

ship would not care what the truth was. Get me a plug of tobacco, will you, Jessie? It'll make me feel human."

I fetched it for him. With great effort, he broke off a piece and stuck it in his mouth. "Ah . . ." he sighed.

"But if it wasn't you—" I began.

"The Captain had it in his mind that it was time for a flogging—to remind the men."

"To remind the men? Of what?" I demanded.

Purvis clasped his hands and leaned further forward.

"No more talk now, Jessie. I'll rest," he said.

Stout handed me a piece of cheese that morning as I sat near Ned's bench sewing a piece of canvas. I took it and heaved it over the side.

Stout smiled gently as though he couldn't blame me.

The Right of Benin

NED THE CARPENTER HAD BEEN UNUSUALLY busy. The result of his labor was a platform on which squatted a nine-pound carronade, black as a bat, absorbing sunlight or the white glare of sunless days, an iron presence which Nicholas Spark touched each time he passed it as though for luck.

I didn't need Purvis to tell me we were soon to meet up with other men. The armament was enough.

An American flag on the signal gaff would discourage the British from boarding us. The carronade would warn them we belonged to ourselves. Purvis had heard there was some kind of American warship that was supposed to prevent the trade, but with thousands of miles of coast to patrol, there was small chance we'd meet up with it. "Besides," he said, "there is the matter of the flags."

"What flags?" I asked.

"The flags in the Captain's quarters," Purvis said. "It's this way, Jessie. If an American patrol should signal us and demand to board the ship, we'd run up a Spanish flag. And if they persisted, we'd show them a full set of papers that would prove *The Moonlight* to be of Spanish ownership."

"But anyone could tell we're not!"

"I tell you, such things are decided by papers!" Purvis declared. "If the papers are in order, nothing else matters. It works both ways. The Spanish slavers hire an American citizen to take passage with them. Then, if they're boarded by the British, the American puts on a captain's hat, takes command of the ship, flourishes his ownership papers and threatens to sue the British naval officer who's dared to set foot on his deck! There's not so many willing to risk the penalty for boarding a ship and finding neither slaves nor equipment on it. I sailed once under a master who, though he grew rich from slaving, wasn't caught for ten years. When he was finally boarded at the mouth of the Volta River, he was dropping slaves over the port side of the ship while his Portuguese servant was dressed up in captain's clothes, cursing the British as they scrambled up the starboard side. They couldn't prove a thing against him!"

"But there are many against the trade," I said, irritated that Purvis was so satisfied with his arguments.

"Oh, Jessie! Don't you see? The British like to provoke us because we don't belong to them any more!"

"But they've outlawed slavery in their own country!" Purvis stroked his chin and narrowed his eyes. "You can be sure," he said with conviction, "that they wouldn't have passed laws against slaving if they hadn't found something else as profitable. That's the way of things, Jessie. But you'll see! You're bound to get a bit of a share yourself at the end of this voyage!"

I felt the force of truth withheld and hidden behind Purvis' grin and so, perhaps to remind him of an event that he couldn't so easily smooth out and explain as British law, I asked, "Does your back still pain you?"

He scowled and threw out his fist.

"Never mind that!" he growled.

I crawled into my hammock with much on my mind. Life had turned upside down. My friend was a man who'd pressganged me. I disliked the man who'd befriended me. For all that talk of papers, I could see clear enough that two governments were against this enterprise, even though my own was, according to Purvis, weak in its opposition. Purvis had said the native kings sold their own people willingly, yet he'd also told me there were chiefs who would sink the ship and kill us all if they had the chance.

"Play us a tune," Purvis' voice floated up to me with a certain melancholy note. "We haven't had a tune from you all these weeks, and soon enough you'll be playing, but not for us."

I peered over the edge of the hammock. Smith and Purvis were looking up at me expectantly. I took my fife and jumped down and played as fast and loud as I could. The two men danced in the small space, circling each other like two dreaming bears, their faces as serious as though they were reading from the Bible.

We entered the Bight of Benin at midday. By nightfall, we were off Whydah. There, I heard the cable strike the deck as the anchor rushed downwards, hooking us to that whole unknown land greeted earlier by Sharkey from his foretop lookout with a shout of, "Land, ho. . ."

I looked eagerly toward the shore as though with a glance I could take in the feel of solid earth, the comfort of it, after all these days on the roiling back of the sea.

But the land was on fire. Sheets of flame as red and jagged as the wounds the rope had opened in Purvis' back flew upward into a darkening sky. Clouds of smoke mixed with low-lying rain clouds. It seemed as though a great forest was dying.

"It's the barracoon," remarked Seth Smith, who had

come to stand beside me at the raffrail. "The British devils have set it afire."

"Barracoon?" I asked, but Smith rushed on impatiently. "The British, the British!" he cried. "They've set the barracoon on fire, and the damned niggers that have been held for us have run off and escaped!"

I asked him what a barracoon was.

"That's a confined place where the chiefs keep them chained and ready for trade. And the British, who pretend that they own the entire world, sneak ashore, let them loose and destroy property that ain't theirs."

"Then we won't be trading—with the slaves all gone?"

He laughed loudly. "The slaves are *never* gone!" he exclaimed. "All of Africa is nothing but a bottomless sack of blacks."

"Will we land soon?"

"We won't never land," he said angrily as though I'd been impertinent. "It's the Captain who takes samples of our rum to the chiefs. He'll go at night in the small boat and leave Spark to see to the ship and us. Now, look over there! You see those ships?" he asked. "That's some of the British Squadron, waiting to pounce. They've done their day's nasty work on shore, and now they'll rub their hands at the thought of this tassy little ship coming all this way only to have to sit and wait."

"They know what we're here for?"

"Lord! Of course, they know. They've had a glass on us since we entered the Bight. It's cat and mouse now. But Caw-thorne will do it. He's a fierce man."

I looked away from the distant cluster of ships, back at the enormous fan of fire. Only through Purvis' stories had I been able to imagine the destructive power of the sea. Our voyage had been, except for a few days of calm and a squall or two, without special incident. But I knew the horror of fire. Only three years ago, 107 houses had been eaten up by flames in New Orleans, and the smell of charred wood, the smoke, the fire that ran where it would, had frightened me so much that for many weeks I would not sit near the candles in our room. When they were lit at night, and I stared into the little eye of the flame, I would see myself running through molten lakes like those our parson described when he shouted at us about the hell awaiting sinners.

"He'll go up and down the coast here," Smith continued challengingly as though daring the distant British ships and their crews. "Yes, he will! And along with the rum, he'll carry the shackles the chiefs will require for the slaves. Then, one night, there'll come to our ship a long canoe filled to the brim with blacks—and the next night, another canoe, so quiet, you won't know it's alongside until the slaves are on deck, wailing

and weeping and biting their own flesh. They're all mad, the blacks! And the British will sweat with rage, for they have no right to search us. The only danger for us is if the British are able to notify the American patrol. But I tell you, such a ship is only here to protect us against any abuse by the damned English! For as everyone knows, our whole country is for the trade, in spite of the scoundrels who cry and fling themselves about at the fate of the *poor poor* black fellows. Poor indeed! Living in savagery and ignorance. Think on this—their own chiefs can't wait to throw them in our holds!"

"But what can the British do?"

"They could try to blockade us if we were so unwise as to sail up a river. They could force us, once we've taken on slaves and unloaded our cargo, to put on so much sail we'd be in danger if they gave chase."

"You've been on slavers before," I said.

"All of us have," he replied. "It's nasty work. And it's not everyone has the nerve for it." His mood suddenly changed for he gave me a big grin. "Perhaps you'll be carrying a pistol yourself, runt that you are!"

"A pistol!"

"Aye. We're all armed as long as we're in sight of the coast. If the blacks try anything, it'll be then, when they can still see where they came from. Oh, they've done terrible things I could

tell you about! Killing a crew and a master and all, then flinging themselves back into the sea, even shackled!”

I thought suddenly of the stories I had heard at home about slave uprisings in Virginia and South Carolina. My breath came short—here, within eyesight, was the very world from which such slaves had been taken. Here, on this small ship, we would be carrying God knows how many of them, and I, without at this instant being able to conceive in what manner, was to make them dance.

“Why must the slaves dance?” I asked timidly, for fear of annoying Smith. At that moment, I was afraid of everyone on *The Moonlight*, just as I had been when I first set my foot upon her deck.

“Because it keeps them healthy,” said Smith. “It’s hard to make a profit out of a sick nigger—the insurance ain’t so easy to collect. And it makes any Captain wild to jettison the sick ones within sight of the marketplace itself after all the trouble he’s gone to.”

Smith went off and left me to my apprehension. It didn’t let up much until the next dawn when I saw land clearly for the first time.

Green and brown and white, trees and shore and waves. I thought of home. At the same time, I was overcome by a dreadful thirst.

I thought I had grown accustomed to doing without everything that was familiar, accepting small rations of water and food without question. But the sight of the land, a longing to set foot on something that didn’t rock and pitch and groan and creak, made the room on Pirate’s Alley the only place in the world I wanted to be. To sit on a bench there in a private patch of sunlight and slowly peel and eat an orange! At that moment, I glimpsed Purvis dragging an enormous tarpaulin across the deck.

I hated him!

“Give me a hand with this, Jessie,” he shouted.

I didn’t move.

“Just take up the end of it,” he called again.

Still, I remained unmoving, nearly senseless with rage.

“Get to it!” said the awful dead voice of Nicholas Spark.

Not for the last time, I considered casting myself over the side and confounding them all! But I submitted, convinced there was no one on the ship who would throw me a rope and rescue me from the water. I went slowly toward Purvis, feeling a shame I’d never felt before.

With my help and Gardere’s, Purvis set up a tent on the deck. He volunteered the information that it was for the slaves to sit under when they had their meals. I had not inquired, and I made no comment. I wasn’t much better off

than the slaves would be, I told myself. I felt utterly alone among the men now. I couldn't even smile at Curry's peculiar mutterings as he went rooting about in his galley, cooking up the foul messes which I would have to eat or else starve.

Benjamin Stout, who had not ceased to speak kindly to me despite the cold way I behaved toward him, followed me around asking why I was wearing such a scowl.

"Leave me be!" I cried at him finally, after he'd tracked me right to my hammock.

"If he speaks to someone, it won't be to an egg-stealing cockroach like yourself, Ben Stout," said Purvis, his head hanging above the ladder to our quarters like a moon that's been roundly punched. "It won't be a man who lets his shipmate hang in the shrouds for him."

"He's in such a dark mood," Stout remarked in a pleasant tone as though he were conversing with a friend. "I was only worried what was bothering the boy."

Stout was surely the worst creature I'd ever known or heard about, worse even than Nicholas Spark.

"Worried," jeered Purvis. "You, worried! It's only that evil curiosity of yours that makes you want to poke and pry and fiddle! Jessie, come up on deck. Come on now! There's a good boy! Don't sulk so! It makes us all worried, to be near the shore like this and not able to walk on it. But think, the

voyage is half over. You'll be home, if the trade winds are good to us, in just this time again. And richer too!" I didn't move. "Well, if you won't speak, I can't hang here like a ham for smoking."

Ham. Oh, ham! And a cask of water!

I stayed for a long time below, and I was left alone. Perhaps Purvis took pity on me and saw to it that I was not sent for. I softened a little in my feeling toward him partly because he'd spoken my very thoughts about the land teasing me there, so close, so out of reach.

Time hung on us. Three days we sat there like a wooden bird. The sky threatened rain but rain never fell. Sharkey got into the run and staggered about the deck shouting and cursing until Spark laid him flat with a belaying pin. The blood ran from the wound, then dried. I stared at his head with a hard heart. No one should have the advantage of *me* any more. I cast a murderous look at Spark's back. I kicked the mast and cursed. No one took notice.

The great cauldron I'd seen Curry scrubbing was brought up on deck. The Captain called all hands together and handed out pistols, but not to me or Purvis.

"Not you, you serpent," he said to Purvis. "You might put a bullet through the head of my last hen." He said nothing to me.

There were more than Sharkey who got into the rum. At night, the ship rang with snatches of blurred song, of shouted angry words, of broken silly laughter, and sometimes, of blows given and taken. Only Ned and Ben Stout stayed sober, Ned observing the goings-on with an indifferent eye, Ben, reading his small Bible by oil lamp with an aggrieved but forgiving look on his face. Once he assured me not to fear his mates. I hadn't asked him for any assurance and told him so.

On the fourth night, the Captain came aboard from wherever he'd been, followed by a tall thin coffee-colored man. Purvis and I watched them go into the Captain's quarters. "That's the *cabociero*," said Purvis. "He's a Portuguese black, what you could call a broker. The Captain must pay him a tax for our anchorage here. Then they'll get down to the trading."

There was only one ship left of the British Squadron. Its port and starboard lights glimmered prettily in the dark. I supposed the other ships were out blockading a river or chasing a Spanish slaver. They had not approached us.

"How is it the British haven't gone after the Captain on his trips ashore?" I wondered aloud.

"We've a perfect right to sell and trade our goods," said Purvis indignantly. Then he laughed. Once, he said, a real African king had come aboard—"Then they do have kings," I

said broodingly. "Well, naturally, they have kings," exclaimed Purvis. He went on with his story, telling me the king and the Captain had got so drunk that when dawn rose, the Captain had clambered over the side, ready to make off and rule the tribe and leave the black king in command of the ship.

"Drink turns people round," commented Purvis somewhat importantly.

"It's not drink," I protested. "It's the kidnaping of these Africans that turns everyone round!" And I looked with growing fear toward that shore which lay behind the turbulent waves whose ghostly white crests were visible in the darkness. I thought of the pyre of the barracoon, empty beneath a moonless sky that now and then let drop a brief weak fall of rain. I thought of the African kings setting upon each other's tribes to capture the men and women—and children for all I knew—who would be bartered for spirits and tobacco and arms, who would, any night now, be dropped into the holds of this ship. And all at once, I saw clearly before me, like a shadow cast on a sail, the woman in the garden in New Orleans, Star, standing so quietly in the doorway. The world, I told myself, was as wicked a place as our parson had said, although he was a great fool. I turned to Purvis, wanting to tell him about the woman in the garden.

He was staring down at me as though I was a cockroach,

his jaw hanging loose, his hand raised above my head in a way I could not mistake. I ducked.

“Don’t say such things!” he bellowed. “You know nothing about it! Do you think it was easier for my own people who sailed to Boston sixty years ago from Ireland, locked up in a hold for the whole voyage where they might have died of sickness and suffocation? Do you know my father was haunted all his days by the memory of those who died before his eyes in that ship, and were flung into the sea? And you dare speak of my parents in the same breath with these niggers!”

“I know nothing about your father and mother,” I said in a voice that trembled. “Besides, they were not sold on the block.”

“The Irish were sold!” he cried. “Indeed, they were sold!”

“They are not sold now,” I muttered. But he raved on, and I sank to the deck, covering my ears with my hands. How could he object to one thing and not another? It made no sense at all! But my speculations were cut short. Purvis delivered a kick on my shin. I howled. As though he were cursing me, he said, “Get those buckets in the hold. Hurry up about it, you nasty piece of business!”

“What buckets?” I asked, wiping my tears away, for he had really hurt me.

He grabbed me up off the deck, and pointed to a row of buckets lined up nearby.

“What for? Why? Where shall I put them?” I asked, sobbing.

“They’re latrines for the blacks,” he replied, thunder echoing in his voice the way it does in a heat storm. “Put them where your fancy strikes you. It won’t matter to *them*.”

We did not say one word to each other the next day, and when he had an order to give me, he had Claudius Sharkey pass it on. But the next night’s event ended our quarrel as well as the drinking of the crew.

At midnight, or thereabouts, I heard a sound as though a thousand rats were scrambling up the hull of *The Moonlight*. I sprang from my hammock, found myself alone in our quarters, and raced up the ladder to the deck.

In the clear sky, a great white moon hung poised above the mainmast, striping the deck with pale unearthly rays. The crew stood silently, their pistols in their hands, their backs against the port rail. Spark and Captain Cawthorne were at attention near the starboard rail. The carronade had been moved and was pointing its muzzle at a spot not far from the two officers.

I heard the cold dead clang of metal striking wood. I heard one piercing scream. My teeth began to chatter.

Then a very small brown face rose above the rail as though it had flown up from the sea. It continued to rise slowly until its brown bare chest was visible. Then I saw dark hands around its waist. The hands lifted, the little naked girl's legs flew out, and I saw the head of the young man who had been carrying her.

For a second, she sat on the deck, looking all around her, her eyes huge with amazement, then she crawled and jumped toward the rail but was forced back by the forward propulsion of the man who tottered over the rail, unable, it seemed, to bring his body any further. The child hugged the young man's neck frantically and buried her face in his hair. At that moment, Nicholas Spark bent his thin length and gripped the man's back as though he were gathering up cloth, and yanked him altogether over, the chains around his ankles striking the deck with a violent clanging.

The clanging never ceased as one after another of the captives struggled over the rail and were dropped or dragged onto the deck. How long did it all take? I'll never know. None of us moved.

Later, after the thud of bodies and the rise and fall of the sobs of the children had stopped, a group of nearly naked individuals sat hunched up beneath the tarpaulin we had rigged up. The Captain was aft, speaking in low tones to

the *cabociero* who, this time, was accompanied by a tall black man carrying a whip. Spark stood close to the blacks, his pistol in his hand.

Although many were silent now, some continued to lament. I prayed they would stop for I had not drawn a true breath since the child's face had appeared at the railing, and I wondered, gasping, when I would again.

"Purvis!" cried Spark suddenly. "Get to that one!"

Spark's pistol pointed at a man who squatted by himself, somewhat apart from the others. His knees were tight against his chest; his head lolled in a strange way. Purvis ran to him, lifted him up, yanked him back and forth, punched his arms and threw him about so violently I was sure they would topple overboard.

The other blacks, except for the little girl who had been the first over the rail, turned away from the sight. But she ran crying toward the young man.

"Grab her, Stout!" called Spark. Stout stepped forward and took the child by her hair, shoving her back among the others. He came back to where we were standing, smiling vaguely and rubbing his hand against his shirt.

"Get a measure of rum, Jessiel!" Purvis shouted to me.

I fetched it from the galley and ran to Purvis who by now had backed the young man up against the rail.

"Pour it in his mouth," Purvis said.

"His mouth is shut," I said in a whisper.

"Open it!"

"How?"

"Here," said Stout, suddenly appearing next to us. He took the cup from my hands, lifted it, then shoved it forcefully against the man's clenched lips, grinding it back and forth like a shovel teasing hard earth, until trickles of blood dripped down the brown skin and onto Stout's fingers. I was aware the other blacks had all grown silent. The only sound was the muttering of the Captain aft, and the crunch of cup against teeth until the spilling moonlight revealed rum and blood mixed upon the deck.

When, that night, I lay awake in my hammock, I saw again and again my arm reaching up to the young man's dazed face, the rum dripping over the rim of the cup because of the trembling of my hand. I heard, hardly muffled by the timbers which separated me from them, the blacks groaning and crying out in the hold, and the world I had once imagined to be so grand, so full of chance and delight, seemed no larger and no sweeter than this ship. Before my tightly closed eyelids floated the face of the child who had, after that one glance at us all, seemed to comprehend her whole fate.

I wished Purvis was nearby, but he was on extra duty above the hold. I heard Gardere snoring a few feet away from me. I could not bear the silence. I woke him. He grumbled threateningly and cursed me for a troublesome rat.

"Why was that man treated that way?" I asked, ignoring his complaints.

"What man?"

"The one who was forced to drink the rum?"

"Man?"

"That Purvis was flinging about so . . ."

"You mean the nigger!"

"Him," I said.

Gardere sighed and pointed at his sea chest. "Get me some tobacco and my pipe, will you, lad?"

I handed him the articles he'd asked for. He took a long time lighting up. Then, expelling a cloud of smoke, he said,

"When they sit that way, their heads on their knees, not moving at all, you must get them on their feet and distracted, by flogging sometimes. They will die if left in that condition."

"But die! How?"

"I don't know how. I've seen it happen though, I swear! They have no poisons since they could not conceal them, being naked as they are. But, somehow, they die. Try holding your breath, you'll see the difficulty. I tried it myself once

after the first time I saw it happen. It bothers me to this day. It's a mystery. They ain't like us, and that's the truth."

For four nights, the long canoes slid alongside *The Moonlight*, giving up their burdens of blacks, those from the bottom of the boats half-conscious from the press of the bodies of their fellow captives, some bleeding from the ankle shackles which, as a consequence of the way they had been forced to lie, had bruised and broken their flesh.

Each night the crew, after loading the canoes with rum and tobacco and a few rusty weapons, gathered on the deck. In silence, we watched the blacks drag themselves beneath the tarpaulin, at least those who were not kicked under it by Spark's boots. The *cabociero* observed the arrival of his merchandise with unconcealed self-importance. Next to him stood the tall black man with his whip whose expression seemed to me to be one of utter loathing for white and black alike, as though there was not a race of men he would claim as his own. Once only, Cawthorne shoved a man toward the *cabociero*.

"A macaroon!" cried Cawthorne. "You dishonest heart! To try and trick me with inferior goods after all the concessions I've made you!"

Purvis explained to me that a macaroon was a black roold for any use, or one with physical defects of some kind.

"What will happen to him?" I asked.

"It's none of our affair," growled Purvis, giving me a warning look. I had guessed by now that any interest, much less concern, I showed about the blacks meant to Purvis that I was demeaning his mother and father. It was as though there was a connection in his mind, unknown even to himself, between our living cargo and those Irish folk long dead, the story of their voyage a lingering and bitter glory in his memory.

Our holds were pits of misery. Two men were found dead the second morning, and Stout dumped their bodies over the side as I dumped waste. Curry cooked up messes of horse beans on deck. Many of the slaves spat them out. They were given yams, a store of which had been brought aboard by the *cabociero*. These seemed to suit them better. But the yams, I learned, were only doled out while we were still in sight of land. Once at sea, they were doomed to a diet consisting largely of the beans with an occasional piece of salt beef taken from our own stores. Along with their two daily meals, they received a half pint of water.

"More than we'll get," Purvis said. "When the supplies run low, it's us who'll go without. There's no loss to Cawthorne if we starve to death or die of thirst."

On our last morning, the little girl—the first to be brought aboard *The Moonlight*—was carried to the rail by

Stour. He held her upside down, his fingers gripping one thin brown ankle. Her eyes were open, staring at nothing. Foam had dried about her mouth. With one gesture, Stour flung her into the water. I cried out. Ned smacked me across the face with such force I fell to the deck. When I got up, I saw a boy close to my own age, staring at me from among the group of silent slaves squatting beneath the tarpaulin. I could not read his expression. Perhaps he was only looking past me to the shore of the land from which he'd been taken.

The Captain had picked up a piece of news during one of his earlier sorties ashore. One of the two American cruisers known to be patrolling the African coast had been sighted from Cape Palmas off the Windward Coast. With nearly 100 slaves in our holds, the Captain was in a fever lest some word had been gotten to the Americans by the British. You would have thought the whole of the British Navy had only one purpose in mind—to prevent Cawthorne's pursuit of his "God-given trade."

It had grown fearfully hot, the sun blasting us with its rays from its first rising. Our water ration had been reduced again, and I went about my duties with a mouth as dry as ashes. I no longer searched the holds for rats. I had a new job—to empty the bucket latrines as they were handed up to me by Benjamin Stour who, moving across the recumbent

bodies in the holds, went about his work as though stepping on cobblestones.

It was with relief, a strange feeling after these days, that I learned we were to set sail for São Tomé, a Portuguese-held island to the south where we would take on water and food.

After that, our direction would be toward the west, along the equator, then northwest as far as the Cape Verde Islands.

It was there, Claudius Sharkey told me, that we would make speed, for we could catch the northeast trade winds, and be in the waters of Cuba in three weeks—with luck, after a thousand miles where the doldrums might hold us captive for days.

My heart sank.

I had believed that half this journey was over. But now, it seemed, it was at its true beginning.