, fell clashing in his armour. When I looked again for the red cap, it was gone. But Don Miguel waited, silent and impassive as ever. Suddenly he gestured with his hand, I saw the heave of the steersmen's shoulders as they obeyed, while the air rang with shouts of command as, the starboard oars holding water, the larboard thrashed and churned amain and the great *Esmeralda* galleass (turning thus well-nigh in her own length) drove straight for the side of her foe.

Never had I seen it better done, and I set my teeth, waiting for the grinding crash that was to send the English ship to the bottom, but lo! her creaking yards were braced round, and, paying off before the wind (which now blew strongly) she stood away upon a course at right angles to her old, whereby both vessels were running parallel as before. Yet it had been close, so very close indeed that as we drove past her I heard the sickening crack of our oars as they snapped off one after the other against her side, tossing those that manned them in bloody, struggling heaps.

And now from every English gun leaped roaring flame; the air was full of shrieks and groans and the crash of splintering wood, and through the eddying smoke I could see many of our soldiery that lay in strange, contorted attitudes while others crawled, sobbing on hands and knees; but on the scarlet-dropping rowing-benches I dared not look.

Hotter waxed the fight, louder swelled the din and tumult with the never-ceasing thunder of the guns; and amid it all

Don Miguel paced to and fro, impassive as always, the blade of his long rapier gleaming here and there as he directed the fire.

Up rolled the smoke thicker and denser, but, ever and anon, through some rift I might catch a glimpse of the scarred, blackened side of the English ship, or the litter and confusion of our decks. Twice shots ploughed up the planking hard by me, and once my post itself was struck, so that for a moment I had some hope of winning free of my bonds, yet struggle how I would, I could not move; the which filled me with a keen despair, for I made no doubt (what with the smoke and tumult) I might have plunged overboard unnoticed and belike have gained the English ship.

Slowly and by degrees our fire slackened, one by one the guns fell silent and in their place rose the more hateful sounds of anguish. Now as I stood thus, my eyes smarting with burnt powder, my ears yet ringing with the din, I grew aware how the deck sloped in strange fashion; at first I paid small heed, yet with every minute this slope became steeper, and with this certainty came the knowledge that we were sinking and, moreover (judging by the angle of the deck) sinking by the stern.

Hereupon, impelled by that lust of life the which is implanted in each one of us, I fell to a wild struggling against my bonds, until, seeing in a little the hopelessness of this, I grew resigned to despair, and, ceasing my passionate efforts, looked about me, for the smoke was thinned away. And truly an evil sight was this great galleass, with its shot-torn decks and huddled heaps of dead, its litter of broken spars and dismantled guns, and with everywhere great gouts and pools of blood, while below and beyond were the shattered rowing-benches cumbered now with awful red heaps, silent for the most part, yet some there were who screamed high and shrill.

Save for myself and divers of the dead the poop lay deserted, but forward such of the soldiers and mariners who yet lived were fighting for the boats, and all was riot and confusion.

As I stared about me thus I espied Don Miguel lying among the wreckage of a dismantled gun; his face was towards me and looked as I had seen it an hundred times, save for a smear of blood upon his cheek. Even as I gazed his eyes met mine full and square. For a moment he lay without motion, then (his face a-twitch with the effort) he came slowly to his elbow, gazed about him and so back to me again. Then I saw his hand creep down to the dagger at his hip, to fumble weakly there—howbeit, at the third essay he drew the blade and began to creep towards me. Very slowly and painfully he dragged himself along, and once I heard him groan, but he stayed not till he was come within striking distance, yet was he sore wounded and so weak withal that he was fain to rest him awhile. And ever his impassive eyes looked up into mine the while I nerved myself to meet the blow unflinching (an it might be so). Once more he raised himself, his arm lifted slowly, the dagger gleamed and fell, its keen edge severing the cords that bound me, and with a sudden effort I broke free and stood staring down into those impassive eyes as one in a dream. Then, lifting a feeble hand, he pointed to the tattered sails of the English ship hard by, and so, resting his head upon his arm as one that is very weary, he sighed; and with the sigh I think the life passed out of him.

Turning, I was upon the quarter railing in a single leap, and, without a glance at the red havoc behind me, I plunged over and down.

The sharp sting of the brine struck me like a myriad needle-points, but the sweet cool of the waters was wondrous grateful to my sun-scorched body as, coming to the surface, I struck out for the English ship though sore hampered by my chain.

Presently coming beneath her lofty stern I found hanging therefrom a tangle of ropes and cordage whereby I contrived to clamber aboard, and so beheld a man in a red seaman's bonnet who sat upon the wreckage of one of the quarter guns tying up a splinter-gash in his arm with hand and teeth;

perceiving me he rolled a pair of blue eyes up at me and nodded:

“Welcome aboard, lad!” says he, having knotted the bandage to his liking. “Be ye one as can understand good English?”

“Aye!” says I, nodding.

“Why then bear witness as I be a patient soul and marcifful. Be witness as I held my fire so long as any marcifful soul might by token that I knew what a broadside can do among crowded rowing-benches—having rowed aboard one o’ they Spanish hells afore now—so I held my fire till yon devil’s craft came nigh cutting me asunder—and marcy hath its limits. Timothy Spence o’ the *Tiger*, master, is me, homeward bound for the Port of London, and by this fight am short five good men. But you’re a proper big ’un. Go for’ard to the bo’sun, you shall know him by reason that he lacketh his starboard yere. Ask him for clothes to cover thy nakedness, lad, and—oho, there goeth yon devil’s craft—!” Turning as he spoke I saw the sharp bows of the *Esmeralda* lift and lift, high and higher, and, with a long-drawn gurgling roar, the great galleass plunged down stern foremost, burying her shame and misery from the eyes of man for evermore.

Thus then I sailed with Master Timothy Spence aboard the *Tiger*, a free man after five years of anguish.

Chapter 1

Of What Befell on Pembury Hill

IT WAS A NIGHT of tempest with rain and wind, a great wild wind that shouted mightily near and far, filling the world with halloo; while, ever and anon, thunder crashed and lightning flamed athwart the muddy road that wound steeply up betwixt grassy banks topped by swaying trees. Broken twigs, whirling down the wind, smote me in the dark, fallen branches reached out arms that grappled me unseen, but I

held on steadfastly, since every stride carried me nearer to vengeance, that vengeance for the which I prayed and lived. So with bared head lifted exulting to the tempest and grasping the stout hedge-stake that served me for staff, I climbed the long ascent of Pembury Hill.

Reaching the summit at last I must needs stay awhile to catch my breath and shelter me as well as I might 'neath the weather bank, for upon this eminence the rain lashed and the wind smote me with a fury redoubled.

And now, as I stood amid that howling darkness, my back propped by the bank, my face lifted to the tempest, I was aware of a strange sound, very shrill and fitful, that reached me 'twixt the booming wind-gusts, a sound that came and went, now loud and clear, anon faint and remote, and I wondered what it might be. Then the rushing dark was split asunder by a jagged lightning-flash, and I saw. Stark against the glare rose black shaft and crossbeam, wherefrom swung a creaking shape of rusty chains and iron bands that held together something shrivelled and black and wet with rain, a grisly thing that leapt on the buffeting wind, that strove and jerked as it would fain break free and hurl itself down upon me.

Now hearkening to the dismal creak of this chained thing, I fell to meditation. This awful shape (thought I) had been a man once, hale and strong,—even as I, but this man had contravened the law (even as I purposed to do) and he had died a rogue's death and so hung, rotting, in his chains, even as this my own body might do some day. And, hearkening to the shrill wail of his fetters, my flesh crept with loathing and I shivered. But the fit passed, and in my vain pride I smote my staff into the mud at my feet and vowed within myself that nought should baulk me of my just vengeance, come what might; as my father had suffered death untimely and hard, so should die the enemy of my race; for the anguish he had made me endure so should he know anguish. I bethought me how long and deadly had been this feud of ours, handed down from one generation to another, a dark, blood-

smirched record of bitter wrongs bitterly avenged. "To hate like a Brandon and revenge like a Conisby!" This had been a saying in our south country upon a time; and now—he was the last of his race as I was the last of mine, and I had come back out of hell that this saying might be fulfilled. Soon—ha, yes, in a few short hours the feud should be ended once and for all and the house of Conisby avenged to the uttermost. Thinking thus, I heeded no more the raving tempest around me until, roused by the plunge and rattle of the gibbet-chains, I raised my head and shaking my staff up at that black and shrivelled thing, I laughed loud and fierce, and, even as I did so, there leapt a great blaze of crackling flame and thereafter a thunder-clap that seemed to shake the very earth and smite the roaring wind to awed silence; and in this silence, I heard a whisper:

"O mercy of God!"

Somewhere in the darkness hard by a woman had cried. Instinctively I turned thitherward, searching the night vainly until the lightning flared again and I beheld a cloaked and hooded figure huddled miserably against the bank of the road, and, as darkness came, I spoke:

"Woman, doth the gibbet fright you, or is't I? If 'tis the gibbet go hence; if 'tis I, rest assured."

"Who are you?" said a breathless voice.

"One of no more account than the poor thing that danceth aloft in his chains and for you as harmless."

And now she was beside me, a dark, wind-blown shape, and above the howling tempest her voice reached me in passionate pleading:

"Sir—sir, will you aid one in sore danger and distress?"

"Yourself?" I questioned.

"Nay—indeed, nay," she panted, "'tis Marjorie, my poor, poor brave Marjorie. They stopped my coach—drunken men. I know not what came of Gregory and I leapt out and escaped them in the dark, but Marjorie—they carried her off—there is a light down the lane yonder. I followed and saw—O sir, you will save Marjorie—you are a man—"

A hand was upon my ragged sleeve, a hand that gripped and shook at me in desperate supplication—"You will save her from—from worse than death? Speak—speak!"

"Lead on!" quoth I, answering this compelling voice. The gripping fingers slipped down and clasped my hand in the dark, and with never another word she led me away unseeing and unseen until we came where we were more sheltered from rain and wind; and now I took occasion to notice that the hand that gripped mine so masterfully was small and soft, so that what with this and her voice and speech I judged her one of condition. But my curiosity went no further nor did I question her, for in my world was no place for women. So she led me on at haste despite the dark—like one that was sure of her whereabouts—until I suddenly espied a dim light that shone out from the open lattice of what I judged to be a small hedge-tavern. Here my companion halted suddenly and pointed to the light.

"Go!" she whispered. "Go—nay, first take this!" and she thrust a small pistol into my hand. "Haste!" she panted, "O haste—and I do pray God shield and bless you." Then with never a word I left her and strode towards the beam of light.

Being come nigh the casement I paused to cock the weapon and to glance at the priming, then, creeping to the open lattice, I looked into the room.

Three men scowled at each other across a table—desperate-looking fellows, scarred and ill-featured, with clothes that smacked of the sea; behind them in a corner crouched a maid, comely of seeming but pallid of cheek and with cloak torn by rough hands, and, as she crouched, her wide eyes stared at the dice-box that one of the men was shaking vigorously—a tall, hairy fellow this, with great rings in his ears; thus stood he rattling the dice and smiling while his companions cursed him hoarsely.

With a twist of the hand the hairy man made his throw, and as the three evil heads stooped above the dice, I clambered through the window, levelled pistol in one hand, heavy staff in the other.

“What d’ye set?” quoth I. The three sprang apart and stared at me quite chapfallen.

“What’s to do?” growled one.

“First your barking-irons—lay them here on the table and quick’s the word!” One after another they drew the weapons from their belts, and one by one I tossed them through the window.

“What!” quoth one, a lank rogue with a patch over one eye and winking the other jovial-wise, “How now, mate o’ mine, shall dog bite dog then?”

“Aye,” says I, “and with a will!”

“Nay, nay, shipmate,” quoth another, a plump, small man with round, bright eyes and but one ear, “easy now—easy. We be three lorn mariners d’ye see—jolly dogs, bully boys, shipmate—a little fun wi’ a pretty lass—nought to harm d’ye see, sink me! Join us and welcome, says I, share and share alike O!”

“Aye, I’ll join you,” quoth I, “but first—you wi’ the rings—open the door!” Here the hairy fellow growled an oath and reached for an empty tankard, and thereupon got the end of my staff driven shrewdly into his midriff so that he sank to the floor and lay gasping.

“Nay now, shipmate,” quoth the plump man in wheedling tone but round eyes snapping, “here’s lubberly manners, sink and scuttle me—”

“Open the door!” says I.

“Heartily—heartily!” says he, his eye upon my cudgel, and edging to the door, drew the bolts and set it wide.

“Woman,” quoth I, “run!”

With never a word the maid sprang erect, caught her torn cloak about her and, speeding across the room, was gone; whereupon the lank fellow sat him down and fell a-cursing viciously in Spanish and English, the plump man clicked his teeth and grinned, while ‘Rings,’ leaning against the wall, clasped his belly and groaned.

“Well so, my bully roarer, and what now?” demanded the plump man, softly.

“Why now,” says I, “’twas share and share alike, I mind—”

“Aye, but she’s off, slipped her moorings d’ye see, my good lad, and be damned t’ ye wi’ all my heart,” said the little plump man, smiling, but with the devil peeping through his narrowed lids.

“Look’ee,” says I, laying a groat upon the table, “there’s my all—come turn out your pockets—”

“Pockets!” murmured the plump man, “Lord love me, what’s this? Here’s us cheated of a bit of daintiness, here’s Abner wi’ all the wind knocked out o’ him and now here’s you for thieving and robbing three poor lorn sailor-men as never raised hand agin ye—shame, shipmate.”

“Od rot your bones!” snarled the one-eyed man and spat towards me, whereat I raised my staff and he, lifting an arm, took the blow on his elbow-joint and writhed, cursing; but while I laughed at the fellow’s contortions, the plump man sprang (marvellous nimble) and dashed out the light and, as I stepped from before the window, I heard the lattice go with a crash of glass. Followed a long, tense moment wherein we all (as I judge) held our breath, for though the storm yet roared beyond the shattered casement, within was a comparative quiet. Thus, as I stood in the dark listening for some rustle, some stealthy creeping step to guide my next blow, I thrust away my pistol and changing my staff to my right hand, drew forth the broad-bladed sailor’s knife I carried, and so waited mighty eager and alert, but heard only the far-off booming of the wind. Then a floorboard creaked faintly to my left, and turning short, I whirled my staff, felt it strike home and heard a fierce cry and the uneven tread of staggering feet.

“Fight, rogues!” cried I. “Here’s meat and drink to me—fight!” and setting my back to the wall I waited for their rush. Instead I heard a hoarse whispering, lost all at once in a woman’s shrill scream out beyond the casement, and thereafter a loud voice that hailed:

“House ho! House ahoy! Light ho! Show a glim, ye drunken dogs!” and here followed a rush of roaring sea-oaths, drowned in a scream, louder, wilder than before. Then, while

this distressful cry yet thrilled upon the air, pandemonium broke loose about me, shouts, cries and a rush and trample of feet; the table went over with a crash and the darkness about me rained blows. But as they struck random and fierce, so struck I and (as I do think) made right goodly play with my hedge-stake until, caught by a chance blow, I staggered, tripped and, falling headlong, found myself rolling upon sodden grass outside the shattered window. For a moment I lay half-dazed and found in the wind and rain vasty comfort and refreshment.

Then in the pitchy gloom hard by I heard that which brought me to my feet—an evil scuffling, a close and desperate struggling—a man's hoarse laugh and a woman's pitiful pleading and sobbing. I had lost my staff, but I yet grasped my knife, and with this held point upwards and my left hand outstretched before me, I crept forward guided by these sounds. My fingers came upon hair, a woman's long, soft tresses, and I remember marvelling at the silky feel of them; from these my hand slipped to her waist and found there an arm that grasped her close, then, drawing back my hand, I smote with my knife well beneath this arm and drove in the stout blade twice. The fellow grunted and, loosing the maid, leapt full at me, but I met him with clenched fist and he went down headlong, and I, crouched above him and feeling him struggle to his knees, kicked him back into the mud and thereafter leapt on him with both feet as I had been wont to do when fighting my fellow-slaves in some lazarette; then, seeing he stirred no more, I left him, doubting nothing I had done his business. Yet as I went I felt myself shiver, for though I had been compelled to fight the naked wretches who had been my fellow-slaves, I had killed no man as yet.

Thus as I went, chancing to stumble against a tree, I leaned there awhile; and now remembering those two blows under the armpit, what with this stabbing and my fall and lack of food, for I had eaten but once that day, I grew faint and sick. But as I leaned there, out of the gloom came a hand that fumbled timidly at my bowed head, my arm, my hand.

“Sir—are you hurt?” questioned a voice, and here once again I was struck by the strange, vital quality of this voice, its bell-like depth and sweetness.

“No whit!” says I. Now as I spoke it chanced she touched the knife in my grasp and I felt her shiver a little.

“Did you—oh, sir—did you—kill him?”

“And wherefore no?” I questioned. “And why call me ‘sir?’”

“You do speak as one of gentle birth.”

“And go like the beggar I am—in rags. I am no ‘sir.’”

“How may I call you?”

“Call me rogue, thief, murderer—what ye will, ’tis all one. But as for you,” quoth I, lifting my head, “’tis time you were gone—see yonder!” and I pointed where a light winked through the trees, a light that danced to and fro, coming slowly nearer until it stopped all at once, then rose a shout answered by other shouts and a roar of dismayed blasphemy. At this my companion pressed nearer so that I felt her shiver again.

“Let us be gone!” she whispered. “Marjorie, come, child, let us haste.” So we went on together at speed, and ever as we went that small, soft hand was upon the hand that held the knife. So we sped on through the dark, these two maids and I, unseeing and unseen, speaking little by reason of our haste.

Presently the rain ceased, the wind abated its rage and the thunder pealed faint with distance, while ever and anon the gloom gave place to a vague light, where, beyond the flying cloud-wrack, a faint moon peeped.

Guided by that slender hand, so soft and yet instinct with warm and vigorous life, I stumbled on through leafy ways, traversed a little wood, on and ever on until, the trees thinning, showed beyond a glimmer of the great high road. Here I stayed.

“Madam,” says I, making some ado over the unfamiliar word. “You should be safe now—and, as I do think, your road lieth yonder.”

“Pembury is but a mile hence,” says she, “and there we may get horses. Come, at least this night you shall find comfort and shelter.”

“No,” says I. “No—I am a thing of the roads, and well enough in hedge or rick!” and I would have turned but her hand upon my sleeve restrained me.

“Sir,” says she, “be you what you will, you are a man! Who you are I know and care not—but you have this night wrought that I shall nevermore forget and now I—we—would fain express our gratitude—”

“Indeed and indeed!” said the maid Marjorie, speaking for the first time.

“I want no gratitude!” says I, mighty gruff.

“Yet shall it follow thee, for the passion of gratitude is strong and may not be denied—even by beggar so proud and arrogant!” And now, hearkening to this voice, so deep and soft and strangely sweet, I knew not if she laughed at me or no; but even as I debated this within myself, she lifted my hand, the hand that grasped the knife, and I felt the close, firm pressure of two warm, soft lips; then she had freed me and I fell back a step, striving for speech yet finding none.

“God love me!” quoth I at last. “Why must you—do so!”

“And wherefore not?” she questioned proudly.

“’Tis the hand of a vagrant, an outcast, a poor creeper o’ ditches!” says I.

“But a man’s hand!” she answered.

“’Tis a hand that hath slain once this night and shall slay again ere many hours be sped.” Now here I heard her sigh as one that is troubled.

“And yet,” says she gently, “’tis no murderer’s hand and you that are vagrant and outcast are no rogue.”

“How judge ye this, having never seen me?” I questioned.

“In that I am a woman. For God hath armed our weakness with a gift of knowledge whereby we may oft-times know truth from falsehood, the noble from the base, ’spite all their outward seeming. So do I judge you no rogue—a strong man but very—aye, very young that, belike, hath suffered unjustly,

and being so young art fierce and impatient of all things, and apt to rail bitterly 'gainst the world. Is't not so?"

"Aye," says I, marvelling, "truly 'tis like witchcraft—mayhap you will speak me my name." At this she laughed (most wonderful to hear and vastly so to such coarse rogue as I, whose ears had long been strangers to aught but sounds of evil and foul obscenity):

"Nay," says she, "my knowledge of you goeth no further—but—" (and here she paused to fetch a shuddering breath) "but for him you killed—that two-legged beast! You did but what I would have done for—oh man, had you not come I—I should have killed him, maid though I am! See, here is the dagger I snatched from his girdle as he strove with me. Oh, take it—take it!" And, with a passionate gesture, she thrust the weapon into my grasp.

"Oh, madam—my lady!" cried her companion, "Look, yonder be lights—lanthorns aflare on the road. 'Tis Gregory as I do think, with folk come to seek for us. Shall we go meet them?"

"Nay wait, child—first let us be sure!" So side by side we stood all three amid the dripping trees, watching the tossing lights that grew ever nearer until we might hear the voices of those that bare them, raised, ever and anon, in confused shouting.

"Aye, 'tis Gregory!" sighed my lady after some while. "He hath raised the village and we are safe—"

"Hark!" cried I, starting forward. "What name do they cry upon?"

"Mine, sir!"

"Oho, my lady!" roared the hoarse chorus. "Oho, my Lady Joan—my Lady Brandon—Brandon—Brandon!"

"Brandon!" cried I, choking upon the word.

"Indeed, sir—I am the Lady Joan Brandon of Shene Manor, and so long as life be mine needs must I bear within my grateful heart the memory of—"

But, waiting for no more, I turned and sprang away into the denser gloom of the wood. And ever as I went, crashing and

stumbling through the underbrush, above the noise of my headlong flight rang the hated name of the enemy I had journeyed so far to kill—"Brandon! Brandon! Brandon!"

Chapter 2

How I Heard a Song in the Wood at Midnight

HEADLONG WENT I, STAYING for nought and heedless of all direction, but presently, being weary and short of breath, I halted and leaning against a tree stood thus very full of bitter thought. The storm was quite passed, but a chill wind was abroad that moaned dismally, while all about me sodden trees dripped with mournful, sobbing noises. And hearkening to all this, what should I be thinking but of the sweet, soft tones of a woman's voice that had stirred within me memories of better days, a voice that had set me to dreams of a future, to fond and foolish imaginings. For, though shamed and brutalised by my sufferings, I was a man and in this past hour (strange though it do seem) felt scorn of myself and a yearning for higher things, and all this by no greater reason than the sound of a woman's voice in the dark and the touch of her warm lips on my hand—and she a Brandon! And now as the bitter mockery of it all rushed upon me, fierce anger swept me and I broke forth into vile oaths and cursings, English and Spanish, foul invectives picked up from the rogues, my fellows in misery; and feeling a new shame therefore, did but curse the more. So there crouched I 'gainst the tree, shivering like the miserable wretch I was and consumed with a ravening hunger. At last, becoming aware that I yet grasped a weapon in either hand, I thrust my knife in my girdle and fell to handling this other, judging it by touch since it was yet too dark for eyes to serve me. And by its feel I knew it for no honest knife; here was a thing wrought by foreign hands, a haft cunningly shaped and

wrought, a blade curiously slender and long and three-edged, a very deadly thing I judged by the feel. Now since it had no sheath (and it so sharp) I twisted my neckerchief about it from pommel to needle-point, and thrusting it into the leathern wallet at my belt, went on some way further 'mid the trees, seeking some place where I might be sheltered from the cold wind. Then, all at once, I heard that which brought me to a stand.

A man was singing and at no great distance, a strange, merry air and stranger words; and the voice was loud, yet tuneful and mellow, and the words (the which I came to know all too well) were these:

“Cheerly O and cheerly O,
Right cheerly I'll sing O,
Whiles at the mainyard to and fro
We watch a dead man swing O.
With a rumbelow and to and fro
He by the neck doth swing O!

One by the knife did part wi' life
And three the bullet took O,
But three times three died plaguily
A-wriggling on a hook O.
A hook both strong and bright and long,
They died by gash o' hook O.

So cheerly O and cheerly O,
Come shake a leg, lads, all O.
Wi' a yo-ho-ho and a rumbelow
And main-haul, shipmates, haul O.

Some swam in rum to kingdom come,
Full many a lusty fellow.
And since they're dead I'll lay my head
They're flaming now in hell O.

So cheerly O, so cheerly O”—

Waiting for no more of the vile rant I strode forward and thus presently came on a small dell or dingle full of the light of a fire that crackled right merrily; at the which most welcome sight I made shift to scramble down the steepy bank forthright and approached the blaze on eager feet. Drawing near, I saw the fire burned within a small cave beneath the bank, and as I came within its radiance the song broke off suddenly and a man rose up, facing me across the fire and with one hand hid under the flap of his side pocket.

“Fibs off your popps, cull!” quoth in the vernacular of the roads. “Here’s none but a pal as lacketh warmth and a bite!”

“Aha!” quoth the fellow, peering across the blaze, “And who be you? Stand and give a show o’ your figurehead!” Obediently I stood with hands outspread to the flame, warming my shivering body at its grateful heat.

“Well?” says I.

“Why,” quoth he, nodding, “You’re big enough and wild enough and as likely a cut-throat as another—what’s the lay?”

“The high pad!” says I.

“Where away?”

“’Tis no matter!”

“All I asks is,” quoth the fellow with a quizzical look, “how you’ve fobbed the nubbing-cheat so long!”

“And what I ask is,” quoth I, “how a sailor-man comes to know the patter o’ the flash coves!”

“’Tis no matter,” says he, “but since you’re o’ the Brotherhood sit ye and welcome, ’tis dry enough here in this cave.”

Staying for no second bidding I entered the little cave and sat me down in the comforting warmth of the fire. The man was a comely fellow of a hectoring, swashing air, bright of eyes and instant of gesture; close to hand lay a short cutting-sword, pistols bulged his deep coat-pockets, while betwixt his knees was a battered case-bottle.

“Well,” says he, eyeing me over, “what’s the word?”

“Food!” says I.

“Nary a bite!” he answered, shaking his head. “But here’s rum now if you’ve a mind to sluice the ivories—ha?”

“Not a drop!” says I.

“Good! The more for me!” he nodded. “Rum—ha—
“Some swam in rum to kingdom come—”

“You sing a mighty strange song!” quoth I.

“Ha—d’ye like it?”

“No, I don’t!”

“And wherefore no?”

“There seems overmuch death in it.”

“Death?” cries he with a great laugh and hugging his case-bottle. “Death says you—aye, aye, says I and so there is, death in every line on’t. ’Tis song as was made for dead men, of dead men, by a dead man, and there’s for ye now!” Here he lifted the bottle, drank, and thereafter smacked his lips with great gusto. “Made by a dead man,” he repeated, “for dead men, of dead men, and there’s for ye!”

“I like your song less and less!”

“You’ve a cursed queasy stomach I think!” he hiccupped.

“And an empty one!” says I.

“’Tis a song well bethought on by—by better men nor you, for all your size!” says he, glancing at me over his bottle with a truculent eye, and though his glance was steady, I perceived the drink was affecting him more and more. “Aye, many a better man!” he nodded, frowning.

“As who?” I questioned.

“First, there’s Abnegation Mings as you shall hear tell of on the Main from Panama to St. Catherine’s, aye, by the horns of Nick there be none of all the coastwise Brotherhood quicker or readier when there’s aught i’ the wind than Abnegation, and you can lay to that, my delicate cove!”

“And who’s he?”

“Myself!” Here he took another draught and nodded at me in drunken solemnity. “And look’ee, my dainty cull, when you’ve seen as much o’ death as Abnegation Mings you’ll

know as Death's none so bad a thing, so long as it leaves you alone. And I for one say 'tis a good song and there's for ye!"

"And who else?"

"Well, there's Montbars as do they call the Exterminator, and there's young Harry Morgan—a likely lad, and there's Roger Tressady and Sol Aiken and Penfeather—sink him!"

"And Abner!" said I at a venture.

"Aye for sure!" he nodded, and then, "Ha, d'ye know Abner then?"

"I've met him."

"Where away?"

"In a tavern some mile hence."

"A tavern!" quoth he, "A tavern, 'od rot 'em and here's me hove short in this plaguy hole! A tavern, and here's my bottle out—dog bite me! But a mouthful left—well, here's to a bloody shirt and the Brotherhood o' the Coast."

"You drink to the buccaneers, I think?" says I.

"And what if I do?"

"'Tis said they be no better than pirates—"

"Would ye call me a pirate then?" cried he, scowling.

"I would." Quick as flash he clapped hand to pocket, but the pistol caught on the lining, and before he could free it I had covered him with mine, whereat he grew suddenly rigid and still. "Up wi' your fambles!" says I. Obediently he raised his hands and, taking his pistols, I opened the pan of each one and, having blown out the primings, tossed them back.

"Snake sting me!" says he, laughing ruefully as he re-pocketed his weapons. "This comes o' harbouring a lousy rogue as balks good liquor. The man as won't take good rum hath the head of a chicken, the heart of a yellow dog, and the bowels of a w-worm, and bone-rot him, says I. Lord love me, but I've seen many a better throat than yours slit ere now, my buxom lad!"

"And aided too, belike?" says I.

"Why, here's a leading question—but mum! Here's a hand that knoweth not what doth its fellow—mum, boy, mum!"

And tilting back his head he brake forth anew into his villainous song:

“Two on a knife did end their life
And three the bullet took O,
But three times three died plaguily
A-wriggling on a hook O.
Sing cheerly O and cheerly O,
They died by gash o’ hook O.”

“And look’ee, my ben cull, if I was to offer ye all Bartlemy’s treasure—which I can’t, mark me—still you’d never gather just what manner o’ hook that was. Anan, says you—mum, boy, says I. Howbeit, I say, ’tis a good song,” quoth he, blinking drowsily at the fire, “here’s battle in’t, murder and sudden death and wha—what more could ye expect of any song—aye, and there’s women in’t too!” Here he fell to singing certain lewd ribaldry that I will not here set down, until what with the rum and the drowsy heat of the fire that I had replenished, he yawned, stretched, and laying himself down, very soon fell a-snoring, to my no small comfort.

As for me, I sat there waiting for the dayspring; the fire sank lower and lower, filling the little cave with a rosy glow falling athwart the sprawling form of the sleeper and making his red face seem purplish and suffused like the face of one I had once seen dead of strangulation; howbeit, he slept well enough, judging from his lusty snoring. Now presently in the surrounding dark beyond the smouldering fire was a glimmer, a vague blur of sloping, trampled bank backed by misty trees; so came the dawn, very chill and full of eddying mists that crawled phantom-like, filling the little dingle brimful and blotting out the surrounding trees. In a little I arose and, coming without the cave, shivered in the colder air, shaken with raging hunger. And now remembering my utter destitution, I stooped to peer down at the sleeper, half minded to go through his pockets, but in a while I turned away and left him sprawled in his sottish slumber.

Chapter 3

Tells How I Stole My Breakfast

THE MIST LAY VERY thick all about me, but when I had climbed to higher ground it thinned away somewhat, so that as the pallid light grew I began to see something of the havoc wrought by the storm; here and there lay trees uprooted, while everywhere was a tangle of broken boughs and trailing branches, insomuch that I found my going no small labour. But presently as I forced a way through these leafy tangles, the birds, awaking, began to fill the dim world with blithe chirpings that grew and grew to a sweet clamour, ever swelling until the dark woods thrilled with gladsome music and I, beholding the first beam of sun, felt heartened thereby ' spite my lack of sleep and the gnawing of hunger's sharp fangs, and hastened with blither steps. Thus in a while I brake forth of the desolate trees and came out upon a fair, rolling meadow with blooming hedgerows before me and, beyond, the high road. And now as I stayed to get my bearings, up rose the sun in majesty, all glorious in purple and pink and gold, whose level beams turned the world around me into a fair garden all sweet and fresh and green, while, in the scowling woods behind, the sullen mists crept furtive away till they were vanished quite and those leafy solitudes became a very glory.

But my hunger was very sore, a need I purposed to satisfy soon and at all hazards; therefore, having marked my direction, I went at speed and, crossing the meadow, came into the highway and struck south. On my going through the woods I had chosen me a cudgel in place of the one lost, shortish and knotted and very apt for quick wrist-play, and I plucked forth my sailor's knife meaning to trim my staff therewith; but with it poised in my hand, I stopped all at once, for I saw that the point of the stout blade (the which I had sharpened and whetted to an extreme keenness), I perceived, I say, that the blade was bent somewhat and the

point turned, hook-like. Now as I strode on again, the early sun flashing back from the steel, I fell to wondering how this had chanced, and bethinking me of those two deadly blows I had struck in the dark I scrutinised my knife, blade and haft, yet found nowhere on it any trace of blood, so that 'twas manifest the fellow had worn some protection—chain shirts were common enough and many a rogue went with a steel skull to line his hat. So it seemed the fellow lived yet and (black rogue though he was) I was vaguely glad 'twas not my hand had sent him to his account.

I was yet revolving the matter in my mind when I heard a loud and merry whistling, and glancing up, beheld a country fellow approaching down a side lane. He wore a wide-eaved hat and his smock was new-washed and speckless; but that which drew and held my eyes, that which brought me to a sudden stand, was the bundle he bore wrapped in a fair, white clout. So, with my gaze on this I stood leaning on my knotted, untrimmed staff, waiting him. Suddenly, chancing to turn his head, he espied me, halted in his stride, then eyeing me askance, advanced again. A small man he was, with rosy face, little, merry eyes, and a wide, up-curving mouth.

“Goo’ marnin’ to ’ee—it do have been a tur’ble bad starm las’ night, master!”

“Aye!” says I, and my heart warmed to him by reason of his good Kentish tongue—the like of which I had not heard these many weary years; but at sight of that white-clouted bundle my mouth watered and hunger gnawed with sharper tooth. “What have ye here?” I questioned, touching this with my staff.

“Nou’t but my dinner, master, ’s ever was!”

“Nay,” says I scowling, “I think not!”

“Aye, but it be, master!” he nodded. “Bread and beef wi’ a mossel of cheese like, ’s ever was!”

“Bread!” says I. “Beef! Cheese! Liar—here is no dinner o’ yours!”

“Aye, master, but it do be so, sure!” quoth he, staring. “My very own dinner cut by my very own darter, beef an’ bread

an' a mossel o' cheese—I take my bible oath t' it, I do—bread
an' beef an' a mossel—”

“Show me!”

With notable haste he undid the wrapping, discovering a good half-loaf, a thick slice of roast beef and a slab of yellow cheese.

“Ha, man!” quoth I 'twixt shut teeth. “So you lied to me then.”

“Lied to 'ee, master?” says he faintly.

“You told me 'twas your dinner!”

“Aye, and so it be, so it be, I lay my oath—beef, d'ye see, an' a mossel—”

“Nay,” says I gathering up the viands, “here's my breakfast.”

“Is it?” says he, gaping.

“It is! Would ye deny it?”

“Not for a moment!” says he, eyeing my staff and the gleaming knife in my belt. “Lordy, no! Only how was I to know 'twere yourn, master—when my darter cut it for her very own feyther—”

“We live and we learn!” says I, turning away. “What might your name be?”

“Full-o'-j'y Tucker, master.”

“Why then, Full-of-joy, though my gain be your loss take comfort in that 'tis more blessed to give than receive. Moreover, though you lack a dinner you have a daughter and a roof to shelter you and I neither one nor other—a poor, hungry rogue. Methinks of the two of us you have the better of life.”

“Why, look'ee now, master,” says he, scratching his shaven chin, “since you've got your breakfus' surely, if you're minded t' step along t' my cottage down t' lane, I can give ye a jug of good ale to wash it down.” Now as he spoke thus, seeing the sturdy manliness of him I dropped my staff and reached out my hand.

“Full-of-joy,” says I, “a starving man must eat by hook or crook, but if you’ll give your honest hand to a thief—there’s mine!”

The man stared from my hand to my face, his wide mouth curved, then rubbing hand on snowy smock he grasped my fingers and wrung them heartily—a clean and honest grip, such as I had not known for many a long day.

“Will ’ee come, master?” he questioned. I shook my head.

Quoth I:

“You have a daughter and I’m no fit company for a good, sweet maid—nor ever shall be for that matter!” So saying, I dropped his hand and turning, strode away down the road, his dinner beneath my arm; and when at last I glanced back I saw him standing where I had left him, staring after me chin in hand. Presently, turning in at a gate beside the way, I sat down beneath a hedge in the warm, level beams of the sun and fell to eating with huge appetite and (stolen though it was) never tasted food more sweet. I was thus rapturously employed when I heard a dolorous whine and, starting about, beheld a ragged creature on the opposite side of the hedge who glared at the food with haggard eyes and reached out claw-like hands in supplication.

“Oh, for the love o’ Christ, spare a crust!” she wailed.

“Spare a bite to a grannam as dieth o’ hunger. O sweet Jesu—a mouthful to a poor soul as do be pined for lack o’ food—”

“Off!” cries I fiercely, “What know you of hunger? Away, hag!” and I reached for my staff, whereupon she wailed and wept, and clawing her dismal rags about her, crept away moaning.

But now while my jaws champed ravenously, the food had lost its savour; wherefore I cursed and choked and, springing to my feet, made after her, but, seeing me follow at speed, she cried out in fear and, striving to flee from me, sank on feeble knees.

“Old hag!” quoth I, “Be damned for spoiling a hungry man’s appetite and robbing him of what he was at pains to rob for himself!” Then I thrust the well-filled napkin into her

clutching fingers and hasted away, but her raptured cry followed me as I went.

I trudged on slow and heavy through the mud, being very weary for lack of sleep and mightily downcast, heedless of gladsome morn and the fair, fresh world about me, conscious but of my own most miserable estate; insomuch that I presently sank down on the grass by the road and, with heavy head bowed between my hands, gave myself up to black despond.

But now as I sat thus, very sick and sorrowful, I heard a sound of wheels and plodding hoofs drawing slowly near, and lifting my head at last, espied a great wain piled high with fragrant hay whereon the driver sprawled asleep, a great fat fellow whose snores rose above the jingle of harness and creak of wheels. Now hearkening to his snoring, beholding him so gross and full-fed (and I starving!!) my sadness gave place to sudden, hot anger and, as the waggon lumbered by, I swung myself up behind, and clambering over the hay, raised my staff, minded to drub the fellow into wakefulness; but even then I stayed the blow, for I spied a wallet that hung to the driving-seat, a large wallet of plump and inviting aspect. Reaching it down I opened it forthwith and found therein a new-baked loaf, a roast capon delicately browned and a jar of small beer. And now, couched luxuriously among the hay, I fell to work (tooth and nail) and though I ate in voracious haste, never before or since have I tasted aught so delicate and savoury as that stolen fowl. I was yet busied with what remained of the carcass when the fat fellow choked in his snoring, sighed, grunted, propped himself on lazy elbow and, catching sight of me, fell a-gaping. So while he watched open-mouthed, I finished what remained of the capon and tossed the bones over the hedge.

“Ecod!” quoth he faintly. “Oh, ecod—my dinner!” As for me, having my mouth full, I spake not. “Ad’s bobs!” says he, “A rascally, robbing thief of the roads!”

“Even so!” I nodded and took a long draught of his beer.

“A-eating and a-drinking of a honest man’s dinner, by the Lord!” says he, clenching fat fists. “Oh, ecod—a hell-fire rogue—a very lousy, scurvy dog as shall be carted and whipped and set in Sir Richard’s new pillory!” At this, being engaged with the bread, I reached out my foot and kicked him (very featly) in the belly; whereat he gasped and growing thoughtful, dolefully watched me make an end.

“If there is aught left to eat,” says I, “show it me!”

“As fine a capon as was ever plucked, by the Lord!” he groaned.

“Most true!” says I, stretching myself in the hay.

“O!” quoth he, as to himself, “O the pity on’t—so foul an end to so fair a bird!”

“Never whine!” says I, “but tell me how far hence lieth Lamberhurst.”

“Better nor six mile!” he sighed, heaving himself into the driving-seat.

“Why then, do you carry me thither.”

“Ad’s love!” he mourned. “’Tis manifest shame a rogue should thieve the food of an honest man—a man like I be as do slave morning, noon and—”

“Slave!” says I, frowning. “What know you of slavery? Be curst for a great, fat fool that speaketh lies!” Now watching him as I lay, I saw his hand close stealthily on his heavy whip, but or ever he could turn to strike, I rose and fetched him a buffet ’neath the ear that pitched him sprawling upon the broad backs of his horses, whence (with much groaning and puffing) he presently got him safely into the road; seeing the which, I took the reins, whipping the team to faster gait, so that to keep pace he must needs trot it in the mud.

“Hold!” cries he. “What would ye wi’ my waggon?”

“Ride in ’t!”

“Hold! Then suffer me to ride likewise, for I’m scant o’ breath—”

“Good! I’ve been scant o’ breath ere now!”

“Show a little pity, master!” he groaned.

“None ever showed pity on me!”

“Nay, but—what harm have I—ever—done thee?”

“Begrudged food to a starving wretch!”

“’Twas my dinner and I do need a deal of feeding, I! Lord, how I sweat! Prithee, master, let me up. How have I deserved this?”

“Called me rogue and thief!”

“Aye, that I did—to my woe. Aye, rogue I named thee and likewise—lousy knave—and grieve for’t now, I do!”

“And so needs must you sweat awhile!” says I.

And thus I (aloft and at mine ease) and the fat fellow trotting breathless at the wheel we went awhile (and never another word) until, what with fear of losing his goods, what with the mud and heat and sweat, the poor gross fool looked wellnigh spent and all foredone (as I had seen many a better man than he), whereupon I brought the waggon to a stand and reached down to stir him where he lent half-swooning across the wheel.

“Hark’ee, fool, dost know of one called Brandon of Shene hereabouts?”

“Aye, truly—truly!” he gasped. “I do know—Sir Richard—passing well. Ad’s bobs, my innards be all shook t’pieces and I do be parched wi’ thirst.”

“Why then, up with you!” says I, and giving him my hand, aided him back to the driving-seat. Being there, he sighed, groaned and cast a yearning eye towards his wallet.

“Parched wi’ thirst I be!” he groaned.

“I’ve been the like ere now!” says I, and having gulped down what remained of the fellow’s beer I tossed the jar into the road, whereat he beat his breast.

“My beer!” he wailed, “And I a-famishing wi’ thirst! O my beer!”

“There’s sweet water i’ the brook yonder!” says I.

“You be a chap wi’ no bowels, for sure!” he cried. “Aye, a hard man you be!”

“’Tis a hard world,” says I, “but ’tis no matter for that, tell me of Sir Richard Brandon.”

“Why then, you must know I am Myles Trueman—”

“And truly, man, there be miles of you, but ’tis no matter for that either—what of Sir Richard?”

“I do be coming to he,” says Trueman in surly tone. “I do farm Sir Richard’s land—a hard man, see you, though just.”

“So—here’s another hard man.”

“Though a just—aye, and a godly! He hath restored our church weathercock an’ all an’ set up a fine, large and fair pillory on the green. Lunnon couldn’t show a finer, wi’ stocks an’ cucking-stool complete and rare to fancy—”

“And findeth he the wherewithal to fill ’em?”

“That doth he! Aha, there be never a vagrant, gipsy nor beggar dare come anigh in Sir Richard’s time. And witches be few hereabouts since old Mother Mottridge was ducked, and scolds and shrews be fewer by reason o’ the brank, d’ye see?”

“Hum!” says I, “a right proper gentleman this!”

“Aye,” quoth Trueman, nodding until his fat cheeks quivered, “and one that doth abhor vagrants and such-like vermin—”

“As myself?” says I. To this Trueman answered nothing, but fell a-fanning himself with his hat again, eyeing me warily the while.

“Art strange in these parts?” he questioned.

“Aye and no!”

“Hast met Sir Richard?”

“I have!”

“Aha!” quoth the fellow, nodding. “He had ye whipped, belike?”

“He did so.”

“For stealing of a fine, fat capon, belike?”

“Nay, ’twas for another matter. But what of him, is he hale o’ body, rich and well esteemed, is he strong in friends and a power at court yet?”

“No,” says Trueman, flicking his plodding horses. “Neither one nor t’other!”

“How—not?” quoth I. “And wherefore?”

“Because he’s dead—”

“Dead!” says I, starting up. “Dead?”

“Why look’ee, if he ain’t dead—leastways—” But here I seized him by the throat and, twisting him round, shook him to and fro till he choked:

“Rogue—damned rogue!” I cried ’twixt gnashing teeth.

“Will ye mock me then!”

“No—no!” he gasped.

“Then tell me ye lied—confess!”

“Aye, aye—I’ll confess—anything—anything ye will, master!”

“Then Sir Richard lieth snug in his manor of Shene—doth he not? Aye or no?”

“Aye—aye, at Shene—at Shene!” Hereupon I loosed him and, falling back on the hay, found myself all breathless and shaking as with an ague-fit. And these tremors were within me as without, since (by reason of this fellow’s lying words) I had, for one black moment, doubting God’s justice, seen (as it were) my countless anguished supplications for vengeance on mine enemy so much vain breath, and this my toilsome journey a labour to no purpose. But now, bowing my head, I (who knew no forgiveness) humbly prayed forgiveness of God for my doubting of God, and passionately besought Him that He would cherish mine enemy and save him in health. And this to no other end but that I myself might destroy him.

“His life, O God—give this man’s life into mine hand!” So prayed I (in my vain pride and selfish blindness) as I jogged along that sunny midsummer morn; and thereafter, my trembling having passed from me, I stretched myself out amid the hay and fell to blissful slumber.

Now to all such as reading this my narrative shall contemn and abhor me for the purblind fool and poor, desperate wretch I was, and who, living but for murder, could cry thus on God for the blood of his fellow-man—to all such I would say that none can despise me more utterly than I who write these words. For life since then hath learned me many truths and in some few things I am, mayhap, a little wiser.

But, because I was proud and stubborn beyond belief, because hate begetteth hate and evil—evil, so came I to consort and make fellowship with pirates and the like rogues and to endure much of harms and dangers as battle, shipwreck, prison and solitude; until God (of His infinite mercy) brought me forth a better man therefor and, in some sense, a more worthy. All of the which I have fully and faithfully recorded for such as shall trouble to read this narrative to the end.

And so will I again to my story.



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