



EUGENIO POCHINI

Pirate Blood

A NOVEL



Eugenio Pochini

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Аннотация

Golden age of piracy. Johnny spends his childhood in Port Royal. Its alleys are populated with adventurers, throat cutters and prostitutes: everyone is looking for fortune among the inns and the decks. The boy finds out once the existence of a mysterious treasure... and everything changes suddenly. Forced to join the terrible pirate Barbanera's crew, Johnny will have to face a lot of dangers, between cruel boardings, scaring native tribes and dark omens, putting his life at risk and trying to fulfill his destiny.

Eugenio Pochini: after obtaining his Bachelor of Arts Degree at La Sapienza University in Rome, he began working in the Italian theatre and cinema industry. Pirate Blood is his first novel, winner of the "International Golden Books Awards 2019" in "Best Plot Category".

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Eugenio Pochini

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Author: Eugenio Pochini

Translator: Valentina Giglio

Editing: Miriam Mastrovito

Cover illustration: Alessandro Cancian

Graphics: Paolo Martorano

Arti director: Valentina Cuomo

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To Chiara G.

I kept my promise

PROLOGUE

*When you go through the entrance arch to the temple of dreams,
there, just there, you will find the sea...*

LUIS SEPULVEDA

The rain was pelting down, hammering the ship deck and roaring against the sails, seeping then into the cracks in the hull. It was like that since they had doubled the coast of Florida.

Samuel Bellamy suddenly cursed. He started smoothing his black moustache, scanning out of the cabin window. He could hardly see the ocean, enveloped in a thick fog. That wasn't what he had expected to find when Emanuel Wynne had gone and seen him, in that small inn in the port of Nassau. He had liked the French man's determination and eccentricity, even when he had told the story about the island Blackbeard was looking for. They had laughed, drank a drop of rum... and he had almost dismissed him, when Wyatt had removed his hair from his forehead. His left eye had given a gloomy twinkle and Bellamy had got sure the pirate wasn't as crazy as he looked.

They had organized the departure in ten days, thanks to the Jamaican governor's financial aid. They hadn't met bad weather conditions or rival ships which could be a risk for the crew along their course.

But now, that rain!

Eternal and never-ending.

Not to mention the fog. Everything was getting rough against him, as if the ocean wanted to warn him to go back.

“This story is making me nervous”, Bellamy said, turning to the boatswain.

“I can believe it”, the other man answered. He was checking some nautical maps with a greedy interest.

“The crew is starting to get nervous.”

The man lifted his eyes and looked at the bad weather raging outside. “You took the French man’s words too lightly. After all, he isn’t trustworthy. Traitors are never considered willingly, even among us.”

“Loyalty or not”, Bellamy replied, “we can’t go back.”

He then added in his mind: *If you had seen his eye too, you would change your mind about Wynne’s intentions. I’ve sailed everywhere in the Caribbean and I’ve never met something so...*

Extraordinary, he wished he could say, but he was interrupted by the shouts coming from the deck. They were so loud they covered the sounds of the storm.

“The watchman will tear his tongue”, the boatswain remarked, without paying too much attention to the mess.

“Shut up”, Bellamy warned him and opened the door wide. Heavy and big raindrops hit his head and shoulders. He closed his hands around his face, trying to stop them and focus on the situation: the crew had gathered next to the mainmast, looking up in agonizing wait.

“Land!”, the man on the maintop kept shouting. “Right at the bow!”

They all rushed forward, gathering at the bow like an army ready to attack. The bravest ones leant out from the ship’s sides, grasping strongly at the shrouds to avoid the danger of the wind and the ship rolling. Bellamy made his way, giving orders and pushing the men. When he arrived, he half-closed his eyes and covered his face again.

Nothing.

No land could be seen.

“I wonder how you can see with a weather like this.” The boatswain voice thundered phlegmatic behind him. He had followed him but he hadn’t realized it.

The captain tried to reply. The memory of his first meeting with Wynne was clear in his mind, like the sun reflecting on still water.

“You mustn’t tell anybody my secret”, he had explained. “Or you’ll end up like Edward Teach.”

“What happened to him?”, Bellamy had asked, much more than suspicious.

The answer had come in the shape of a single and simple word: mutiny. It was considered the worst of all crimes a buccaneer could make.

“Where?, Bellamy shouted turning to the watchman. “There’s nothing, Emanuel. Are you sure?”

The man on the maintop was waving and pointing straight

ahead. His hair whipped by the wind and his excessive thinness made him look like a nightmare monster, like those populating the old mariners' stories.

“Right at the bow”, Wynne repeated. “Look!”

Bellamy remarked that the crew too was looking at the point shown by the French man. He tried to do the same and after a while he could see out of the storm, beyond the fog, the island jagged sides. But there was something else. Next to the first shape he saw a second one. He thought for a moment that was their destination.

“Here we are!”, he exclaimed, in an outburst of satisfaction. He had started gazing at the landscape again, wondering which heavenly wills made it unreal. He then turned his attention to Wynne once more. He was surprised when he realized he was coming down from the maintop in a hurry, grasping at the shrouds like a monkey running away from a predator. And he got still more surprised when he saw him running to the stern cabin, shouting like a crazy man.

“Captain!”

The boatswain shook him violently by his shoulders. He turned at once, more worried for the hesitation he had heard in his voice than for the action itself.

The shape he had seen was slipping through the foggy cover and seemed closer. Yet the ship wasn't sailing full speed, because of the wind blowing in the opposite direction and the decks made heavy by the rain. Then something which left him astounded

happened. The blurred image his eyes had detected dove into the dark depths of that stormy sea with a gloomy gurgling.

“At starboard!”, someone exclaimed.

Bellamy rushed where the man was pointing at, trying hard to understand what was going on. The water was boiling some miles away and underneath something undefined was moving straight towards the ship, leaving a long foamy trail behind.

“It’s coming on us!”, he screamed and he suddenly understood he had to get control of the ship, feeling sure that the boatswain wasn’t aware of anything. By such a bad weather he would defy anyone to see farther than his nose.

When he got to the top desk, he took the helm just before the *Whydah Gally* started trembling under the strokes of a violent shake. He tried to tack on the left, but he was flung against the gunwale and he stood there panting breathless. The rest of the crew was swarming on the ship, screaming and asking for mercy.

Samuel Bellamy got to his feet just as a huge wall of water rose along the right side, roaring and thundering like the storm they had got into. There was a new stroke and the keel creaked. The planks burst out. The mainmast bent aside. The ropes broke. With terror stirring his mind, he leant out from the bulwark: the ship was rising perpendicularly on its own axis, pushed by a huge force. The ocean under it was boiling and shaking in a never ending whirl.

All that happened later went very fast.

The *Whydah Gally* jolted before breaking into two blocks.

The main deck opened wide like a huge mouth, its central body swallowing up all the unfortunate people around it. Afterwards, the prow section broke off from the central body and fell into the water once more. It was a single blow, muffled in part by a gloomy sound in the background. The stern started bending on the opposite side. Bellamy grasped at a rope and found himself dangling near the mizzen mast. He tried to climb till the observation mast. The rope was treacherous and slippery with rain and it scraped his hands. He didn't care. When he came to the top, he had just enough time to consider whether to dive into the sea, as the jump could be deadly. What was worse, the whirlpool of the sinking vessel could drag him away. However, his wonderings had a short life: he opened his eyes wide while his heart had a sudden stop.

Through the watery wall towering above the ship a Cyclopean shape appeared, dominating over the remains of what once had been the *Whydah Gally*. The sound which had accompanied the bow fall got louder and he could identify the guttural noise of a threatening rumble. The rumble became then a grinding of teeth and that grinding became a roar. He could see an ochre eye clearly, with a blood-red pupil flashing in the middle.

It was staring at him.

It was huge.

In his last moment of life, Bellamy stopped to gaze at that horrible sight. The vessel was finally breaking to pieces under his feet, swollen forever by the mysteries inhabiting the abysses of

the Devil's Triangle.

PART ONE

*We expect life to be meaningful: but life has exactly the meaning
we are ready to give it ourselves.*

HERMANN HESSE

CHAPTER ONE

PORT ROYAL

Jonathan Underwood opened his eyelids, in spite of the sleepiness making his body still numb. His thoughts started slipping slowly, like drops on an opaque glass surface. From the only window in the room, he could see the sun beams falling oblique on the floor planks, dragging dusty specks in their track.

He lived with his mother in a room on the second floor of a crumbling building, like many others downtown. The *Pàssaro do Mar* inn below had welcomed its customers till late at night, so he had fallen asleep lulled by laughs and screams. However, as it often happened to him when he found himself in the middle stage between sleep and wake, he was wondering about the fact that those noises weren't keeping him awake more than his curiosity about the stories told by the customers.

He was born and had grown up in the town that many people considered as the wealthiest and most ill-famed in the world. Anne always kept telling him. He had never got into serious trouble. Some acts of bravado... very usual for a boy of his age. But according to his mother, the world was dangerous and Port Royal above all.

Civilization is also that, his father had explained him once. Only it is lived differently here. And you will have to do the same,

Johnny.

He decided to get up. He moved to the window, stopping for a moment in the middle of the room to fix the leotard slipping on his naked legs. He opened the shutters, encrusted with salt. A wave of light hit his face. He lifted a hand instinctively to protect himself and waited patiently for the nuisance to pass by. When he got used to it, he let himself be charmed by the wonderful landscape.

The bay was lapped by a large stretch of crystal water. Rocky walls, their tops covered in vegetation, surrounded it in a messy semicircle. Foaming waves were breaking softly against the coast, pushed by the wind running into the straight connecting the inlet to the open sea. The western part of the beach grew thin into a sandy string in the shape of a horseshoe, where Fort Charles stood. On the fortress's main tower the English flag was waving proudly.

Johnny kept gazing at that wonder. He could distinguish the houses, the stores and the docks where the ships were laying at anchor to let the crews get down. Flocks of seagulls were flying among the masts, croaking in a choir.

"Johnny, are you awake?" His mother's voice reached him behind the door.

"Yes", he answered. "I'm coming."

He was used to sleeping with Anne, also because they couldn't do otherwise. With the little money they earned, it was a miracle if they could afford paying a rent to Bartolomeu, the innkeeper.

Anne worked for him.

“Hurry up!”, she shouted once more, on the other side of the door. “Avery is waiting for you. You’ll be late as usual.”

Johnny could hear the typical reproaching tone he knew so well, followed by a cough soon after. He rolled his eyes. She had been ill for some days. And there had been no need of consulting a doctor to understand. He had tried to talk about that just once, but she had warned him, adding she was just tired.

“You’re just like your father”, the woman ended, trying hard to stop the spasms.

Always with my head in the clouds, Johnny thought.

The reason of Anne’s continual reproaches were about Stephen Underwood himself. She had never forgiven him for bringing her to Port Royal.

Thanks to the trade company he had founded, Stephen had been able to credit himself with a small part of the transport of the goods coming from England to the Caribbean Sea. It all had gone very well at first. The situation had come to a head later, because of the Indies Company monopoly. As if that wasn’t enough, some creditors the man had addressed to, had forced him to close his activity and declare bankruptcy. He had answered his wife’s never ending requests telling her he would leave as soon as possible to balance his debts. Anne had wanted to trust him, as usual. She surely couldn’t imagine she wouldn’t see him anymore in a few days.

Stephen Underwood had left on a ship flying the Dutch flag.

Many rumours had started going around after his disappearance. Some people said he had been attacked by pirates and some others had seen the ship sinking off the Aruba coast, at the mercy of a storm. In spite of that, Anne had lost everything and had been forced to turn her well-to-do life habits upside down: she had had to find a job in the place she hated the most in the world.

The place which had taken her husband away from her.

And her dreams.

Every time his mother tormented him with this story, Johnny kept listening to her in silence. He didn't dare contradict her, fearing to make her suffer. He had heard her crying next to himself at night and he had wondered why the Davies family hadn't come to Port Royal to help them.

He came to know the truth once he reached adolescence. William Joseph Davies had never accepted his daughter's departure to a part of the world where the idea of civilization was relative. By the way, Anne had kept in touch with her family, at least till her husband's disappearance. She had then stopped replying to the letters coming from London. Johnny had thought that would last for a while, waiting for better times. But when he had found her burning the letters, he had understood that any link with the past was broken.

He got dressed very fast that morning. He tidied his dark locks up in front of a mirror whose borders were oxidized, then he opened and closed his mouth a couple of times. The scar on his left cheek got thinner till it became quite an invisible line. Some

black and dirty spots had appeared on his teeth: he put a finger into a small basin next to him and brushed them with force.

When he had finished, he went down the stairs like his mother had done just a moment before; he believed he would find her on the landing coinciding with the back of the *Pàssaro do mar*, doing the tidying up. She was there in fact. She was singing a song. He greeted her quickly; Bartolomeu's voice called her after a while.

“Anne, come here”, he said, in his strange Portuguese accent. Even if he was a very odd man, he was the only one who had offered her a place where to live and something similar to a job. He had also tried hard to convince Bennet Avery to hire an apprentice at his workshop.

Johnny opened the door and ran into the alley stretching outside the inn, getting deep into Port Royal's frantic life.

A crowd was assembled in the streets. They were walking among the junk stalks of sellers or they were chatting lively under the house windows. There were every kind of people, from prostitutes blinking in front of the inns, to the sea wolves guffawing between them, to the British navy soldiers pushing carelessly every people coming in front of them.

Wiping his forehead beaded with sweat, Johnny turned into a side street getting down to the port. In that way he would avoid the messy crowd of the people going to the market. He had just to get over the ancient Spanish area, then...

Damn it!, he thought. He bit his lips without realizing it.

Alejandro Naranjo Blanco was the last person he wished to meet. He had made up a gang with some other boys, tormenting everyone passing through that area. They didn't look favourably on anyone. The English people above all. That was because Port Royal had been a Spanish fortress before the British conquest.

Their frictions had started when a sword had been ordered to Avery. He was a very good carpenter, but also a very capable and known blacksmith. He had appointed Johnny to deliver it and the boy had entered into the Spanish area, without even thinking about it. Alejandro's gang had immediately assaulted him. The boy had tried to defend himself, but Alejandro had jumped on him, taking out a knife and leaving a memory of their meeting on his left cheek.

When he stopped in the middle of the street, Johnny felt again the burning sensation of liquid warmth he had had soon after the cut. He touched his scar, starting from the cheekbone and going down to his lips. He could hear his mother then: *This place is dangerous, that's why I keep worrying about you! And are you fighting against people of your age, now?*

"Shut up", he muttered to himself.

"Who are you talking to, *amigo?*" Alejandro was waiting for him a few steps behind. He hadn't entered the area yet and the boy had already found him.

"Let me go, *gordo*", Johnny replied. He knew that calling Alejandro a fat boy wasn't a good idea.

Yet just meeting him made his blood boil into his veins. “This is not your neighbourhood yet. I can come back from where I came from and take another way.”

“Of course.” The Spanish boy didn’t seem to react to the offense. “But you were always getting through this area.”

“Are you looking for a pretext to quarrel?”

“Maybe.”

Johnny moved forward cautiously. “That’s just what I dislike about you. Don’t provoke me.”

Alejandro’s smile widened into a much deeper line, parting his fatty face in two.

“How is your father?”, he asked.

Johnny’s feet refused to go on. He clenched his fists. That bastard knew exactly where to hit.

“Have they searched into any shark’s stomach?”, he went on. “Or he might have run away with a bitch he met anywhere. He had perhaps got bored of your mother. And of you. What do you think about it, *pendejo*?”

He wished he could jump on him and settle the question all at once. But he forced every nerve of his body to let go.

“I’ll tell you again for the last time”, he cut it short. “I don’t feel like...”

He could hardly finish the sentence. Something flew next to him. It was a stone. He turned his eyes behind his shoulders, even if his brain answered faster. Taking him by surprise had been just an excuse to let the other members of the gang catch him on

the wrong foot. Johnny saw three guys running to him.

“I’m ready this time.” His voice revealed a certain amount of confidence, as Alejandro changed his expression. His smile had turned into a grimace of gloomy hesitation. He then took out a flat-top knife, reminding a bit a barber’s razor.

One of the boys tried to hit him with a stick. Johnny heard it hissing near his ears. The boy tried to come close to him, wanting to make a lunge. He couldn’t. His rival was punching faster and faster. Suddenly Alejandro pushed him from behind, making him hit the boy who had attacked him first.

“*Hijo de puta!*”, the boy shouted and hit him with his elbow on the face.

Johnny wasn’t surprised. He instinctively plunged the sword into the thigh. The boy fell to the ground, writhing in pain. Alejandro on his side started attacking him again: he took out the knife and tried to hurt him. He was aware of that and could move away just in time. The stroke hit the boy who had thrown the stone, hurting his shoulder. The two guys started to insult each other at once, giving up the fight. The last member of the gang kept looking at them apart, as if stupefied.

And then Johnny suddenly understood.

The time of revenge had come.

“I’ll return the favour, *gordo*”, he sentenced and hurt the Spanish boy in his eyebrow. He saw a stream of blood dripping from his eye, dimming his sight. He decided to take advantage of it and beat a retreat.

He turned on his heels and rushed to the direction he had come from, leaving behind him the very rancorous shouts of his aggressors.

“I’m late”, he apologized, opening the shop door suddenly. He was panting, his chest was dancing under his clothes. The elbow stroke he had got gave him a strange nose accent.

“I know”, Avery agreed. He was sitting on a stool, in a shadowy corner. Puffs of light blue smoke were coming out of the pipe sloping three quarters from his lips. They whirled sleepily to the ceiling planks, where they lay stagnant in a dim cloud. The wrinkled face didn’t show any kind of feeling. He got up slowly and passed by the stone arch dividing the shop into two separate areas. He got to the forge. He started observing the anvil absent-mindedly.

It looked as if he hadn’t seen it before.

“Let me explain...”, Johnny tried to say.

Avery moved with an incredible dart for a man of his age. He stretched his wrinkled hand and caught the boy’s forearm, grasping him tight. “I don’t know what to do with you!” Splashes of saliva were spurting from his toothless mouth. “You are always late and you go home when you like. You’re an irresponsible! I wouldn’t have hired you if Bartolomeu hadn’t asked me.” He then changed expression. “What happened to you?”

Johnny hesitated. He saw an indefinite sense of bewilderment into his interlocutor’s blazing eyes. Or was it mercy? He would

rather get his usual scolding than discuss about his meeting with Alejandro.

“It’s not your business, old man”, he addressed him.

Avery’s wrinkled face seemed to relax. He let him go and scratched his bald head, crossed by just two wisps of grey hair on his ears.

“It was the fat Spanish, wasn’t it?”, he asked.

The boy turned his eyes away.

“Ok”, Avery went on. “Do as you like. You don’t need adding anything else. Let’s try to understand whether your nose is broken. Then we’ll find an excuse for your mother. We could tell her you got hurt here. That woman is always worrying too much about you. You’ll break her heart one day.”

“How do you know?”, Johnny replied.

“There are lots of things you don’t know about me.”

And that was true.

He knew almost nothing about Bennet Avery.

Some rumours depicted him as the protagonist of raids made on board the *Queen Anne’s Revenge*, pirate Blackbeard’s vessel. Obviously, according to the old man that was only nonsense spread to give him problems. But Johnny had still some doubts. He had often wondered if it was his fancy speaking: maybe he had better not let it so free. However, the uncertainties about the old man past had stirred his curiosity. He had heard him talk on different occasions about pieces of his life, accompanied very often by a couple of glasses of rum. Being Bartolomeu’s friend,

he was constantly present at the *Pàssaro do Mar*. Nevertheless, his stories had always something which didn't fit. He even seemed to avoid some details willingly.

“Come closer”, Avery called him, handing a bucket of water to him, “and wash yourself, to begin with”.

Johnny obeyed, without uttering any single word. He placed the basin on a barrel and put his head inside. The fresh water gave him a light thrill. He held his breath for a short while. He then came out, breathing the fresh air deeply. His fingers went up unintentionally to touch the top of his nose.

“So?”, the old man spurred him.

“The pain has decreased”, Johnny answered. He could hardly believe it.

“If it was broken, you would cry as the snotty kid you are. You were lucky.”

“Luckier than them”, he replied, showing the flat-top knife. He turned it in his hands. The blade was stained with coagulated blood.

Avery stared at him with a satisfied smile. “Stop boasting, boy. Try to tidy yourself up. Work is waiting for you.”

At the very moment when Johnny was wrestling with Alejandro, captain Woodes Rogers was thoughtfully scanning the horizon from one of the windows of the governor's villa. His blurred shape was reflecting on the glass like a ghost's one, his short, brown hair and his large forehead were giving him

a look of solemn austerity, softened by his short height. His mouth, reduced to an almost invisible cut, showed up a feeling of uncertainty. But maybe the feature which made him look more strict was the thick cobweb of scars disfiguring the left part of his face.

He wished heartily that his meeting with Henry Morgan would be as short as possible. He had never accepted his political success willingly, especially after his lucky attack to Panama. He was jealous of him, at least. He had always said there was nothing trustworthy in a pirate who had been chasing his fellow men, just to please the royal family. Ceremonies and banquets were part of a lifestyle he wished he could have too, even if the most important thing for him was to find out why Morgan had summoned him again.

“Your task is simple”, he had told him during a previous meeting. “You have to catch *monsieur* Wynne. He’s a pirate, so any other reason is useless. He won’t be able to escape being hanged forever. As governor of Jamaica and spokesman of king George’s will, we are morally obliged to give this order to you. We wish you will understand.”

Of course, he had thought. *Damned pompous idiot.*

And he was still thinking the same, when a soldier walked into the room. He stopped at the door and stood at attention.

“Captain Rogers”, he addressed him. “His Excellency sir Henry Morgan is waiting for you.”

He waved absent-mindedly to him and let himself be driven

into the narrow corridor taking to the anteroom, made even narrower by the host of works of art crowding there, a clear sign of the wealth the governor liked to be surrounded with.

“The execution will be held tomorrow morning, captain.” The soldier had stopped in front of a door strengthened by iron bars. “The governor wishes to curb piracy strongly. He hopes you will be there too.”

Your hypocrisy is astonishing, Henry, Rogers wondered. You found a more decent mask to put on. You would have ended up hanged too, if your friend hadn't helped you.

Meanwhile the soldier was knocking on the planks with a resolute air. Morgan's voice echoed on the other side, inviting them to come in and followed by a baritone voice which made Roger feel a new wave of scorn.

“He still laughs as a pirate”, he muttered to himself. He grasped the door handle and close it behind his back, leaving the soldier alone. He was immediately assailed by an intense smell of burning incense, a penetrating fragrance of dried herbs. The light was filtering through the windows and the velvet curtains were trembling in a breath of sea wind. Yet there was no sign of the governor. Neither of him nor of anyone else. He went on suspiciously till he got to a big table covered with maps.

“Is there anything wrong?”, Morgan suddenly asked him.

Woodes Rogers turned on his heels and feared to stumble on his feet. He was feeling terribly vulnerable. And slow. When his bewilderment vanished, he found himself facing a well-built man

with a prominent belly. He had come out from a private room, wearing a showy light blue dress with large lace lapels. He was wearing on his head a long powdered wig, matching very badly with his red and bushy moustache.

“You’re too nervous, captain”, Morgan laughed again. “In our opinion you should learn to enjoy the pleasures of life better.”

“Pleasures are a luxury I can’t afford”, Rogers replied.

“It’s a real pity, then.”

“Why have you sent for me, Your Excellency?”

Morgan looked him up and down. He then stretched his face muscles, with a clearly amused air. “We wish to discuss a very important matter with you. We know your inclination very well. We know you aren’t a man who likes wasting his time.”

“So we can get to the point at once”, the pirate cut it short. “More than twenty days ago you sent me in search for Emanuel Wynne, a cheap pirate who...”

“Rather by chance”, the governor interrupted him. He kept smiling. “Finding him floating off, not far from Nassau was really providential. It turned your hunt into a rescue mission.”

“That was just good luck, in fact.”

“And is that what you’re worrying about?”

“Absolutely”, Rogers lied. He had to strive to stay easy. Henry Morgan had hit the point. He had left on board the *Delicia* to go hunting a pirate, but he had found him just a few miles from the port. “I’m trying to get the positive side of the situation. I avoided useless days of sailing. But you haven’t answered my question

yet. Why did you send for me?"

Morgan approached. He put both his hands on his shoulders and grasped them with a slight pressure. Rogers considered the possibility of being strangled. As if he had read into his thoughts, the other man let him go and moved a few steps away from him. He took one of the maps from the table and started studying it.

"I think you're a careful man", he said sharply. "So you're deceiving us, captain. The answer is just under your eyes."

Rogers raised his brows. He didn't seem to understand. Then a memory flashed suddenly in his mind, cold and merciless like lightning. He turned his eyes to the object Morgan was keeping in his hands.

"It's just a map, your Excellency", he commented.

"You're right", the other one agreed and handed the roll to the pirate. "I suggest you to observe it better, by the way. It's the only thing Wynne had with him when he was rescued. He didn't care about it. He should have. Why should a dying man worry about protecting a map?"

He unfolded it in front of himself. He could feel the mouldy cracking of the paper under his fingertips.

Straight and curving lines were crossing each other, making definite and linear signs. They became then more and more indefinite, chaotic. Besides, there was no course to follow, as if Wynne had got lost.

"He was heading to this island", Rogers claimed, plunging into the drawing. "But I can't understand which sea he was sailing."

He turned his eyes to the lower corner of the map. Then he raised his brows. A series of words had been written on that side. He read them and his eyes opened wide in surprise. Anger came later.

“Do you think I’m a fool?”, he burst out. “Was it all just a joke?”

Henry Morgan held his glance with a harshness which didn’t let any emotion come out.

“No joke”, he replied.

“That’s impossible! Wynne can’t have drawn this map. He was completely out of his mind when we found him. He hadn’t eaten and drunk for days. He kept muttering meaningless words.”

“And he’s still muttering them at the moment.”

Rogers didn’t gave up. He studied the map once more, his eyes flashing frantically into their orbs. “I’ll tell you again: he can’t have drawn it, simply because this place doesn’t exist!”

“The Devil’s Triangle exists, really!”, Morgan exclaimed. He looked breathless. “Wynne has been there, no doubts. And not only the piece of paper you’re holding shows it, but also the fact we knew he was preparing to sail those seas.”

When they came out of the villa, some soldiers approached them, ready to escort them to the coach. Roger had wanted Morgan to let him meet the prisoner. He still couldn’t believe the story he had told him.

“Please, Excellency”, one of the guards suddenly said, opening

the door of the coach which would drive them to the jail.

The coach turned into a strip of land bordering the beach. Morgan caught the opportunity of greeting the colons. Many of them bowed. A bit farther the coast made a small inlet, which was considered the real heart of the bay. There were a dozen ships at anchor there.

“Here we are, Excellency”, the coachman shouted after a while.

The road they were driving through was scattered with stones everywhere, becoming closer and closer till they formed a pavement ending in front of the fortress entrance. The access was composed of a brick arch obtained in the main wall. The grey mouths of the cannons came out of the upper cornice, surmounted by imposing battlements.

Once inside Fort Charles, they got off the coach in the middle of an octagonal square. Afterwards, they were led to the jails through a stone corridor, on whose walls some torches were flaring. A well-built man with a scornful air came through the dim light. He was panting and his face was wet with sweat. He was wearing a plain dress with dirty spots everywhere. Rogers could see blood trails both on his sleeves and on his collar. He then had the unpleasant feeling of facing the hangman.

“Excellency”, the last one greeted Morgan respectfully.

“Best greetings, master Kane”, Morgan replied. “This is captain Woodes Rogers, a corsair at His Majesty’s service.”

“How can I help you?”

“We’re here to meet Emanuel Wynne.”

The hangman nodded decidedly, he caught one of the torches hanging on the walls and took them to another corridor, where some cells were alternating. When they got to the end, they walked down a flight of stairs. The slope became steeper halfway so they had to bend, as the ceiling was gradually stooping. They would find themselves underground soon.

“Before we go in, I wish to ask you a question”, Rogers told the governor. “You’ve prepared the execution for tomorrow. Why such a hurry?”

“Wynne is a pirate, so he must pay for his crimes”, the other man replied.

Without a fair trial? Those thoughts flashed in the corsair’s mind with a disarming easiness. *Do you really consider me such a fool, Henry? You’ve dragged me here for a much more important reason. Why are you spinning out?* Lost in those thoughts, he got in front of a cell, without even being aware of it. The interior, which had been enveloped in darkness till then, was lighted by Kane’s torch. He saw him fumbling about a heavy brass ring enclosing a dozen keys. He put one of them into the keyhole and made it turn, producing a resounding creaking. The bars opened on a poor, bare room, whose only furniture was a bedstraw. Being underground, there wasn’t any kind of window, neither simple slits. A heavy smell of mould, excrements and urine was hovering all around.

Morgan was very interested in the shape lying on the bedstraw.

It was still, covered in a filthy blanket. “Are you sure you didn’t go too far, master Kane? We want this man to be hanged before a jubilant crowd, not to die here like a rat.”

“Don’t worry”, the hangman assured him and moved towards Wynne. He then kicked his ribs. The pirate got up in a hurry, squealing. He looked like a ghost in the dim light. His thin face was marked by a bristly beard surrounding his cheeks in a mess. His long oily hair was falling on his eyes and behind his shoulders.

The governor showed a very false grin. “*Monsieur* Wynne is very worn out by what happened to him. We don’t need to treat him like this. We are among gentlemen. Now, please, leave us alone. We can manage by ourselves.”

“Really...”, Kane tried to disagree.

Morgan’s face became gloomy at once.

“You can go”, he repeated slowly.

The hangman left his torch on the cell wall and disappeared.

“Wynne”, Rogers called him. “Can you hear me?”

The corsair waited, hoping the other man would answer. But when he realized he would have to wait forever, he knelt down, a few inches from the prisoner. “My ship found you off Nassau, do you remember? I’m here to talk about the map. What happened to you?”

Wynne lifted his head, staring at his interlocutor, but it looked as if he couldn’t see him. Rogers thought he saw a greenish glare coming from one of his eyes. He held his breath. He wasn’t sure, as the pirate had his hair stuck on his face. He then was persuaded

that was just the reflex of the torch hanging on the wall.

“The Devil’s Triangle”, Wynne croaked after a while.

“Did you really sail those seas?”, Rogers questioned him.

“I shouldn’t have left my place. The captain’s orders. He will be furious.”

“He keeps telling the same story again and again”, Morgan said in an irritated tone. “He wants to go back to Bellamy. Even Kane’s whip strokes couldn’t make him change his mind.”

When he heard those words, the pirate started, gasping like a fish out of water and letting deep rattles come out of the bottom of his throat.

“Were you at Samuel Bellamy’s orders?” Rogers moved his fingers cautiously, catching his arm softly. Wynne was clearly made shy by Morgan’s presence. If Rogers couldn’t make him calm down, he would withdraw into numbness again.

The small man let out a surprised gasp. “We got lost.”

“Explain it better.”

“The fog... was everywhere.”

“Which fog?” Rogers spurred him. “What are you trying to tell me?”

“I must keep on watch”, Wynne changed his voice. It sounded like the one of a man looking for confidence. “The captain’s orders.”

Rogers kept silent, waiting again.

“There’s nothing to do”, Morgan asserted. “We are wasting our time. You have been able to learn something more, captain.

We'll grant it. However..."

"That's just what you don't understand!", the pirate burst out. A spark of consciousness seemed to light again into his brain. "There's a price to be paid by those who are looking for the treasure. A treasure which can change the destiny of the man who will find it."

"Which treasure?", the governor suddenly asked.

Wynne started. He got free from the corsair's grip and crouched back on the bedstraw, in a foetal position. From that angle, Rogers could see the fresh whip signs.

"Wynne!", Morgan exclaimed in a threatening voice. "What treasure are you talking about? Answer, God damn!"

The pirate burst into a series of moans and stopped talking. The governor's insults couldn't stir him anymore.

"Was that all you wanted to know, Excellency?" That sounded more like a bare statement than like a question on Roger's part. "You've used me to find out the possible existence of a treasure?"

Henry Morgan's face turned gloomy. "I didn't use you, captain. You had a precise task. To catch Wynne. And you succeeded very well."

"It was a simple chance, to use your same words."

"Of course."

"What are you playing at, Henry?"

The man stared at him doubtfully.

"You owe me some explanation", Rogers went on soon after. "I did my duty. And I thought that was all. But now you're

involving me in this story.”

The sound of some steps came from the bottom of the corridor, together with Kane’s light whistle. They had clearly remained in the cell too long and the hangman was coming back to check if something had happened.

“There’s no need of discussing the matter here, captain”, Morgan hissed.

“I’m afraid there is”, Rogers disagreed.

“What do you want to know?”

“The truth.”

“Ok”, the governor replied. “You’re a trustworthy man, after all.”

“Hurry up!”

“Bellamy himself came to tell me what he wanted to do. Our past is not a mystery, isn’t it? So you won’t be surprised by our friendship.”

I’m not surprised at all, Rogers considered.

“He asked us for a loan.” Morgan was talking fast and he sometimes turned his eyes to see if Kane suddenly came. “He didn’t have enough money to afford starting such a dangerous journey. We wanted the list of the crew in return. Experience has taught us to get to know who is going to use the money we are spending. The only name of the list we already knew, was Wynne’s.”

“So you sent me to look for him”, Rogers highlighted.

“Exactly. When we learnt that Bellamy had disappeared, we

couldn't do otherwise.”

The French man started talking again. He was sitting on the bedstraw, crossing his legs. “I'll be punished because I stirred up a mutiny. But it wasn't my fault. I can swear it. Don't trust the man with golden teeth.” Even if his face was hidden by his hair, he was clearly smiling. “What's more, I was the only one who could see. I was on the observation mast. I had to watch, just like the shaman had told us.”

Rogers bent down once more. He was going to open his mouth, wanting to know what Wynne was referring to. The pirate was faster.

“Our eyes often deceive us, captain Rogers!”, he said.

“And what about the treasure?”, Morgan intruded.

There was no answer. Edward Wynne bent his head back and burst into an obscene and powerful laughter, clashing with his body's thinness. He kept laughing also when the hangman came back. The governor had he whipped again and again, hoping to get more information. But the more Kane tortured him, the more the pirate laughed. He went on till his vocal cords broke and disgusting sounds came out of his mouth, forcing Rogers to shut his ears.

CHAPTER TWO

THE EXECUTION

Late in the afternoon, Johnny started on his way back.

Remembering what had happened in the morning, he decided to take the longest way. He could avoid going through the Spanish area in doing so. His mother was certainly at work, plunging as usual in the suffocating smell of spices which impregnated the *Passàro do Mar's* kitchen. She wouldn't notice him, if he came home late.

He moved on along the east end of the harbour, getting over docks and road-steads. He sometimes cast a glance at the moored ships. Most of the crews had landed. He had often felt the impulse to sign on and leave Port Royal. But how? He wouldn't bear the sea, not even for a week.

He heard Anne's voice echoing in his mind at that moment, as powerful as only she could have, accusing him of being just like his father. He thought again over the story he had invented with Avery's connivance.

I had to hand him some pincers, he revised it mentally, trying to look convincing even to himself. *He told me to hurry up, so I turned. I didn't notice a lower beam and I hit against it.*

She might believe him, even if he could foresee her worried look, her goggle eyes and her wide-open mouth.

She was going to overwhelm him by her usual wave of scolding, about how dangerous the world was and everything else. Obviously, he expected her to ask the old man for an explanation. He would prove everything was right that same evening, when he was going to have a drink at the tavern.

I hope he won't get drunk, he thought.

Farther on, the ground made some terracing, following a flight of steps which had been built against the walls of the harbour. Johnny walked up there without even stopping to think about it. He knew the area like the back of his hand. When he got to the top, he stopped there to look at the bay.

He had seen that sight lots of times, but he felt a different emotion that day, which he had never felt before. The dying sunset light was enveloping everything in violet brushstrokes. He felt sure for a moment that the air was even full of electricity, almost bringing some change forward.

“The wind is changing.”

Johnny winced. A man had come close to him while he hadn't even noticed him, and he was staring at the inlet just like him. He was wearing a blue jacket and a shirt opening on his chest, tied by a green sash on his waist. He had knee-high boots on his feet. His face was pockmarked, as if he had been stung by hundreds of voracious insects and it was framed by a pair of long and thick dark sideburns, making it look as long as a beech-marten's one.

“Something is going to happen, isn't it?”, the boy asked him, not even knowing why he was addressing that man.

The other one nodded.

“Go back home, guy”, he told him. He put his hands on his hips and pushed his clothes aside in doing so. A sword hilt came into view. “A storm is going to break out soon. You don’t want to be around here, when that happens, do you?”

Johnny didn’t answer. He realized that he didn’t like that man. Especially when he smiled: he had his upper incisors set in gold.

He is a pirate, he thought and, while walking away, he could hear him sneer. It was a gloomy, unpleasant laughter. He turned, fearing the man was going to follow him. On the contrary, the pirate wasn’t caring at all about him.

The frantic life of the colony was dying away meanwhile. The streets were getting empty. The people who didn’t have a house to go back to, were showering inside the inns. The lamp men had started on their tour, lighting lamps and filling them with new oil. Oddly, there didn’t seem to be any dead man lying in the mud. But the night was going to be still long, to be sure about that.

Johnny walked all along the street separating him from the *Pàssaro do Mar* in a strange state of excitement, which he couldn’t understand. It was the fault of his meeting with the mysterious man. And he was still thinking about him, when he met one of the several guard spots scattered along the street, where a boy, about twelve years old, was hanging a warning. Some soldiers were surrounding him, looking curious.

“At last!”, one of them exclaimed

“I feared the governor had got soft”, another man added.

“Shut up”, a third one warned him. “You don’t want to be hanged too, do you?”

They went on discussing without really caring about it. It was different for Johnny. As soon as the boy had finished, he decided to move closer, attracted by the words heading on the sign.

**ACCORDING TO HIS MAJESTY KING GEORGE OF
ENGLAND’S WILL,
THE GOVERNOR OF PORT ROYAL SIR HENRY
MORGAN
ORDERS THE EXECUTION OF THE PIRATE
EMANUEL WYNNE
AT THE FIRST LIGHTS OF DAWN**

He kept staring at it for a long time. After those words, there was a list of crimes Wynne had made. When he finished reading it, he started walking again.

He recollected the day when his father had taken him to watch an execution for the first time. He had put him on his shoulders, so he could see beyond the crowd. Johnny had kept laughing amused, till something had changed. His child excitement for that show had turned into horror, as soon as the rope had been passed around the prisoner’s neck. He couldn’t understand why he hadn’t expected to see him hanging there dead after a few seconds. Tears had suddenly started streaking his face.

“Why are you crying?”, his father had asked him.

“That man over there...”, he had just answered, pointing at the swaying dead body.

“He was a wicked man.” Stephen Underwood had tried to calm him down. “He had to pay for his crimes.”

Johnny had nodded, but he hadn't perfectly understood what he was talking about. His gesture had been an instinctive one, due mainly to his irrepressible urge to go away as soon as possible.

“Just remember that you are going to meet a lot of people in your life”, Stephen had gone on. “Each of them made some mistakes. Some of them have mended their ways and decided to leave their past behind them. Some others, on the contrary, wear them proudly on their face, like sorts of masks. I'm warning you, don't trust the latter. They will go on making mistakes and justifying themselves by saying that it's your fault. And the worst thing is, they really believe what they are saying. Just like the man who has been executed today.”

While he was revising those words, he found himself wondering about how much he missed his father.

Judging from the row coming from inside the *Pàssaro do Mar*, he guessed that the customers had opened the dances. Someone had even started playing, since the shrill notes of a violin had joined the racket.

Johnny stopped under the porch for a moment and looked through the single window, pressing his palms against the glass. A large room made up the central body of the inn, whose walls were covered with cracked boards, reminding a lot the sides of an ancient sail boat. There was a counter at the bottom and, right

on its left, the sooty mouth of a chimneypiece. The kitchen door opened on one side.

Dozens of candles were placed along the tables and on the candlesticks. The most pleasant thing in that place was just that: the light. Unlike the other inns scattered around Port Royal, Bartolomeu was proud of having the brightest one.

The boy saw him bustling about among the tables, carrying dishes and jugs to and fro. He had expected to see his mother there too, but there was no sign of her. Anne was usually the one who bustled about serving the customers.

He went back in the street and lifted his eyes to the single window in the room upstairs. The blinders were shut.

Yet he remembered having left them open.

She might have come back and shut them", he thought. A shrill voice suddenly pierced through his head. *Something might have happened to her! That bad cough never lets her alone. It's getting worse every day.*

A painful burning sensation ran through his belly. It was as if a rat had got on fire and kept gnawing his stomach in spite of that.

He ran breathlessly down the lane stretching along the inn, he opened a back door and climbed the stairs.

The sounds downstairs got blurred, muffled. It was like going through a tunnel dug inside a mountain.

And at the bottom of the tunnel, the golden sparkle of the pirate's teeth was shining.

"Mother?!", he called out, knocking at the flat door. He didn't

get any answer from the other side. “Mother, it’s me. I’m going to come in.”

The room was enveloped in absolute darkness. There was a sharp smell of sweat inside, mixed up to something like rusty iron.

He finally identified it.

Blood.

Panic-stricken, he looked for the oil lamp on a short night table next to the door. He found it at the second attempt. He inspected the surface of that piece of furniture once more. When his fingers brushed against the linchpin, he made it click. The lamp shone with a weak flame and the light trail started to stretch on the floor, till it got to the foot of the bed. He noticed something just then. A very slight movement. Someone was moving in the shadow.

He heard a rattle at that moment, followed by a coughing fit.

That was enough to turn his doubts into certainties.

Anne was lying on the bed, her untied, long dark hair spreading in a mess on the pillow. They reminded him of the carcass of a giant octopus brought to the shore by the streams. Johnny went closer to her and she raised her eyelids a bit. Her face was cerulean, beaded with sweat. The corners of her mouth were stained with red. A blood trickle was running down her cheek, falling on the pillow where it had made a lumpy stain.

“John, is it you?”, she asked, her voice just a bit louder than a whisper. Her breast was dancing at an intermittent rhythm.

“Yes, it’s me”, he answered.

“I can’t see. My eyes are blurred.”

The boy was shocked, he didn’t know exactly what he should say. He feared that anything coming out from his mouth, could sound unconvincing.

“You’ll see, it’s nothing”, he played it down, caressing her forehead. It was icy. “You’ll feel better tomorrow morning.”

“How are you?”

“Don’t worry about me.”

The woman tried to smile. She moaned a second time, so he caught her hand.

“You must rest”, he told her.

“I know”, Anne admitted.

“Is there anything I can do for you?”

“My throat is dry.”

Johnny went to the water basin and plunged a cup into it. He went back to his mother. He sat next to her softly, placing his hand on the back of her head to help her drink. The woman swallowed the liquid greedily.

“You’ve been working so much these days. You must sleep. Sleeping will help you.”

“I’m scared”, she rattled.

“There is nothing to be scared of.”

Am I trying to convince her...or myself?, he wondered.

“Just relax”, the boy went on, trying to hide his anxiety. “I’ll go downstairs and talk with Bartolomeu now. He must need some

help in the kitchen.”

“Don’t go away.”

“I’ll be back soon.” Anne’s eyes turned bright. A tear fell down her face. “I’ve already lost your father. Don’t leave me alone.”

“All right. I’ll stay here with you.”

Johnny kept listening to the woman’s breathing, which was becoming regular again, till she fell asleep. He grasped her hand once more. Only then, he allowed himself to rest.

The governor’s carriage took Rogers to the harbour, following the track he had suggested to the coachman along the way. A strange paranoia had started peeping out inside him. The town was swarming with spies and the last thing he wished for was being tailed by one of Morgan’s lackeys. Of course, the postilion was going to get back and he could tell him everything... so he threw a bag full of money to him, when he got down the coach.

“You have understood, haven’t you?”, he warned him.

“As clear as a starless sky, captain”, the man answered.

“So tell me again what you are going to report”.

The postilion looked around. “If someone asks me, I must say I took the captain to the crossroads between the ancient walls and the main street. The one following the cape southward. I saw him get into a brothel, intending to spend some of His Excellence’s money in sweet company.”

The corsair felt satisfied. He gestured in agreement to the coachman, who left very quickly, leaving behind himself a trail

of dust and crushed stones. He waited for him to disappear, then he walked along a lane leading down to the docks. There were no more than ten old buildings in terrible conditions and everything was plunging in a ghostly silence.

“Captain.”

Rogers didn't need to turn. He could identify that catarrhal tone anywhere. “I'm pleased to see that you're watching the area, O'Hara. Has anything happened during my absence?”

“Nothing important.”

“What about the rest of the crew?”

“They are sleeping.” O'Hara slipped out of the darkness and turned out next to him. “You took longer than expected. Has anything gone wrong?”

“We'd better discuss it privately”, Rogers cut it short. He could feel on himself the eyes of all the people spying on them behind the half open shutters.

Without adding anything else, they turned a corner. They walked along a narrow and stinking lane, till they could hear the sea washing. An old and neglected warehouse appeared in front of them, almost overhanging the docks.

“I left Husani on guard”, O'Hara explained, in a hoarse hiss.

The pirate smiled satisfied.

Of all the members of his crew, he would have entrusted just two people with his own life. The first one was James O'Hara himself, whom he had met several years before in Cuba. He was famous for being a loyal killer and his typical voice was due to the

fact that his throat had been cut. His enemies had thought he was dead, without even checking it. On the contrary, nobody knew how he had survived. The second one, whose name was Husani, was a very big man, a slave in a cotton plantation in Virginia. He had been able to escape and sign up on a ship. Rogers had met him in Port Royal, where he had been charmed by the physical strength the African man had shown in a fight. Many people criticized him for the way he chose the men making up his crew. He didn't care at all. He very much preferred working with gallows-birds similar to the ones he was hunting, rather than with spruced up and unexperienced soldiers.

After they had knocked at the door, they waited for Husani to come and open it. They didn't have to wait for a long time. The door half-opened and a large dark face, with a grim look, peeped out in the opening.

“Good evening, captain.”

“Good evening to you”, Rogers answered.

The room was dirty. A low snoring echoed everywhere. Husani picked up a candle end and took his mates to a nearby table, being careful to avoid treading on the rest of the crew who was sleeping on the floor. Rogers sat down and O'Hara sat in front of him. He showed off the white slash of a scar under his chin. Husani stood at attention, but only after he had placed the candle on a rough canopy and filled three jugs with some dark liquor.

“So what, captain?”, he asked him.

Rogers searched through the pockets inside his jacket. He took out another bag, larger than the one he had thrown to the coachman.

“This is the first half”, he said. He threw it carelessly in the middle of the table. The coins inside it tinkled. “The rest when your work is done. As usual.”

“What shall we do?”, O’Hara inquired.

The corsair kept staring at the flickering flame of the candle. Time passed by. He finally answered in a far-away voice. “At first I thought that Morgan was making fun of me. Then I understood he wasn’t joking at all. And that was probably the worst moment.”

“Make yourself clearer.” O’Hara had started snapping his fingers. “What else does he want from us, after Wynne’s arrest?”

“The only problem is Wynne himself”, Rogers explained. “The governor had his own reasons for ordering us to look for him.” He stopped. “Do you remember what he was holding in his hand, when we found him?”

“A map”, the African answered decidedly.

“You have an excellent memory”, Rogers congratulated him. He searched through his pockets once more, he took out the roll Morgan had entrusted him with and placed it in front of himself.

O Hara stopped tormenting his knuckles. He put on an inquiring look. “Where should it lead to?”

Rogers turned his eyes from the map and laid them straight on him. He did it with no hurry, trying to find the right time to

answer him.

“To the Devil’s Triangle”, he finally exclaimed.

There was a moment of silence, during which the only noise that could be heard was the continuous snoring of the crew. Husani and O’Hara cast each other a quick, surprised glance. Then the latter threw his head back and sniggered, showing his scar in all its length. It was a horrible noise, a sharp screech, like a blade scratching on a rusty surface.

“Do you find it funny?”, Rogers asked him seriously.

“I didn’t know your sense of humour was so sharp”, the other man answered.

“No humour.” The captain tapped his finger on the map. “Wynne really seems sure about what he has drawn. And so does Morgan. That’s enough for me, as far as the governor is ready to pay.”

“For Judas’s blood!”, Husani burst out. “Have you considered at least that it could be just a crazy man’s frenzy?”

He nodded and did his best telling in a detailed way how things had gone, starting from his morning meeting with Morgan and his talks with Wynne.

Meanwhile Husani had grasped one of the chairs and had sat down on it. “How are you going to persuade the rest of the crew?”

“They don’t need to know the truth at the moment”, Rogers replied. And he suddenly remembered the warning Wynne had lavished on him: *There is a price to be paid by the ones searching for the treasure.*

He felt himself sinking into distress, as if the sword of Damocles was swinging over his head. He tried to push it away. He couldn't allow himself to show any kind of hesitation. O'Hara's providential intervention came to his help.

"Which warranties is the governor granting us?", he inquired.

Rogers smiled. The disfigured side of his face twisted into a grimace which could make even the bravest man shiver. "This mission will be made in an absolutely legal way. After the execution, Morgan is going to give me a new letter of marque."

"God save the King!", Husani burst out in a scornful voice.

Some men stopped snoring, muttering incomprehensible words in their sleep. Then they started making deep noises again.

"Nobody knows the governor's real intentions", Rogers whispered. "Not even His Majesty. If Wynne is telling the truth, this map will lead us to an incredible treasure."

O'Hara lifted his jug in the air. He hadn't drunk a drop since they had started plotting. "May luck help us."

"To our health!", Rogers wished, imitating him.

The African giant joined the toast too. "May the devil take you, captain!"

They spent most of the night discussing the organization of the journey. They agreed about the fact that it would take them five days at least to get the *Delicia* ready. By the way, there was enough time to plan the expedition. However, a vague foreboding kept troubling Rogers's heart. In spite of the apparent calm atmosphere, the fear he had been feeling all evening came back

again and again. Besides the warning of the French man, Husani's exclamation echoed in his ears.

May the devil take you, captain!

The bells of the only church in Port Royal echoed with a deafening clangour at the first light of dawn.

Johnny woke up accompanied by that sound. He had a terrible headache, a clear sign that he had slept too little and badly. He half-closed his eyes. He saw a face hovering in the air just before him. He didn't identify it at first. Anne's lying body was hiding a part of his sight. He was able to focus on it at last and heard Bartolomeu greeting him in his usual drawling accent.

"Try to speak English at least", he begged him. "I haven't closed my eyes almost all night long. My head is hurting."

The other man burst out laughing. "You're right. Sorry."

Johnny got on his feet with trouble. His numb legs were threatening to give way. He was able to avoid a disastrous fall, just because the Portuguese was ready to help him. He caught him by his arms and put him at the foot of the bed.

"I can do by myself", he said and went to open the shutters. A breath of fresh air got into the room. The sun filtered and his features stood out against the early morning light.

He had a sharp face, surmounted by a mop of dark hair which he kept tied in a ponytail. His dark and deep eyes gave him a threatening look, stressed by his thick black eyebrows which joined each other. His upper lip was framed by a sparrow-hawk

moustache.

“How is your mother?”, he wanted to know.

“Not well”, Johnny answered.

They both looked at Anne. She was still sleeping. In spite of her relaxed breathing, she might have gone through a hard night. That could be understood from the painful look she had.

“Let her have some rest”, Bartolomeu went on. “There is nothing we can do.”

“But...”

“No objections”, he warned him. “Come with me. We must talk.”

The boy agreed, but unwillingly. He went downstairs, where Bartolomeu had him sit down on a stool placed behind the counter.

“Bennet was here yesterday evening.” Bartolomeu had started fumbling about a dusty bottle of rum. “I don’t care about what you do, nor about the stories you are forced to invent to avoid making your mother worry.”

He had forgotten it all, after the latest events. He instinctively pressed his forefinger on his nose. The swelling had decreased, as well as the pain. Luckily Anne didn’t seem to have noticed it.

How could she do it, in her bad shape, he wondered.

“She is a very strong woman”, the innkeeper underlined. “But you don’t have any right to do those silly things. The boy who is bothering you today, will turn into the drunkard who will stab you tomorrow.”

“Is that one of your precepts?”

The Portuguese frowned at him. He didn't seem to like the mocking tone he had just been addressed by. He started swallowing the liqueur.

“No, it isn't”, he answered with a sneer. “I've just made it up.”

Johnny had been fearing till then that he would be given a new telling-off and he was ready to spring up. He didn't care about anything, except his mother. That simple joke was enough to make him change his attitude.

“Come on, have a drop too”, Bartolomeu encouraged him soon after. He handed the bottle to him.

“In the morning?”

“You'll have to turn into a man sooner or later. Let me see what your nature is. Be brave!”

The full and dense smell of the rum got to Johnny's nostrils and he couldn't hold back a disgusted grimace. He brought the jug softly to his lips and threw his head back. The liqueur slipped hot and sweetish down his throat. When it got to his stomach, it took fire with all its force.

“It's burning!”, he exclaimed. A series of powerful coughing started twisting his chest. It went on like that for a while, before the amused eyes of Bartolomeu, who couldn't stop laughing at all.

The governor was used to being an early-bird. Especially when he had to watch an execution. In those cases, he could hardly ever fall asleep, waiting impatiently for the moment he would go to

the gallows square.

It was different that time.

After having dismissed Rogers, he had preferred to withdraw into his rooms, without touching any food.

He had ascribed his insomnia to his too spiced meals, besides anxiety. Foreboding that he wouldn't fall asleep anyway, he had ordered Feller, his personal butler, to bring him one of the black maids who worked in the kitchen.

"You must be Abena", he had said as soon as he had brought one of them to him.

The slave had just bowed slightly and had kept standing next to the door, looking around herself with a puzzled look.

"Don't be afraid, my dear. Come here." The governor had shown a predatory smile off. "Please, make yourself comfortable."

"Now, Your Excellency?"

"Yes."

That sounded simple and Abena had started undressing. Morgan had examined her with curiosity, just like a child observing an unknown phenomenon. Then he had started undressing too. He had taken her by force and Abena had let him do it. It hadn't lasted long, but he had looked satisfied anyway. Then he had fallen asleep.

The next morning Feller got into the room holding a tray with a glass of wine and all the things Morgan needed for his toilette: a basin of fresh water, another one full of rice flour, a series of

jags with make-up and sweet-smelling clothes.

“Good morning, Excellency”, he said.

Morgan mumbled something. He took the glass and gulped the wine down, without deigning to taste it. Even if he was recognized as the most important authority in charge in Port Royal, many people still considered him as a mean and shabby pirate.

“A perfect day for a hanging”, Feller stated. He pulled the window curtains back and placed all the necessities for the day on a baroque-style cupboard.

“Where is the girl?”, the governor asked instead. He had reached his arms out, sure he would find her still sleeping next to him.

Feller didn't lose his composure. He picked up the wig and powdered it with the rice flour. “She came out of your room without even asking for your leave. One of the gardeners saw her going back to the slaves rooms at night. These niggers are really impudent. I'm sorry I brought her to you.”

“It doesn't matter”, he mumbled. He got up from the bed and moved to the cupboard. “Take her to the jails and let her be whipped.”

“As you wish.”

Morgan started wiping his face. When he had finished, he kept looking at himself reflected in the mirror. “Have you questioned the coachman?”

The butler spread a cloth and helped him get dry. “Captain

Rogers seems to have stopped at a brothel. He probably wanted to spend some of your money.”

“That’s possible.”

“Do you trust him?”

Feller’s question seemed impudent to him. Morgan had always considered him as a small person, not only for his physical aspect but also for his character. He rarely let himself go to personal considerations.

“Absolutely not”, he answered. “In spite of that, he is the most skilled pirate who has ever sailed the Caribbean Sea.” He unscrewed the lids of the jars and rubbed a thick layer of greasepaint on his neck and face, giving them a noble paleness. Then he put some red colouring on his lips and cheeks. “Is our carriage ready?”

“Certainly”, Feller answered.

“Very well”, Morgan commented and started dressing up with the most formal and smartest clothes he owned: a white silk shirt and a leotard the same colour. All that was matched by a blue doublet. He completed his outfit by his unfailing wig, which was going to cover his thin reddish hair.

Once he had finished, he took a step back, to let the butler have a look. Feller fixed his shirt collar and nodded satisfied.

“You look perfect, Excellency”, he claimed.

“Let’s hurry up, then.” Morgan walked out of the room, turning down the large entrance staircase. “This damned doublet is choking us to death.”

Johnny started coughing again as soon as he got out of the inn. After his misadventure with the rum, Bartolomeu had suggested him to have a sip of hydromel, saying it would help him.

It hadn't been like that. He ran behind a lane, kneeled down and crossed his arms on his chest. Then he threw up. The sour taste of his gastric juices blurred his eyes, making the outlines vague. He had to wait in that pose for some minutes, before he could get up.

"How disgusting", he panted, while he plodded along the lane. "Get out of my feet!"

The powerful voice of a soldier was shouting at him. Together with his brothers-in-arms, he was guarding a person's lifeless corpse. One of them had grasped him under his armpits and was dragging him along the street, in the stillness of that torrid morning.

There's something different here. That thought rose spontaneously in his mind, even if he wasn't just referring to the sight of the corpse, but to the absence of the usual crowd blocking the main street. On the contrary, he got still more surprised when the tradesmen shut up their stalls and swarmed to the harbour.

Even the prostitutes had disappeared.

"Of course!", he exclaimed. He called out one of the guards, who had kept back from the others. "Has the execution already started?"

The soldier was puzzled, as if he didn't understand what he

wanted from him.

“Not yet”, he finally answered. “If you hurry up...”

Johnny couldn't hear the rest of his words. He was already running breathlessly, following the stream of people flowing to the location of the event.

Once he got into his carriage, Morgan felt puzzled in finding Rogers sitting comfortably among the quilted cushions covering the seats. He looked calm, without any hint of anxiety. And it was just that self-confidence which made Morgan nervous.

“What are you doing here?”, he asked, without being able to hide his dislike.

“I thought you would like a bit of company”, the pirate answered.

“You are presuming too much, captain.”

“Come on. Don't be stiff. It's you who dragged me into this matter, after all.”

Morgan claimed his right not to reply. There were just a few things which could annoy him in his life. One of them was sitting just in front of him. Nobody had ever dared make fun of him so openly.

“How are you going to behave?”, he asked Rogers.

“It won't be an easy task”, he explained. “The map has no landmarks. We will have to sail blindly.”

“We are sure you'll get through.”

Rogers shrugged, as if he wanted to show that he didn't care

at all about that matter. Since they had left, he hadn't stopped looking out of the window even for a single moment.

The governor for his part was immersed into the deep estimation that Port Royal was certainly a wealthy colony, even if that wasn't enough to make it pleasant. And the area they were going through proved it. The streets turned into narrow lanes stuffed with dirt. The buildings, leaning on each other, were very badly made. Even the colonizers had something wrong. In spite of that, being a greedy and opportunistic man, he had understood he could exploit the town according to his wishes. By the way, which were the differences between a pirate and a politician?

"We are sailing in a few days", Rogers suddenly stated. "The crew has to arrange the last preparations. I haven't given them much information about the journey yet."

"The fewer people are going to get involved, the better for us."

"However, I won't be able to keep the crew forever in the dark about what we are going to do. I could risk a mutiny."

"You aren't risking anything, captain", Morgan replied. "Even in that case, you would get the money we agreed on anyway, together with the new letter of marque."

"Aren't Wynne's ravings scaring you?"

"Absolutely not."

"Why?"

"If that was just a crazy man's raving, we still would have nothing to lose." The governor wiped an invisible crumble of dust away from his doublet. "Father Mckenzie must be confessing the

prisoner at the moment. For what it's worth."

"We are all sinners", the corsair sentenced.

"This is a cynical and cruel world. You should know it better than us. We didn't think you were a moralist. Do you have any Puritan ancestry?"

"My ancestries aren't important."

"So, what is the reason for this sudden moralizing lecture?", Morgan cut it short. "*Monsieur* Wynne can send his filthy soul back to his Creator without any ceremony more. We have gotten what we wanted to know. If many people come to the gathering, better for us, so we will be able to grip the population. They are going to understand that nobody can escape God's judgment."

The pirate mumbled in agreement without any enthusiasm.

"Wynne's hanging will be an unforgettable event."

After that last consideration, Morgan waited for them to get to Port Royal.

The square was divided into two parts: the lower area, where the people were crowding, and a higher one, where the gallows had been erected. They communicated with each other by some stone stairs, guarded by dozens of soldiers. Around that area some cabins had been built, serving both as lodgings and as warehouses for weapons and ammunition. Several communication trenches connected the main body of the fortress to the ramparts and each of them had its own cannon battery. The south walls overlooked the sea instead. The donjon

stood there.

As soon as Johnny walked through the gates, he plunged into a confused and messy crowd. He had at first the unpleasant feeling of having got lost, of being absolutely out of place in such a disarming spot.

From where he was standing, he could hardly see the gallows. He had to find a way to get closer. Luck came to his rescue as soon as the governor's carriage arrived. The crowd was forced to part, so he took advantage of that and slipped as close as possible. He could do it without any trouble. Then a hand grasped his shoulder. He swallowed hard, fearing someone had it in for him. A soldier might have disliked what he had done. He took ages to turn round.

“What are you doing here?”, Avery addressed him, taking him by surprise.

“You really frightened me”, he replied bewildered. “I thought you were one of the guards!”

The old man burst out laughing, showing the few teeth he still had. “Do you have a guilty conscience by chance? Are you afraid of ending up over there?” and he lifted his hand lazily in front of himself.

Following his knotty finger, Johnny was bewildered by the simplicity of the structure the soldiers had built: a cross beam, supported by a post where a solid slipknot was hanging from. Everything was placed on an elevated stage, more than three meters high, which could be reached by a stair.

“Have you seen many people go to the gallows?”, he asked.

“Oh, yes, I have.” Avery’s features got wrinkled and his eyes turned unusually blank. “These people don’t care about the prisoner, only about the sound of his neck breaking. Experience has taught me to be indifferent. You are going to learn this lesson too in time.”

John was struck. He had heard a vague suffering in the old man’s voice, as if a painful memory had come to his mind. *If he has really watched so many executions, he should be used to it. So, what is upsetting him?*

His own fancy answered him. *Bennet Avery is a pirate, John. Haven’t you understood it yet? The rumours about him are true. He was on board the Queen Anne’s Revenge. He might know the prisoner!*

His wondering was covered up by the crowd rejoicing in agreement. Someone was exalting the governor’s arrival. Morgan came out of the carriage, followed by another person. The two men walked up the steps leading to the elevated area in the square.

“Some people will never change”, Avery grumbled disgusted. Johnny didn’t seem to understand. “What do you mean?”

“Before turning to politics”, the other man explained, “the governor was an unscrupulous pirate.” His previous anxiety was wiped away by a spiteful mask. “He never hesitated to kill the members of his own crew. As far as cruelty was concerned, he came just after Edward Teach.” When he uttered that name, he

was shaken by a shiver that the boy could only see quickly. “The guy behind him is called Woodes Rogers. He is a corsair. He is famous for being one of the fiercest pirate hunters.”

“So, why are they together?”

“Gold can work miracles.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“You will have to learn that too”, Avery stated sadly. “Lots of men lost their lives trying desperately to amass wealth. That’s a disease which can’t be healed.”

Johnny nodded in agreement. He understood what he meant, even if he had never had anything to do with money. When his father was running the trade company, he was too young to understand its value. Now the few coins he was able to spare looked like a treasure themselves.

“They are going to start”, the old man stated. “That is the hangman.”

A bully had turned out from one of the huts, followed by a young man who was slinging a drum over his shoulder. He greeted the governor and his guest nodding slightly. He then climbed the stairs with some trouble.

A whisper went through the spectators, like a growing wave. The drum started rolling and three soldiers came out of a second building. The last one was escorting a worn-out man, dressed in rags. He had a bad limp, his hands were tied behind his back, his oily hair was covering his face. Most of his body was marked by deep wounds and some of them were bleeding.

The crowd started laughing and making a din and someone threw vegetables at him. A man even threw a stone, which hit the prisoner's forehead. He staggered and almost fell down, then he recovered his balance and lifted his face towards the crowd.

“Walk on!”, a guard shouted at him.

“Bastard!”, the crowd echoed him.

The prisoner was escorted under the gallows at a slow and limping pace, then he was forced to stop. The young man stopped rolling his drum. One of the soldiers stood at attention, unrolled a parchment and started reading. “For His Majesty's and the Jamaican governor, sir Henry Morgan's will, the present Emanuel Wynne has been sentenced to death by hanging. He is accused of murder, thief, kidnapping and piracy.”

The last word made the spectators turn into a wild frenzy, so that Johnny even started fearing for his own life. He realized that those people were in a fit of fury he had never witnessed before. They were all shouting, with no difference in sex and age. Many of them were even rushing to the stairs, to lynch the pirate by themselves. The soldiers were forced to take their weapons out and push the rioters back.

That's what Avery meant, he thought. They want to see him dead. All at once. They don't care about anything else.

“How do you claim yourself?”, the soldier asked, turning to Wynne. That was an ordinary question, simple and expected, and the answer wasn't going to change things.

The pirate didn't answer.

“May God have mercy of your soul”, the man finished. He sheathed the parchment and cast a glance at the governor, who answered by waving his hand lazily.

Wynne was forced to walk up without wasting any more time. When he was half way, his legs turned shaky and he almost slipped backwards. The audience shouted in protest. One of the soldiers grasped him and forced him to go on.

“His fate is settled”, Johnny considered sadly. “Why are they so pitiless against him?”

He waited for Avery to speak, taking his involvement for granted. As he got no answer, he turned to look at him.

He was puzzled by what he could see.

The old man eyes were so bright that they were almost reflecting the sunlight. He was holding back his tears just because he didn't want to show himself in that condition.

Meanwhile, Wynne had got to his destination and had been left in the hangman's hands. Dozens after dozens of voices were croaking their scorn once more, followed by a more powerful rolling of drums. Kane placed the prisoner on the trapdoor carefully and tightened the slipknot around his neck. Everything was still, even the air. Also the far-away washing of the waves had calmed down.

The French man took all the spectators by surprise at that moment. He burst out laughing loudly, overcoming the noise of the drum and of the crowd below. It was as if a cannon had fired not far from there.

“That’s how they are repaying me for having told them where the greatest treasure the world has ever seen is hidden!”, he shouted.

An icy silence fell over Fort Charles. There wasn’t any sign left of the folly which had spurred the pirate’s brain. Even Morgan looked shocked about that, his mouth wide-open with an idiot look.

“Governor”, Wynne addressed him, “where have you put the map I drew up to get to the Devil’s Triangle?”

An excited yelling started spreading through the crowd. Just like many other people, Johnny turned to look at Morgan: under the white paleness of his make-up, he could notice a slight blush of uneasiness and anger appearing on his face. He then glanced back at Avery. Before his eyes met the old man’s ones, he noticed someone else’s shape, not far from where they were standing.

He was the pirate with golden teeth.

The boy staggered, as if someone had punched him in his stomach. The man was focused on listening to Wynne’s words. For just a moment, Johnny was sure he even saw him smile lightly.

“Why has he come?”, he mumbled. He got absolutely sure and was able to dispel all his doubts: that man was making him feel breathlessly scared.

“What did you say?”, Avery asked him.

“Over there...” Those words died in his throat. The guy had vanished. Johnny looked frantically for him, searching

carefully the sea of heads surrounding him. He couldn't find him anywhere.

Meanwhile Wynne kept shouting: "If my fate is going to hell, better to hurry up!"

Morgan seemed to wake up from his indolence. He started shouting orders, but nobody was able to do much. Wynne had finished by bursting out laughing even more powerfully for the second time, increasing the spreading mess which had got hold of the fortress.

"Kane!", he screamed. "The trapdoor! Open that damned trapdoor, silly idiot! What are you waiting for?"

The hangman grasped the machine lever and pulled it. A series of sounds followed each other very quickly. Wynne then hurtled down, keeping kicking and swinging in mid-air. In spite of the violent rebound, his neck hadn't broken. Not only that. Even if he was choking, he didn't stop laughing his heart out. His face started turning purple and his tongue came out of his mouth. He bit it till he tore it apart. A gush of blood stained his lips and cheeks, just like the petals of a blossoming rose.

"Let someone stop him!", Morgan shouted, joining the frenzy of the people watching that havoc.

Only the man next to him was ready to act.

He climbed to the gallows and drew his sword out. Once he got to the platform, he slipped out of Kane's grip who had tried instinctively to stop him, surprised in seeing him there. He hacked the rope with a clear cut and the French man crashed

to the pavement at last. The impact let out an unpleasant noise, coming from broken bones. He rolled on himself twice, letting agonizing sounds out, then his body turned suddenly still.

Johnny watched all that with his heart in his mouth. Wynne's image got impressed into his retina like a fire mark. He couldn't avoid it anymore. He could distinguish each detail: from the pirate's unnatural position, his broken legs and his bent trunk, to his livid face, stained by the blood he had thrown out. The disgust of the execution had shown in all its horror.

"Let's go, Johnny." Bennet Avery was recalling him to order. "I've heard what I wanted to. What's more, I don't like all that mess."

The boy nodded, still more shocked: the old man had seldom addressed him by his name. Besides, he had been aware of something vaguely mysterious in his attitude, a rather sinister feeling.

His fancy overwhelmed him like a river in flood, so much that it was able to wipe his perplexity away: Avery knew much more than he implied and the moment to find it out had come.

CHAPTER THREE

DEAD MEN TELL NO TALES

“Bloody hell!”

Flaring up in uncontrollable fury, Morgan overthrew all the objects crowding on his desk, included the nautical maps, an excellent workmanship sextant and the letter of marque addressed to Rogers.

“Filthy beggar!”, he barked. “He deserved a much worse suffering!”

The corsair was sitting in front of him on a damask sofa, showing a certain amount of indifference.

“With all due respect...”, he tried to speak.

“Shut up!”, the governor interrupted him.

A very long and deep silence followed, marked only by the man’s panting breathing. Rogers preferred not to reply. It would be better to wait till he calmed down, to pursue his own interests.

Wynne’s revelations had helped to undermine Morgan’s already bad reputation among the colonizers. His political career and his high-ranking connections had been quite useless. And the fact that they paid a deferential respect to him just hid an etiquette made of hypocrisy and respectability. As if that wasn’t enough, the rumour about the treasure was certainly spreading around Port Royal. It wasn’t going to take long to get to impudent

ears.

When King George gets to know you're financing pirate expeditions for your own business, you will get into serious trouble, Rogers thought. His feigned indifference wasn't certainly due to a lack of interest. The question was very serious, but he could take advantage of it anyway.

"How can you keep impassive?", Morgan asked him tightening his fists till his knuckles turned white.

He got up, without answering. He wanted to weigh up carefully the words he should utter, in order to avoid making Morgan rage still more and, at the same time, to let him understand that guys like that should be handled by the right firmness. He started walking up and down the room.

"With all due respect", he said again, "I think that reacting in this way is really useless. Wynne has already pilloried your business."

"And do you think that's an unimportant matter?"

"I absolutely do."

"He mocked us all!", Morgan barked.

"That's not true", Rogers showed an histrionic, but also affected scorn. "He had fun outsmarting only you, your Excellency. So, shouting at a dead man won't solve the question. Did you believe you had the matter under control? You were wrong!"

The governor blushed deeply, his mouth turning into a very thin line. His melted make-up made him look much more

grotesque than usual. His eyes seemed to pop out of his head.

When he saw him like that, Rogers could hardly hold back a very satisfied smile.

“Unless you are ready to make a choice”, he suggested. “I mean...” and he willingly stopped talking. He pretended to be wondering, pressing his forefinger on his lips. He wanted his gesture to look like something which was helping him to think over in some way. In fact, he started supposing: *You’ve lost control of the situation, Henry. You must acknowledge it. That pirate really played a bad trick on you. He might have been really crazy. Or not. Who can say?*

“Come on!”, Morgan urged him exacerbated. He started rubbing his temples.

“I can bring our departure a couple of days forward”, Rogers started. “That could help us spare time, even if that would mean a change in our agreement. The crew won’t almost certainly take it very well.”

“If money is the problem...”, the governor ventured.

“The question concerns the treasure.” The corsair picked up a letter of marque from the floor and waved it before his eyes, then he slipped it into his pocket.

“Everything you want!” Morgan knocked his hands on the desk. “We must get there before anyone else. Getting quickly started could save us from the humiliation and make us avoid troubles with His Majesty.”

“He won’t get to know it. Even if the news should get to the

Court, there are no real proofs. What's more, the Devil's Triangle has always been considered as a legend."

"You're right about it."

"And even if rumours should spread out about you paying a pirate crew, what could you be accused of for an engagement like that? The last member of Bellamy's crew died a few hours ago."

"So what?"

"The price we have agreed on is the right one." Roger's statement wanted to get the double aim of making his interlocutor calm down and focusing his attention on what he was going to say. "But I'll demand eight parts out of one hundred, to ensure my loyalty and my men's one."

"You are crazy!", Morgan burst out, looking as if he was going to faint.

"My mind hasn't been more sane in all my life!"

"This is a theft!"

"Take it or leave it."

"Let's say four parts", the governor proposed.

"You're a mean man, Excellency." The corsair shrugged. "You're hurting my pride, when you consider me just four parts worth. Remember this: if the expedition is successful, you won't even be forced to share the booty with the King."

"Five parts, captain. And we'll stop talking about it."

"With just five parts, I can't grant you that nobody will go around and tell this story."

"So, let's agree on six."

“Seven!”

Morgan kept still, his elbows laying on the table and his fingers crossed before himself. “Okay”, he finally agreed. “Seven.”

“You are a wise man.” Rogers reached out his hand and waited for the other man to return his gesture, even if unwillingly. When Morgan did it, he held his hand tight, placing it on his own. “With your leave, I wish to advance one more request.”

“Another one?”

“After all these years spent serving the Crown, I think I deserve something more than a simple letter of marque. For that reason, I’d like to be rewarded by the allocation of some lands and by a title recognized by His Majesty.”

“Do you mean a political rise?”

“Exactly!”

“Independently of the expedition being profitable?”

Rogers nodded.

“As you wish”, Morgan finished, looking worn-out. “We’ll try to intercede for you at the Court.”

“Thank you.” The corsair let his hand go and walked away from the desk quickly. Before getting out, he stopped for some moments next to the door. “Each promise in an obligation. Always remember it, Excellency.”

And with those words, he disappeared.

Anne was sitting on the bed, her back leaning against the wall and her eyes staring at the window. She was holding a bowl of

soup in her hands. Her hair was waving in the breeze preceding sunset, ruffled around her head. It didn't look like a putrescent giant octopus anymore. On the contrary, it looked more like a haystack swept by the wind. Her face, even if still pale, was recovering a slight blush. The shadow of disease had vanished, at that moment at least.

"How are you?", Johnny asked her as soon as he came back. He had been anxious all day long, excepted during Wynne's execution. Watching that man die had filled him with a horror which had pushed back for a while his worries about his mother's health.

"Tired", she answered in a feeble voice. "Bartolomeu has been taking care of me while you were away. He was very kind. He made dinner for me. Look!" As if she wanted to prove something, she took the dipper hardly to her mouth.

"Let me do it". The boy sat next to her and started to feed her. The smell of soup made his stomach rumble.

"Have you had dinner?", Anne asked him.

"Of course", he lied. He hadn't touched any food since the previous evening. Still worse: the little food he had swallowed, had ended up in the lane after the rum the Portuguese had offered him.

He sometimes wiped the corners of her mouth by a cloth flap. Anne was smiling, trying hard to swallow her soup. When she had finished, he helped her to lie down.

"I don't feel like sleeping", the woman protested.

“You must rest.” Johnny addressed her a glance which brooked no argument.

She leant her head softly on the pillow. “That’s strange, isn’t it? I’ve always looked after you.”

“Don’t strain yourself by talking.”

“You know, I haven’t had a coughing fit since this morning.” It seemed as if Anne hadn’t heard him.

“You’ll get better and better, trust me.”

“I hope so.”

They kept silent for a while and Johnny started feeling guilty. As if he was held prisoner in a body which didn’t belong to him, he was forced to witness his mother’s illness helplessly. He watched her through a multicolour kaleidoscope, whose faces reflected pain and resignation. He understood at that moment that he wanted to get away, to run as far as possible, to avoid seeing her in that condition.

“You’d better rest”, he claimed. He took the bowl and the stirrer. “Bartolomeu might need me. Can I trust you and leave you alone?” Deep into his heart, he feared that she was going to ask him again to stay there.

Anne took him by surprise, saying innocently: “Just go and don’t worry. See you when you finish.”

“All right.”

“I love you, John.”

“Me too”, he answered. Then he bent down to kiss her on her forehead.

Johnny could see something hovering inside Bartolomeu's brain all evening. He had said just a few words and Johnny had noticed it, in particular when he understood he was waiting for someone: he kept casting furtive glances at the door and every time someone opened it, he held his breath, almost worn out by that never ending wait. In spite of that, Johnny avoided investigating, being busy in serving the customers.

He was able to listen to some of their conversations, which drew his attention inevitably. And stirred his imagination once more. Some of them were commentating on Wynne's horrible death, while others were saying that a certain captain Rogers was preparing a mysterious expedition.

After the last customer had left the inn, Bartolomeu ordered the boy to shut himself into the kitchen and do the washing up. He then started wandering about the inn, turning the candles out one by one. The large room plunged into a heavy gloom, made flickering by the few remaining flames.

Johnny spent an hour washing a never ending series of dishes and jugs. His eyes were swollen and his nose was closed, because of the unmistakable smell of spices. He feared he could faint. But after he had got used to it, he went on faster. He was washing an earthenware jug, when the door on the other side of the large room was flung open with a bump.

"You've come at last", he heard Bartolomeu say.

"I've been busy."

Johnny recognized Avery's voice. He had told him he didn't feel well after work and he preferred going to bed early. So, why was he there?

"Are we alone, Bart?", the old man asked.

"Don't worry", the other answered. "I've sent the brat to the kitchen. He'll be busy for a while. Now, sit down and tell me why you wanted to talk with me."

There was a noise of chairs then. Johnny walked carefully to the door separating the kitchen from the main room. He pushed it slowly, letting it just half-open enough to eavesdrop.

"How is Anne?", Avery began.

"Not well", the Portuguese acknowledged. "She has felt better for a few days. That's giving me some hope, but we can't be sure without a doctor's opinion.

"We didn't need it."

"That's right."

Johnny started. Listening to the two men talking so sadly about his mother's condition comforted him. He pushed the door open and peeped out. From where he was standing, he could catch a glimpse of Avery's back.

The old man said: "By the way, I didn't want to talk about that, but about what happened to Wynne. I've been to his execution."

"Did you know him?", Bartolomeu asked.

"We used to be on the same ship."

The boy could just avoid screaming in surprise. So, were the rumours going around about Avery true?

Had he really been a pirate? He had to find a way to get to know it.

He slipped out of the kitchen, pushing the door so slowly that he took ages to do it. Crawling like a baby, he got to the long counter and stopped there, to make his heartbeat calm down. He could feel it pulsing in his temples. He was still holding the wine jug in his hands: he had forgotten he was keeping it. He was so excited that he didn't even realize he was leaning against a rack full of bottles. When he moved, he made them clink. He opened his eyes wide with fear. Nothing happened for a short moment. Then he heard some footsteps coming closer. He lifted his eyes. Bartolomeu's horny hand appeared just above his head. It was a few inches far from him. He could even smell the stink of his breath. He was going to grasp his hair soon, drag him out and... he leant over the rank instead and caught a bottle of rum, then he walked back.

"That doesn't explain why you wanted to meet me", he claimed while uncorking the bottle.

"It's easily said", Avery answered.

The noise of some more footsteps echoed there, followed by the one of the jugs which were being placed next to each other. Johnny leant over the edge of the counter. He saw the two men pouring the rum into their glasses.

"Wynne caused a lot of trouble", the old man went on and gulped down his rum. "But he was just a poor wretch. He didn't deserve to come to that bad end."

“Better him than us”, Bartolomeu stated.

Avery’s expression showed a mix of incredulity and resignation.

“Are you afraid of being caught?”, the Portuguese asked him.

Avery didn’t answer. He started looking around distrustfully. After a while, he added, in a barely perceptible hiss: “The matter concerns what he said before being hanged.”

Johnny shivered, still hiding behind the counter. He could see again the pirate shaking in the slipknot’s grip, his legs kicking in the air and the gush of blood which had stained his face.

“Are you talking about the Devil’s Triangle?”

“Rumours travel fast, Bart.”

“That’s all nonsense”, the latter tried to belittle it.

“That place really exists!” Avery’s look exuded a palpable... and threatening certainty. “Even the most naïve freshwater sailor knows that legend. But I can assure you that it exists.”

“Stop it!”

“What if I told you a story?”

The Portuguese mumbled some words, without committing himself.

“Fine.” Avery poured some more liquor into his glass. His knotty fingers were shaking evidently and some trickles of rum finally slipped down the neck of the bottle. “It all started some years ago. I landed on an island near Antigua with the crew I had joined. We laid at anchor there for several days, trying to understand where we had got.”

“The Anthill’s archipelago is famous for having islands which don’t appear on nautical maps”, Bartolomeu explained.

“I know”, the other man replied, in a condescending voice. “What none of us could have imagined, was that the place was inhabited by some local tribes.”

“Which ones?”

“The Kalinagos.”

Bartolomeu felt puzzled for a few moments. He then shook his head slowly, as if that story wasn’t persuading him completely.

“The death eaters?”, he asked.

“Exactly”, Avery answered. His smile was askew. That memory was evidently amusing him. Or it made him nervous. Difficult to say. “Let me go on.” He swallowed the second glass of rum and filled a third one. “Our captain decided to send an expedition to explore the island. We waited for days, uselessly. So he decided to go himself, together with some other men. Wynne and myself included. The crew was nervous, even if nobody dared discuss his orders. We left the launches on the beach and walked through the forest.”

“You found the Kaliganos there”, Bartolomeu stated.

“They found us, actually”, the old man specified gloomily. “They caught us just like they had done with our mates. I could never forget what I saw. They are beasts, with no mercy at all.” He gulped down the rum again, letting it drop along his chin and neck. “They cut up their victims when they are still alive, with an incredible fierceness.”

Bartolomeu's attitude was changing. Unlike his interlocutor, he had hardly sipped his rum. He was laying his arms on the table at the moment, his fingers crossed so tight as to let his white knuckles out.

"Anyway", Avery went on, "our captain was able to be received by the shaman. We could avoid death, but at a very high price."

Hidden behind the counter, Johnny started trembling. That matter was really turning interesting. Terribly interesting.

Avery on his side hesitated, pouring some more drink into his glass.

"The captain made an agreement with him", he explained slowly. "So the man told him about the existence of a great treasure, hidden on an island lying north-east of the Bahamas. He even showed him an ancient drawing cut on a clay tablet. The location of the island seems to be the same area where the Devil's Triangle is supposed to be."

"What was the agreement about?"

"The captain had to commit himself to find the treasure. He could keep everything he wanted for himself. In return, he had to bring back an amulet to the shaman."

"An amulet?"

Avery nodded. "Yes. A jade amulet."

"Why?", Bartolomeu insisted.

"No idea. He just told him and the men he trusted the most. We were left outside the hut. I got to know later that, thanks to

that amulet, he had promised the captain that he would have what he had lost in the past back.” He stopped to think about it. “I wonder what he was referring to.”

“And then?”

“As soon as the shaman told him, he accepted. He marked both of them with a tattoo, to seal the agreement. He then added that, if one of them didn’t keep to the agreement, that mark would bring him to death.”

“Superstitions”, the Portuguese got to the point.

“Think just as you wish, Bart”, Avery insisted. “I know what I witnessed! And that takes me back to Emmanuel Wynne. But I’m going to explain it later.” He gave out a hollow moan, as if that memories were still tormenting him. “I can swear on my own life that the captain went crazy after that experience. Some men decided to mutiny. They were thirty, included myself. The captain obviously didn’t take it well, so he left us on a deserted islet, east of Portorico, with just a bottle of rum for each of us and no food. After a few weeks, he came back to rescue us. Only fifteen men had survived.”

Bartolomeu gasped, with a grimace of amazement. He slapped his forehead, like someone who has just remembered something important. “You want me to believe that...”

“Exactly”, Avery said in advance, showing a very deep uneasiness. “I was on board the *Queen Anne’s Revenge*, at Blackbeard’s orders.”

Johnny jumped back in amazement: he instinctively laid both

his hands on the floor, forgetting the fact that he was holding a jug in one. He lost his balance badly and bumped once more against the bottles rack. The impact was very strong that time. A fit of pain hit his shoulders. The bottles clinked. One even came out of its place, smashing to smithereens on the floor. Slivers of glass were shining everywhere.

The old man started on his chair. "What was that?"

"A mouse", Bartolomeu replied, walking to the source of that noise. "A very big one."

The boy was paralyzed, his eyes grew dull and his pupils dilated. He could hear his own heart hammering crazy. His heartbeats were resounding painfully in his ears, like a hammer's clangour, so that the Portuguese's footsteps seemed to come from a far-away, unknown world.

I must do something", he thought. *I must get away from here. Immediately!*

Unfortunately, panic got the upper hand over him. It was like being stuck in quicksand: the more he struggled, the more he sank. Finally Bartolomeu's threatening shade fell over him.

"What are you doing here, brat?", he inquired.

Johnny smiled with a blank stare.

He understood he had got into trouble.

The two pirates made him sit down bodily between them. The candles flickered for a moment, moved by an invisible wind, and made the outlines of the big room slightly distorted.

“We have a stowaway here”, Avery giggled.

“How long have you been hiding there?” Bartolomeu sat down again. The fatherly feeling which he had shown at the beginning of their conversation had disappeared from his attitude. There was only resentment now.

“I swear I didn’t want to, Bart...”, the boy stammered. He was trembling all over.

The Portuguese hit the table with a punch. “I don’t give a damn to your excuses! I asked you how long have you been hiding there. Answer me!”

“Looking at him is enough to understand that he heard everything”, the old man stated. He crisped his lips, uncovering his gums. “But I know a way to make him speak.” After those words, he took a big knife from under his clothes and waved it in front of Johnny.

The boy stopped breathing in a moment. The blade was swinging strangely slowly, cold and merciless. He recalled the knife he had made, the one he had used to take his revenge on Alejandro. His knife couldn’t stand a comparison with the other one. Avery could butcher him.

“You are going too far, Bennet”, Bartolomeu warned him. However, he didn’t lift a finger to prevent him from doing what he had in his mind.

“Desperate situations require desperate remedies!”, Avery stated, catching Johnny’s hand. He pressed it on the table and lifted the knife.

The boy screamed with fear. The blade's reflection pierced through him with its cruel glare. He knew he would soon feel it penetrating into his flesh. The thought that Avery could do something like that was frightening him more than the action itself. He didn't think about it twice. He burst out crying. He told them what he had heard, in between sobs. When he had finished, the two pirates cast a furtive glance at each other. Then they started laughing their hearts out. Johnny was stunned and he couldn't really understand what was going on.

Then he finally understood.

"You didn't mean to hurt me", he said, feeling very ashamed. "You did it just to force me to speak."

"That's true", Avery admitted. He let him go and sheathed the knife. "That's an old trick I use to draw out information."

"Attack is the best form of defence", the Portuguese said.

The two men started giggling again. Johnny joined them with no reason, sharing that odd connivance. He didn't care about having been teased by them anymore. Fear had given place to an undefined satisfaction. A vague sense of membership. As if he had come back home after a long journey and had embraced his family again.

"I had to do it", Avery said. "I had to teach you a lesson."

"The question is different", Bartolomeu added drily. He untied his long black hair and started playing with one of his locks. "What are you going to do, as you know the truth about us now?"

The boy surprised them.

“I want to get to know more about it”, he stated.

Nobody talked for a few moments. The two sea wolves were studying each other, puzzled. They looked as if they were hiding some more secret information.

The old man was the first one to break the silence.

“Alright”, he said. “I’m really struck by your firmness, so, if you heard our conversation, I don’t need to add anything else. You watched Wynne’s execution too, anyway.” He poured some more rum into his glass. “I think the time has come to tell you something about him. He wasn’t as crazy as he wanted people to believe. And he left a map showing how to get to the Devil’s Triangle.”

“I can remember him talking about a map”, Johnny ventured.

“I’m not referring to that.” Avery took out his pipe, filled the bowl with a large pinch of tobacco and slipped it into his mouth. He waved to the boy, pointing at a candle end. Johnny handed it to him. After he had lit the pipe, he started smoking slowly and rhythmically. “Wynne had a glass eye. He had lost his own during a boarding. Following the agreement between Edward Teach and the shaman, this one offered to cast a spell on him, so we would be able to sail those seas.”

The Portuguese smiled, without any cheerfulness. “Do you mean you are talking about magic, Bennet?”

“Exactly”, he answered with determination.

“I can’t believe it”, Johnny commented.

“You should, instead.” Avery had trepidation in his eyes and

his glance was full of bewildered excitement. "As nobody had noticed it, I decided to exhume the body. That's the reason why I was late. I was at the cemetery."

The Portuguese crossed himself. "You're crazy, Bennet Avery! I'm talking seriously."

"Thanks", the old man replied, turning his attention to Johnny. He was smiling greedily. "And I think I've found someone as crazy as me, who will help me exhume Wynne's body. A pair of strong arms are just what I need."

A shade was moving stealthily at the foot of Fort Charles's walls. He was carrying a bulging sack on his back.

He followed the perimeter of the fortress, going round a rampart after the other, till he got to the side overhanging the sea. He carefully slipped to the beach section between the cliffs and the walls.

He took some steps, then he stopped.

He suddenly heard some voices above himself.

He raised his eyes and saw the soldier patrol on its rounds. He waited for them to move away, then he went on, till he reached the first cannon battery. They were standing out like brass poles on the stone floor, smoothed by the usual bad weather coming from the south. Climbing there barehanded was impossible. He had brought a strong rope luckily, with a hook on one end. He opened his sack: the rope came suddenly out.

He had arrived in Port Royal twenty days before. The sloop he

had used to land there hadn't been noticed and bribing the local officer had been enough for him to get a small dock far from impudent eyes. Before he started on that mission, the captain had made it clear: he had to find out everything he could about Wynne. And he had succeeded in doing it. The pirate's execution had enabled him to carry out his task, but also to study the fortress's defences.

He whirled the rope and threw the hook towards the highest side of the wall. The metal hit the stone and a slight tinkling reached his ear. He tugged at the rope. The hook fell to the ground. He cursed silently, stopping to listen. No sounds, nothing showing that someone had heard it.

He threw the rope for the second time, watching it fly over the walls. He pulled again and he had to move, to avoid being hit by the piece of iron falling back.

I'm taking too long, he thought angrily. I must keep calm... and hurry up.

He scanned the open sea. The darkness of the night was merging with the black colour of deep waters. He knew that the vessel was waiting somewhere over there. The captain was probably watching him at that moment. He could imagine him standing on the quarterdeck, with his unsheathed spyglass and a sardonic grin spreading on his face.

He tried for the third time and the hook gripped. A moment later, he could hear another patrol chattering as it approached. He held his breath, hoping they wouldn't notice the sharp piece

of iron stuck into the stone. He saw them move away as if nothing were the matter. He then started climbing. That wasn't easy at all: the sack on his shoulders was heavy and it made climbing difficult. He had to use the cannons he found on his way, as if he was climbing among tree branches. He got to the bulwark, he crouched down and took the rope.

Fort Charles was deep in silence, apart from the low voices of some guards. Some of them looked drunk, while non sign of movements came from the cabins around the main square.

He slipped over the battlements softly, enveloped in darkness. The cannons on the first terrace were aiming at the open sea silently. He remembered very well that three more footbridges had been built underneath, each of them with a battery ready to fire. And the powder magazine lay below them.

He had seen it during the execution. A pair of soldiers stood on guard at the cabin with a self-confident look.

Later, thanks to the mess following the pirate's horrible death, he had been able to slip closer: one of the guards had opened the door and he had seen almost fifty barrels full of gunpowder. The Englishmen had made his task easier again: if he made them blow out, the deflagration would make the terraces burst out, damaging the guns.

It couldn't be easier, he thought.

He moved forward, hidden by the familiar shadows. He made some short stops, just to prevent anyone from approaching him. He walked down the stairs carefully at last and got to the square.

No sign of guards.

“They might be inside”, he mumbled. He got to the cabin and leant his ear on the door. He could hear a deep snoring coming from inside. Without surrendering to panic, he unsheathed the knife he kept inside his boot, then he walked in.

The interior was covered with metal plates, a protective device which should avoid accidents. The room was lit by a single, small shielded lantern, hanging from the ceiling by a curved hook. The barrels had been placed carefully on both sides. A soldier was snoring deeply at the bottom.

He was walking on tiptoe. It all happened suddenly: he shut the soldier’s mouth by a hand, while he drove the knife into his throat by the other one. The victim opened his eyes wide and started kicking. The blade went still deeper, cutting his trachea and larynx. It then found something harder, probably a bone. The guard made a single gurgling sound, then he bent his head aside.

“Excellent”, he stated, taking the knife out. He wiped it quickly on his jacket and started bustling about his sack. He took almost ten sticks out, tied together by a long and thin fuse. He placed them carefully on the floor. He was smiling.

Two golden teeth shone evil in the dim light of the lamp.

Johnny was astonished when he found out that Avery wanted to carry out his task that night. Bartolomeu had tried to talk it over with him, but he hadn’t succeeded.

“The weather is on our side”, the old man stated, hearing a

faraway thunder, followed by the rain pouring down a bit later. “There will be nobody to bother us and the ground will be softer and easier to dig.”

So they decided to go.

The Portuguese was going to cover the boy till he came back, if Anne suspected them, that would be the end of it all.

“Be careful”, he whispered. “For God’s sake.”

They didn’t meet anyone, as the old man had foreseen. Johnny was happy about it. The idea of being discovered was making him nervous.

They passed by a row of houses till they went down a deserted street. The last part of it made a sudden bent to the left; they could see the cemetery on the other side, beyond a stream crossed by a bridge.

“The time of truth has come”, Avery said, walking stoically over the bridge. “Hurry up! We’ve got a job to do.”

An iron fence stood in front of them, bounding the cemetery borders. The gate had been broken, so they could go in easily. Some rough wooden crosses were standing along a path winding to a chapel, which had been built in the austere style which made the colons famous.

Avery pointed his finger at the building. “We must get inside.”

“Pirates are usually thrown into common graves”, the boy stated in a whisper.

“You’re right, but I have something to do before.”

They got to the small temple. A Latin sentence had been cut

above the door. Johnny stopped for a moment, sheltering his forehead from the rain and trying to understand those words. The old man interrupted him, asking Johnny to follow him. The door gave a hellish creaking and they walked on in absolute darkness. After a while, a flame burst through the dark.

“Hold this one, brat.” Avery handed a torch to him. He put the lighter and the firestone back, then he leant over some piled up coffins. He took out a sheet made of sail cloth. “I brought all the tools we need to dig. I knew they would be safe here.”

Johnny saw two barrels coming out of the sheet. “The only problem will be finding the pirate’s grave out.”

“Don’t worry. The governor wanted the dead man to be buried in a single grave. I could find it almost at once.”

“I didn’t know he was so generous.”

The other man shook his head and loaded the bulky tools on his shoulders. “He did it just to show himself merciful, after what had happened. What’s more, he wanted to save his face. There is nothing generous in it.”

After they had gone out, they walked through a scanty wood standing close to the chapel. The air seemed made of lead while they walked among the tangled branches and roots; it was heavy, loaded with gloomy omens. A bit farther, the ground slightly sloped down and the green disappeared. The crosses had disappeared too, giving place to some simple tombstones planted on the ground.

“There it is!” Avery suddenly stopped, pointing at a grave not

far from them.

They started fumbling about it, without wasting any more time talking. It was a hard job; the ground was a cold and granular mud and they got stuck into the mire till ankle length. The digging work took a very long time. After a while, Avery had to stop. He was panting hard.

“Go on”, he said, sitting down on the muddy edge of the grave.

The boy went on. The more he drove the spade into the ground, the more his heart beat fast. After a while, his hands started hurting too. He tried not to give up. That absurd excitement he was feeling, was pushing him to go on. Then he stopped. The spade wasn't digging the ground anymore. It was making a rasping sound, like claws scratching greedily underground. That image made him freeze: what if the dead man came out of his grave and dragged Johnny away with him?

“I'm going on now”, Avery said providentially. He took out from under the sheet a tool looking like a metal pole. One of its ends was sharp and slightly bending.

Johnny couldn't ask for more and climbed out of the grave, sitting down on its edge, next to the torch stuck into the ground to light the place: the wet wood was going to burn just for a short time more. They had to hurry up.

The old man went down again, being careful not to slip. When he got to the bottom, he turned the ground over, till the rough boards of the coffin came out. He bent down, testing their thickness by his fingertips. He was probably weighing

the question up, or paying Wynne homage. When he looked satisfied, he opened his legs wide, drove his boots on both sides of the grave and stuck the pole between the boards, then he started undermining them. The cracking wood made a horrible sound: it was like the noise of broken bones. The cover was torn up bit by bit, till the corpse came out.

He was stiff, lying in the coffin, his arms were pressing his hips and his neck was bending. His long hair was dirty with mud and came down in a shapeless pulp, covering a side of his face. His skin was drawn like old paper, his muscles and sinews stood out from underneath. His fingers were true claws.

When Johnny saw them, he felt a new sense of terror. They were the same he might have heard while he was digging. He was still thinking about that noise, when he had to turn his head the other side. An unbearable stench overwhelmed him, the unmistakable acid smell of putrefaction. He tried hard not to throw out: his intestine was in a mess, as if someone was stirring it by a stick.

Avery gave a start as well. He lifted his collar to protect his face.

“How are you doing, my friend?”, he asked after a while, turning to Wynne. His voice was nasal, almost funny in such a context.

As an answer, the pirate’s jaw started to move in the middle of his ruffled hair, as if he was trying hard to speak.

Johnny opened his eyes wide. *Oh my God! He is still alive...*

No sound came out of his mouth, but a rat did instead. At first its tail peeped out, then the jaw opened in a wide yawn and the animal walked back on his small paws. It took some steps back, heedless of the human beings. It darted its black eyes around, clearly stunned and annoyed since he had to leave its den, then he disappeared into a hole at the bottom of the coffin, where the wood had got rotten.

The old man didn't bat an eye. That wasn't the same for Johnny.

"What are we going to do?", he asked. The small stick in his belly had turned into a beam. He feared that Avery would ask him to get back there.

On the contrary, he kept silent, rubbing his hand on his rough chin and wondering. His grey wisps had fallen by the sides of his face and the rain was streaming down his bald head.

"Give me the torch, before it goes out", he suddenly ordered.

Johnny did what he was asking him. He could see Avery catching the dead man by his hair and shaking him violently: the head changed its angle and gave out a series of creaking sounds, even if the neck hadn't broken. His face kept sneering, his wide open and distorted mouth, where the mouse had come out from, was like a very deep well. Since the tongue was missing, the rodent had been able to hole up there untroubled. All around his livid lips, marks of clotted blood could still be seen.

"Come here", Avery ordered. He drove the torch into the ground. The yellowish halo of the fading light was casting its

shade against a side of the grave, reducing it to a vague half-moon shape.

Johnny went down again, unwillingly. He lost sight of the corpse for a moment: Avery was bending forward so much that he was blocking his view. He seemed to be bustling about something. He finally let his grip and Wynne fall back heavily into the coffin.

“So?”, the boy inquired.

The old man turned to look at him, his hand open and trembling. He was still holding some greasy locks between his fingers. The pirate’s artificial eye was standing out against his wrinkled skin. It was an almost perfect sphere, except for a slight notch on one side. It seemed to be staring at him with chained hatred.

Then Avery waved his hand near the torch, letting the light pass through it. A greenish glare was shining inside the eyeball. It seemed just a faint light at first, but it was flaring up like a small incandescent sun under the flame’s warmth.

“Oh my God!”, Johnny burst out, opening his mouth wide in amazement.

“What did I tell you?”, Avery claimed. He then moved his lips, keeping talking, but Johnny couldn’t hear the words which followed.

Without any notice, a deafening rumble burst out near the bay, followed by a column of fire, which rose in the sky like a giant octopus’s tentacle. Screams of dismay and terror started echoing

there in a short while.

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