

Spaniard would see to it that they were strengthened and fattened for market.

A few lanterns were strung up to give us light. They made a mystery of the ship—we floated like a live ember in a great bowl of darkness.

"I don't like this weather," Purvis remarked. "I don't like Cuba. The sea is queer hereabouts."

If I had not felt so heavy-limbed and sleepy, I would have shouted with rage when Isaac Porter, resenting the fact he'd been ordered to go aloft and serve as lookout, gave me a hard blow across my back. But all I did was slump against the pile of tarpaulin Purvis and I had just taken down.

"It's a terrible life," Claudius Sharkey observed to no one in particular. As though he'd been summoned by Sharkey's words, Stout appeared suddenly. "Go to the Captain's quarters, Jessie," he said. "There's a chest there you are to bring out on deck."

I had not ever seen the inside of Cawthorne's roosting place and I was both curious and fearful. I went aft, half suspecting the errand was some trick of Stout's to get me into trouble. After entering a short passageway, I came to a heavy, elaborately carved door. I knocked. A loud grunt left me perplexed as to what to do. "Well!" shouted the Captain's voice from behind the door. I went in. I was in a room, a

Ben Stout's Mistake

FOR SOME TIME AFTER THE SUN HAD SET, THE sky remained the color of rope. The ship lay steady on the glass-like surface of the water which was pricked, now and then, into small ripples when a seabird struck its surface. There was a smoky indistinct look to the Cuban shore. The birds disappeared, their last cries lingering in my ears the way strands of light cling briefly to the masts after the sun has vanished.

In the holds of the ship, in the crew's quarters, along hatchways, across the deck below the furled sails, there was constant and agitated movement on this last night the slaves would be aboard. Tomorrow, before dawn, they would be loaded into boats and taken away. Some, too weak to stand, would be lowered with ropes over the side of *The Moonlight* and, if they weren't too far gone, the

real room, twice as spacious as the crew's quarters. I saw a large green chest near a berth covered with a scarlet rug. I had an impression of leather and new cloth, and I thought I smelled lemons.

"Well, Bollweevil," said the Captain with unusual mildness. He was sitting at a desk, his hands folded across a blood-red book, a lamp near his elbow.

"Stout sent me to fetch a chest, Sir," I said.

"That one," he said, waving one hand with its turnip-like fingers toward the green chest. I hesitated. "Take it," he said pleasantly enough. I grabbed hold of a ring in the side of the chest and pulled. Cawthorne held up his hands.

"Do you know what's inside?" he asked.

"No, Sir," I answered.

"Guess, then," he said.

I let go of the ring and straightened up. I felt a vague uneasiness as though someone I did not know was watching me from the shadows where the lamplight didn't reach.

"Well—"

"I insist," said the Captain, his voice hardening ever so slightly.

"Rum?"

He laughed. "That's reasonable but incorrect," he said. "Brandy?"

"Not at all! For those lours out there? Brandy?"

He rose to his feet and leaned toward me. "Guess again," he urged.

"Sir, I don't know!" I said pleadingly. I had had an impulse to ask him if he'd managed to pack a few more slaves in the chest. I was as afraid of what would pop out of my mouth as I was of him.

"Clothes," he said. "The very best! Silks, laces . . . for a little entertainment on our last night together. *They* like to dress up, and it amuses the men who are tired and discouraged now but who will cheer up soon enough."

Was I to take the chest? Or to listen? Before I could make up my mind, the Captain had reached somewhere behind his chair. "Here," he said, and held out a hand filled with biscuits. "If you'd guessed right, I wouldn't have given you a thing. Draw a moral from that—if you dare!"

I took the biscuits instantly, fearing he might change his mind, and stuffed them in my shirt.

"Thank you, Sir," I said.

Cawthorne scowled.

"You were sent to fetch the chest—then, fetch it!" he said, and sat down again and without another word opened the book and began to read it—or pretend he was reading it. I lugged the chest out to the deck. Someone had set

a keg of rum on Ned's bench. Because there was no wind to twist the flames, the lanterns burned steadily. Various crew members were lumbering about the deck in a way that reminded me of Bourbon Street. I looked around for Ben Stout and saw him standing a few feet away staring at the chest. He walked over to it, touched it, then told me to get my fife so I'd be ready.

"Ready for what?" I asked.

"For the festivity," said Stout, grinning.

When I returned to the deck with my fife, Stout had gone somewhere else. Sharkey and Purvis were talking together, leaning on the starboard rail and looking off into the dark the way we all often did. Most of the slaves were huddled near the bow of the ship; a few sat near the forehold, legs drawn up, shoulders bent, their faces hidden by their arms. Some of the women held sleeping children.

I heard the slap of oars. Soon, the Spaniard, his narrow fox head resting stiffly among his ruffles, made his appearance on board. With him was his servant who was wearing a striped jacket and a flat hat with a broad brim that hid his forehead. Cawthorne walked quickly to the Spaniard who pointed up at the Spanish flag. "A miracle!" he cried, then broke into a shriek of laughter. I did not see the joke of it although I did think the Captain's hat was comical. It was covered with gold

scroll and was too large for him. I wondered if he had worn it for humorous effect, or whether, on the contrary, it showed how seriously he took himself. He was laughing along with the Spaniard. I saw him reach up to slap the tall man's back. The Spaniard shut his mouth at once and looked exceedingly put out. At the same time, the servant advanced a step closer to his master as though to protect him against Cawthorne's familiarity. Cawthorne's hand went to the pistol he carried. Then we were all distracted by Stout's shouting as he herded the slaves amidship. It was a sight that was both heart-rending and ludicrous, for the black people were not resisting. They drifted toward the cluster of lanterns like shadow presences. Behind them, Stout, in a frenzy of self-importance, jumped up and down and waved his arms and commanded them to do what they were already doing.

Except for Porter far above us, we were all standing quite close together now, cargo, crew, Master, Cuban broker and his servant. For a moment, there was the whole heavy silence of the night, the sea. Then the Captain cried, "Open the chest!"

It was Stout who flung back the lid. Purvis muttered to me, "I didn't think he'd do it again—after the last time." "What?" I asked as I saw Stout tossing all kinds of garments on the deck, women's gowns, seamen's trousers, hats and

capas and shawls and even lengths of cloth. "Give what he calls a ball," replied Purvis. "He says the niggers like to dress up and they ought to have a bit of pleasure before the Cubans get them. The Spanish are very cruel, you know . . ."

"What happened last time?" I asked.

"There was a knifing or two," said Purvis. He wouldn't say more than that. When I asked him what kind of music they'd had on their last trip, he said, "Only a nigger with a drum."

"Hurry now," the Captain said. "Let them put on what they wish."

"He knows they won't put on anything by themselves," said Purvis in a low disgusted voice. Stout was picking up armfuls of the clothes and flinging them at the blacks who stood silently and impassively.

"Show them!" cried the Captain. "Teach them! Dress them!"

"Are they dead?" inquired the Spaniard in a piercing voice. "If they are dead, they are of no use to me!" The Captain joined in his laughter, the sounds of which seemed to me unreal, as those of men imitating roosters.

With his outstretched arms, Ben Stout was supporting a man so bent I thought, for a second, the Captain had been fooled into shipping an ancient halfway around the world. Then Stout began to shake him. I saw his face. I realized he

was no more than seventeen or eighteen years old. With one hand, Stout held the young man upright; with the other, he drew a woman's loose white gown over his head. The hem fell just below his knees.

I heard Sharkey laugh and Smith snicker. John Cooley said, "Why she's a pretty little thing, ain't she?" The Spaniard whispered to his servant. The black man stepped forward and opened his mouth. No sound issued forth. He waved his hands—he lifted clothes from the deck—he made as if to dress himself in them. His mouth remained open like a small dark empty cave where nothing lives. He dropped the clothes he was holding on the deck. When he stepped back to take his place behind the Spaniard, the slaves picked up the various garments scattered around their feet. I was no more able to fathom their expressions as they dressed themselves than I could have explained how the mute man had persuaded them to dress at all. There was not a scrap of cloth left on the deck. The slaves were like statues. The sailors moved among them, straightening a collar, rearranging a shawl, yanking down a shirt. One woman had not troubled to put her arms into the sleeves of the dress she had put on, and Cooley wound them about her neck and tied them in a knot. I saw the young black boy move to the rail, a thin white undergarment floating from his shoulders.

The rum keg was tapped, and the seamen began to drink clumsily and with gulping haste. Captain Cawthorne cried, "Don't neglect our guests!" Sharkey, whose arm the Captain had grabbed, looked at him in astonishment. When Sharkey gestured toward the Spaniard, the Captain hit him several times with considerable violence, all the while smiling as though they had been speaking together about pleasant matters. Sharkey was utterly bewildered. Cawthorne made him fill a cup of rum, guided his arm toward a black woman, then pushed the sailor's hand against the woman's mouth. "Our guests!" shouted the Captain. The woman coughed as she swallowed the burning stuff. "Bollweevil!" cried the Captain. "You'll dance us all now!"

I played my tunes. I could not hear my piping above the thumps of the sailors' boots and the slap of the slaves' feet. At first, I kept my eyes on the Captain who moved among his crew and cargo like a diving bird among a school of fish. He was dreadfully graceful and quick, so fast with his feet he could have danced for pennies on the riverside. Yet he had energy left over to pinch and hit and slap and punch the slaves and sailors alike. Purvis kept out of his way, but Stout, who'd drunk a good deal of rum by then, seemed to place himself in Cawthorne's way on purpose, roaring with laughter each time the Captain hit him.

The smell of rum was powerful. The slaves were drinking it avidly as though to assuage an endless thirst. The seamen drank to become merry but they only grew drunker. They clutched the slaves, they grabbed them by their waists, they hung on to their arms and flung them about, they fell upon them and dragged them to the deck. A few children suddenly broke away. I watched them run toward the bow. They hid near the anchor where they huddled together like nestlings. Then I dropped my fife, whether because the dance had grown more frantic and abandoned and I was frightened, or whether I had become exhausted, I don't know. It rolled toward the rail.

It rolled! I felt the ship rocking ever so slightly. At the same instance, I felt a breeze.

"Look!" howled the Spaniard. All dancing stopped at that loud cry. The dazed sailors stared off in every direction. The Spaniard's servant was waving his hands slowly back and forth. His mouth was open, forming a dark circle.

"He sees a sail!" the Spaniard cried.

"A sail. . ." said someone.

"Stout!" called the Captain.

Stout staggered to the starboard side of the ship. I could see with what effort he was holding himself upright. The breeze suddenly doubled in force. I saw Purvis rise from

where he'd been lying and look about himself as though mystified.

"An English ship," Stout declared. "I know her. She won't bother us in these waters."

"Get that Spanish flag down, Cooley," ordered the Captain.

At that moment, I heard Porter cry out from aloft, "A sail! Starboard side!"

The Captain looked straight up at the heavens. The scorn in his face would have singled a harder man than even he was. "Indeed, Porter!" he said softly. At that moment, one of the black men began to spin slowly on the deck, his arms held out like wings, turning, turning, until he fell and lay as if dead. Cawthorne said to me, "Stay by the children," and started aft. "Stout," he called over his shoulder. Stout stumbled after him. "I want the American flag hoisted."

"I know that ship, Captain," protested Stout. "She won't bother us."

"Cease!" snarled Cawthorne. "Do you hear that, you drunk hog?"

Stay by the children? I looked around wildly for Purvis. The breeze was becoming a wind which rose out of the darkness, then fell like a wave and scattered itself to every part of
The Moonlight.

I heard Cawthorne say, "I don't trust your judgment, Stout, any more than I'd trust the British to do what they're supposed to. Get the niggers to the rail!" He sniffed the air. "There's something coming up that isn't English," he said.

"The hatch covers must go over," Stout said thickly. "And the leg restraints." A great moan suddenly went up from the slaves, and I saw Curry dumping the cauldron over the side.

What happened next took place so quickly that afterwards I could recall only fragments like pieces of dreams that sometimes haunt my waking hours. Through it all, most of the crew worked on the sails, and I glimpsed them from time to time as they climbed and clung to the rigging like great ragged moths. The American flag was hoisted. The Spaniard snatched up the Spanish flag from the deck where it had fallen. Stout, who had vanished for a moment, reappeared, his hands full of shackles which he flung into the sea. Then Isaac Porter, down from his lookout perch, began to cry urgently in words that were not clear for the wind suddenly intensified its force, the sails smacked into position and the clatter of the anchors drowned out nearly everything. I saw the Spaniard raise his hands in apparent protest as the ship, with a great lurch, got underway. And his servant's hat suddenly blew off and spun away into the black night. Then Porter cried out again. "Boats!" I heard.

I saw Cawthorne rush to the rail, Stout at his side.

“By God!” Cawthorne thundered. “I see the ship! I see it. *It’s American!* You disaster, Stout! You’ve murdered me! Get the slaves over! Get them over!”

I cried out in terror myself as I saw the luminous crest of a wave in the darkness, and right behind it on the next crest, a number of small boats coming directly at us, the rowers bent against the wind. At that moment, Sam Wick picked up a black woman and simply dropped her over the side. With hardly a pause, he then kicked over two men.

Now the slaves, aware of their mortal danger, sank down, piling themselves up on one another as though in this way they could protect themselves. They scratched the deck frantically as the seamen ran among them, grabbing them up and shoving them to the rail. I saw Cawthorne himself seize a small woman, lift her up and drop her into the sea. As he turned from the rail, three black men moved unsteadily toward him, flailing the air with their arms as though he were a wild animal. Cawthorne instantly drew his pistol and fired it directly into the face of one of the blacks. I fled to the bow, the shot echoing in my head. The storm suddenly broke, the sails rautened, and the ship gave a mighty shake. I could no longer see the small boats from the American ship. I could make out the Captain now standing by Purvis at the helm

while all around them the seamen whipped the blacks over. I began to wail like a demented person, pleading with the small boats to catch up with us, to seize us. Then I heard children weeping. They were only a few feet away from where I stood, clinging to the young black boy who looked at me with such defiance I flung up my arms and shook my head violently to show I meant no harm. I heard running feet. Seth Smith passed me as I squeezed myself against the cathead. He found the children. The black boy struck him with his fists and his feet, but Smith ignored the blows and picked up the little ones and flung them off the bow. I screamed. Smith turned a mad face to me, his eyes glittering.

“Get to it!” he shouted crazily. I thought I saw pale giant sails suspended off the starboard side like a curtain dropped from heaven, but *The Moonlight* lurched forward again, and the sails vanished as had the small boats. The black boy slipped behind the mast. We were still alive here, but in the sea, slaves and rowers were falling into the silent dark depths. Smith began to bear the air with his fists. I realized he was waiting for me to say something, do something. I struck my foot in a coil of rope, then made as if I was trapped. “My foot’s caught!” I cried. Smith ran off. I hastened to the boy who was clinging to the mast. I took hold of one arm, but he shook me off. His breathing had a dire sound to it, and

I thought he might die of sheer terror. I took hold of him again, determined to hold on no matter how he struggled. Suddenly he gave way. I felt his breath fluttering against my face. I released his arm then, and motioned in the direction of the forehold. Then I got down on my hands and knees. He did the same. We crawled along beneath the main staysail that strained above our heads. I heard the Captain's shouts but not what he said. The wind howled.

We gained the hold and dropped down into it. In the dark, I found the boy's arm again. We went as far as we could from the open hatch. Between a nearly empty cask and the great root of the foremast, we crouched. Our breaths mingled. The boy whispered something. "I don't know," I said. He was silent. Then, to my horror, I saw the solid hatch cover descend over the hold, remembering at the same moment that the hatches were always closed in foul weather.

The hideous strench made breathing difficult. My legs began to cramp and every bone in my body ached. Something furry brushed against my hand. I got to my feet, cracking an elbow as I rose. The boy got up too, and we stood for a long time. I felt the ship heeling over as though a giant hand were pressing her to her side. Sometimes we sat, sometimes I dozed. Once, the boy took my hand and pressed it against the cask. I felt moisture. He directed my damp fin-

gers to my mouth and I licked them. We took what wet we could, our fingers crossing the surface of the cask like moles. When the ship yawed, we were flung back against the timbers. Sometimes we clung to the cask to keep from landing on our heads. But as terrible as the storm was, it would be worse when the hatch was opened and we were discovered. I thought of Stout's face, how he would look, how he would smile when he saw us.

The boy spoke to me. I answered. Neither of us knew what the other said, but the sound of our voices in the dark held back dread as the thunderous violence of the storm broke all around us. There were moments when I wanted only to give way, to become a noise, a thing, so as not to *know* the terror I was feeling. We plunged and pitched through the sea—I know the ship made great speed those first hours, but it was the uneven lurching speed of a crippled runner.

We both slept. What I sensed as a long time grew immeasurable. These could not be hours passing, but days. As I sat, braced against the howling, crashing chaos above, taking some comfort from the small but steady sound of the black boy's breathing as he slept, I couldn't imagine night and day, dark and light, only the storm, the ship plunging through it like those stars I'd seen fall through heaven in late summer.

Once I woke to hear him crooning to himself. God

knows what his words meant! But the sound of them! It will be like that, the last sound of the last soul on this earth. I shook his arm to make him stop and he laughed. It was then I felt a pang of hunger and remembered the biscuits Cawthorne had given me. We each had two. Though damp, they were fine biscuits and did not require to be broken by a hammer.

We often held our strange conversations, each waiting for the other to finish as though we actually understood. Once, there was a terrible crash above. A violent shudder passed through the ship and entered my bones. I waited for the sea to rush over us. But it didn't come. And all the while, I scratched my legs frantically where the salt damp was biting my skin.

Then, long after we'd finished the last of the biscuits, at a time when I'd lost all sense of whether I was awake or dreaming, the hatch cover disappeared as though lifted by a mighty hand. I saw daylight. I saw a gray turbulent sky stirred by the wind. The boy and I looked at each other. In his sunken eyes, I saw the questions that must have been in my own.

I crawled among the casks until I found a piece of the rope ladder which still hung down from the deck. As I gripped it, water the color of the sky rushed into the hold and tossed me back to where I'd started as if I'd weighed no more than a gull's feather. I heard canvas flapping, the creaking of

straining wood. I went back and took hold of the rope again and pulled myself up to the deck.

The first thing I saw was the ship's small boat smashed to bits. The mainmast lay athwart the deck, broken and twisted, its sails all rags. Beneath it lay Purvis, one leg free of the mast and floating in the water that advanced and retreated. The ship was awash to the hatches—the great wheel which had guided us such distances was now useless, floating among the ship's debris. Only the mizzenmast still stood, its sails whipping back and forth. I was drenched instantly. I rolled myself to Ned's bench and clung to it.

The water stung my eyes and filled my ears. It came again and again across the deck as the ship, slack and lifeless, rose and crashed down. Nothing stood still in all the gray bawling world.

I raised myself up and flung myself across the bench. Through my blurred sight I caught a glimpse of what I could not believe was there. Land! But even as I drew breath, the ship plunged down into a trough between giant waves. When it rose, I saw palm trees, their topmost branches combing the sky as though on the very point of being yanked out of the earth and carried heavenward. I had never felt such fear—no storm in the great ocean was so awful as this—to see land, to be so near the shore . . .

I heard a moan, muffled like the cry of a sea bird in a heavy rain. I raised my head then ducked as a wall of water rushed toward me. I felt the weakness of my fingers gripping the soaked wood of Ned's bench. Then I saw Benjamin Stout caught like a huge fly in a tangled web of rope. He stared blindly at the sky. Another wave came across the deck. I looked for Stout. He was gone along with all the rope which had trapped him. I saw land again. I made out the foam crests of the waves breaking against the shore, and I cursed the light that let me see. If it had only been dark!

It must have taken an hour for me to move my hands to the bench leg, to lower myself through the battering wind to the deck. Coughing, unable to see, I felt my way back to the hold. Inch by inch, I advanced. Once I grabbed at something only to feel it give softly in my fingers, the feel of cloth and bone and flesh traveling up my arm. I shouted with horror and my mouth filled with water. I choked and sputtered and tried to see whose leg I had grabbed. I thought it was Cooley but could not be sure. I thought I heard a cry for help but the wind mimicked distress so perfectly there was no way to tell. The ship hit the bottom of another trough just as I reached out and took hold of the rope. I could not move. It was hopeless. I had no strength left to brace myself against the elements which

would soon send the ship and her cargo of corpses to the bottom, to the depths where no wind blew.

I felt a monstrous convulsion traveling through what was left of *The Moonlight*. I opened my mouth and shouted with all my might as though such a pitiful squeak, lost in the smash and crack of the wind and sea, could bring the storm to a halt. An instant later, the ship listed so far to her side it seemed that only the wind kept me plastered to the deck like a bug blown against a piece of bark. But the shudder had moved me forward a foot, and I was able now to fling myself over the edge of the hold.

My head and shoulders were hanging down into the darkness. I heard isolated *pings* of dripping water in that strange stillness below the deck. Then I saw something waving, something living. A dozen frights rushed through my mind until sense came back to me and I knew it was the black boy reaching up. I gripped his fluttering fingers. Then, as I edged myself down, his arm came to guide me.

Squatting, we held each other's arms. He was trembling, as I was. He spoke to me. I gripped him more strongly and nodded. A wave hit. We fell and rolled among the casks, holding on to each other as we gathered bruises and splinters. We lay against the hull in a pool of warmish water that had its own small tides as the ship rocked back and forth.

Then, gradually, the pounding on the deck grew less; the wind receded; the rattling and thumping of the ship's gear—the very stuff of the ship herself—diminished to a low quarrelsome mumble. There were little easings and movements I barely noticed through the hull. I realized the ship was settling upon something, a reef, a rock, something upon which it would rest briefly before plunging to the bottom. The boy took my wrist. I felt rather than saw the motion of his hand as he gestured toward the hatch.

We made our way to the deck. It was nearly dark. Waves washed placidly across the ship. I could see the shore now, the narrow beach, the line of palms. I glanced at the boy. He was gazing intently at the shore, his mouth slightly open, a look of eagerness on his face. Did he think we had come to his home? I caught his arm and shook my head. The light left his face. I wondered if we were looking at Cuba.

Then I nearly jumped out of my skin. A wild choking laugh erupted from what was left of the aft quarters. I heard the distinct sound of a bottle smashed against wood. Cawthorne was not dead.

The laugh ended abruptly. There was only the soft gathering rush of water, the hush beneath the dying wind. The boy gestured toward the shore. We slid down the deck, bracing our feet against what was left of the main rail. A piece

of the boom lay close. I touched the boy, and pointed at the length of wood. We worked away at it, disentangling it from the sail that was wound around it. I could not estimate how far we were from the shore. But I knew we'd drown if we stayed on the ship.

I heard another shout. Cawthorne lay against the mizzenmast, the angle of the ship such that he was nearly horizontal. I thought he had seen us, but no. His gaze passed over us without recognition. Perhaps he could see nothing. I looked back at the water. I could only swim like a dog. It was the way I'd learned. I didn't know if it would carry me—pawing—all that way. And I didn't know if the boy could swim. But what choice was there?

We flung the piece of boom into the water and slid in after it. I lost sight of the boy almost at once. My lungs took in water. I sank. A hand touched mine. I rose sputtering. He was there, his head bobbing a few feet away. We managed to take hold of the wood, and kicking our feet, we made for the shore.

I turned my head once. I saw, against the cloud streaming sky now streaked with an earthen glow, the Captain, his hand clawing the air. The ship was sinking slowly from view. For an instant, I felt a twinge in my ear as though Cawthorne's teeth had closed upon it once again. I wondered if, with all