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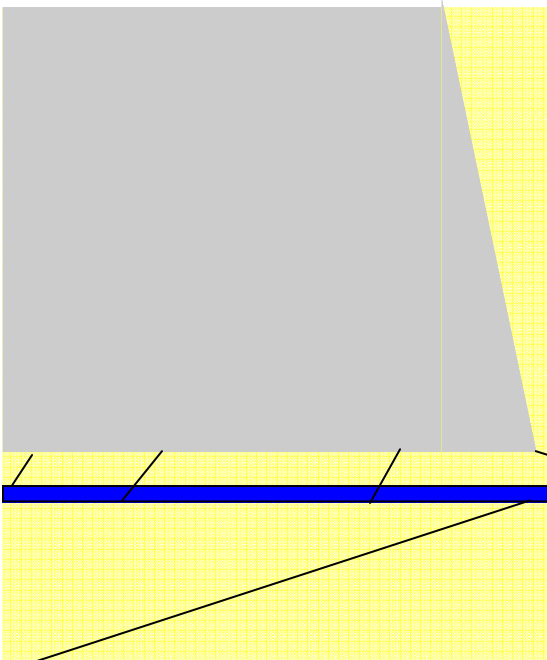
Writing a pirate story along the lines of *Treasure Island* was always on my bucket list. That book just seems to come to life every time I read the first page. However, since I have daughters and a niece, a story with a boy like Jim Hawkins would not be as much to their liking as a story with a young girl.

So, I wrote this pirate story for my niece, about a girl, named Anne Greene. It was meant as a story to be read by a teenaged girl, around aged 12-14. The girl is taken mostly from my daughter April, with some of her sister Rachel thrown in. Since they're in their late 20s and out of the house, they can't punish me for this by hiding the ice cream.

Further Out There,

Paul

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# ANNIE AND THE KING'S GOLD



A  
GIRL'S TALE OF  
PIRATES, ADVENTURE  
AND THE KING'S GOLD

## ALONG THE ROOFTOPS

She stood at her upstairs window, staring down at the schooners, square-riggers, and pilot ships in the harbor. She was but a young girl, waiting for her father to come home from his voyage in the Caribbean. Her father was a pilot himself, commanding a commercial ship carrying lumber, cloth, and ironworks to the islands in the warm waters. He always came back, she knew he would, but every day she watched the horizon, hoping, holding her breath, awaiting for those blue sails and gleaming white hull to appear.

Her name was Suzanne, though all the folks along the harbor called her, Little Miss Annie. She touched her fingers on the window pane, letting the trace of her fingertips come down the glass in a wavy pattern, like the wind on a cold night.

Anne Greene then gave up hope for this afternoon. She slumped on her bed, wishing someone else would come in to help her make her bed. She missed her mother so much, now that her mother decided to return to England to inherit a fortune in Sussex. Her aunt came over every night to make dinner and tuck Anne in, but it just wasn't the same. Her father was somewhere out there, beyond the horizon, her mother was somewhere out there in England so far away.

Dusk now crept along the harbor, with the ship masts and lines tossing a complex of shadows crisscrossing the docks and lofts and the sugar factory. Another night approached. The wind brought a chill from over the sea, a vacant sarcastic chill like the laughter of a thief. She didn't even notice the ship, *Wicked Rover*, anchored a few blocks down from her house.

Strange-looking men got off her forward deck, pig-tailed men with swords clanging on their hip, men with dirty yellow bandanas, one with an eye-patch, and one evil-looking man on the deck, lashing some poor sailor to a mast. They were whipping him, Anne heard his screams, a screeching tear from his lungs she'd never forget.

The other men leaped off the gangplank, spitting and laughing and shoving each other around, staggering off to the street where the taverns were. She knew they'd be drunk soon enough, as long as they don't come down her street.

Why couldn't she just live somewhere else?

Just then she saw some arm stick out one of the portholes of the upper deck. Then someone grabbed the arm enough to strangle it back into the hold. Anne could hear a beating take place. She heard wood splinter, laughing, chains twist around a leg, wicked pain cried out, the last breath of a hoarse exhale limped in the air, falling for the last time. Anne turned away from her window, shuddering, crawling under the covers, closing her eyes to hope all this would just go away. She tried to imagine a nice garden, and a soft warm breeze, and a happy puppy skipping alongside her dress but she knew it was all a dream.

Just then she heard a piercing rap on the door below—

Below her bedroom, her father ran a ship supply store, but it was too late in the day for any captain to come around. She pulled the covers up to her eyes, hoping they'd just go away. But the pounding shook the glass door—it came at her again. She knew she was the only one in the house. Who could that be? Mrs. Nelson had already gone home for the night.

She covered herself with her blanket, crawling to the corner of the window, looking down, hoping no one saw her. She saw three men, rough-looking men grasping short swords and cussing with laughter. They stood outside her door. They used their fists to smash the door in—crash—it fell in shattering the glass everywhere on the floor.

Anne was desperate...would they come up here? Where would she go?

She looked around her room. The other window, higher up looked out on the roof of the downstairs room. She'd need a chair to get up to the window, then she'd need to lower herself down to the roof...but then where? She heard his footsteps pounding around downstairs. She took hold of the blanket, dragged a chair over to the window. She hoped he didn't hear. She shoved with all her might until the window broke old paint into pieces, sliding up. Did he hear that? He had to...she climbed up, tied her blanket around the window latch, lowering herself down onto the slanting roof. She didn't dare look back through the window.

Just then one of them burst open the bedroom door with his sword, splintering the door into a thousand pieces...he'd heard, he'd come stomping up, he'd cracked the door open, but he didn't see her. He saw her bed, the blanket gone, and one window. He didn't see the other high window...she ran and ran across the slanted roof, looking all around for a way down. Then she tripped over a loose shingle, sliding down and down toward the edge of the roof. If she slid over, she knew she'd die.

He heard her trip and slide. He saw the high window out the corner of his edgy eye. He had a three-cornered hat, pirate style, peering out through the window—then he saw her. He laughed sadistically. He scrambled to lean out the window, grasping for her. She knelt, between his evil eyes and the edge of the roof.

'Cain't go nowhere, little girl, can ya?' he spewed at her like she was some mangy dog.

Annie gasped for breath.

She looked down, she looked at his hissing teeth. Two of them were down there, waiting for her to fall, smiling wickedly. She looked down at them again, then she looked at him. He tried to get himself through the window, but he was too fat. She looked behind her.

This roof led to another roof, but it was slanted so much.

Just then he shoved his big fat self through the window, reaching out his dirty hands at her. She crawled across to the ridge, then he slipped on that same shingle, tumbling over the edge, falling down upon the two pirates down there---

They cussed, they fell in a heap, one broke a finger and screamed, Annie got away.

She didn't know where she was, but she was running. Then she heard them

Maybe the captain would take a shine to her, at least to protect her. Or maybe not. The captain's a harrowing fellow, he is, Gaffie thought.

Anne ate well, nearly forgetting where she was. When she finished, she shoved the bowl and plate to the door, opened the door, shoved the bowl and plate out and then closed the door as silently as she could.

She looked around at her room. The ship pitched some, the shouting had stopped. There was a tiny porthole high above her head where she saw it was now night. Kidnapped, she thought. It isn't so adventurous as the stories say. It's lonely here. She heard voices, but not from above, from down the ship's passageway. Then it was the clattering of bowls and cups and munching teeth and belching. Men down here eating just like she did. They must be waiting for their watch.

Just then Gaffie opened the door without hesitation. He leaned his short belly over to find her. When he saw her little eyes gleaming in the dark corner, he grabbed her by the arm, dragging her out of her room, down the passageway past bunks and tables and men who laughed at her, on down to the captain's cabin. Gaffie rapped the door with his knuckles while the men cackled at Annie.

He opened the door, threw Annie in and slammed the door behind her. She slid in, tripping, falling on her knees before the captain. She looked up, he looked down.

She saw a lean man with a scar. His eyes went off in different directions, like one of them was false. He had these long bent fingers with the scar of stitches across his knuckles. He wore a sword on pantaloons, a bandana around his black dirty hair, and his mouth came out the side of his face.

'So's you're the girl they's all yappin' over,' he said more spitting than talking.

She stood up, trying to be defiant. 'I am Anne Green from Baltimore. Who are you?' She said this pointing a finger just like she'd seen the women on the dock do when they talked to men.

He laughed. 'Ol' Gaffie was right, ya got spunk. I think I'll call you Spunkie Baltimore.' He laughed again.

'My name's Anne, an' don't you forget it, mister. You stink, you need a bath. With soap.'

He laughed again. He liked this from her. 'Well, Spunkie, I'm Mungo Styxx, captain of this ship bound for the Caribbean. I do need a bath, an' I'll have more than a bath when we get to Bitt Island.'

'Why are you going there?'

'You'll find out when we get there, lassie. You'll find out, soon enough. Now, it's near about 10 bells. You're goin' on deck see the night. You've been cooped up long enough ta' make a rat crazy.'

Meanwhile, while Styxx and Annie made their way on to the top deck, Gaffie was below, feeding the prisoners. They were in the forward hold, where Gaffie slid their bowls and plates under the oak door, watching them like a hawk. He wasn't gonna get his hand caught by one of them. They all looked thin, they all sounded hoarse when they whispered.

running alongside in the street. They were mean, now they had their swords out, they cussed, they were after her life.

Anne ran scared. She knew she'd have to get down, somewhere, but then what? She had no place to go. She slid down a gutter, running scared, hair flying, her mind whizzing in a thousand directions. She ran down the docks, past the shops and ships, past men and women and shadows of creepy places and secret doors and sailors and pick-pockets and strange characters with ringed fingers.

She turned a corner without knowing where she was. Then she felt three big hands grab her by the neck—she couldn't breathe, she was going to be dead in a minute, she rolled her eyes, her eyelids fell, she was falling limp. Anne passed out.

### ON BOARD

When she awoke, Anne was laying in a bunk surrounded by a tiny wood room, heavy beams, a pitching motion slung her around till she fell out of the hammock, thudding on the floor. Her elbow bruised, she cried out, tears ran down her face. Then she realized this place—she was on a ship on the ocean. She heard the creaking of the wood, the ropes, the stretching of giant sails, the clattering of feet running up and down the deck above her.

She'd been kidnapped! She'd been shanghaied to some lost foreign place with a crew of ugly pirates above her. They'll probably give her nothing but rum and bread. This place smelled so bad, a stinking dank smell. She saw the ocean water had leaked in, laying in pools here and there, rolling over the floor as the ship pitched. She saw this squiggly thing come from the pools of water, some tiny shrimp or worm or something ugly.

They were yelling above her. They yelled about getting the sails up, about getting the cannons ready, about anything. Anne knew they were about to attack some other ship.

Just then she heard the scrape around of a rusty key to open the door to her room. A fat smiling fellow with teeth missing stood there, leaning in. She knelt in a corner, hoping he'd just go away. He saw the bunk empty.

'Ah lassie, I sees ya's out of yer bunk there ya is,' he whispered with a whistle through his teeth. He didn't see her right off in the dark. 'I's the cook, Gaffie by name, an' this here grub is fer ya.' Now he sensed where she was. 'Come on, lassie, I won't bite, come on an' have some of this soup and bread an' a piece o' meat. Same as the captain's havin', better than any of this here motley crew, I can says ya.'

Anne saw him put the bowl of soup and bread and meat down near the bunk. He retreated, but left the door open just enough to see if she'd come out of her corner. She didn't notice the door was just ajar, she crawled in the dark to the bowl and plate. She ate like a hungry cat.

Gaffie peered through the crack in the door, seeing how thin she was, seeing how her hair needed a wash, seeing how tattered her dress was. But she had spunk, he thought, and he hoped they'd all stay away from her, at least now.

'Damn, finally here,' one of them said.

'Be grateful, lads, the captain don't always let us eat like you is,' Gaffie said.

One of them said, 'He must love us like his mother.'

That one sat in the corner, waited for everyone else to grab a plate, then took what was left. He was younger than some of them, with eyes scheming against these pirates. He didn't speak, but Gaffie knew his type. Had to watch him, these silent ones.

They ate without speaking, they were too weak to do anything but put food in their mouths, savoring every bite like it was their last. Maybe it was. Gaffie knew where they were going, and what would happen. All they had the strength to do was to shove away rats and worms.

They slid the bowls and plates back under the door. Gaffie took them, went back to his kitchen, remembering their faces, remembering their gestures, their underhanded way of laying there. The only one who sat up was that silent one in the corner. Gaffie knew he'd be the one to be thinkin' of a mutiny.

## THE MAP

On deck, Captain Styxx yelled at his men. He stood at the quarter deck, glaring at the sails. Annie held on to the bulwark, trying to hide from such awful men. These wooden ships creak and squeak so much, she thought, no wonder they all yell at each other. The seas spewed over the bulwarks, tossing green waves across the deck, Anne had to duck.

The night howled, it turned so dark you could touch it, the sails whipped like they were angry, the seas shoved back, men fell across the wet deck, they held onto lines and corners, they laughed when they were scared. An old man fell overboard, but no one moved, no one said a thing. Anne saw his arms and his fingers in the water, desperately clutching air, till the sea covered him over, the foam his grave, the cold grey sea buried him as if he'd never lived.

Captain Styxx put his hand on her shoulder, pushing her down so she couldn't see the water any more. She knelt and cried for the man. When the wind blew open the hatch down to the captain's cabin, Anne ran down there to her room, burying herself in her hammock. She cried till she fell asleep.

Meanwhile, the men didn't like Styxx. They ran eyes aslant when he turned away. They whispered, they made these small gestures with their fingers, like a scabbard across the throat. Styxx knew them all. He knew what they were musing, what they plotted, what they could do if he let them have weapons.

One of them had killed a captain before. He was Will Scrunt, but Styxx knew better. He knew another name he went by, Sawface MacDougal, an escaped convict from Scotland. Another had stabbed his mother for an inheritance which he gambled away in Charleston. They were a motley crew but Styxx knew they'd do anything for treasure. He was counting on that.

The night grew cold and blustery.

Past midnight, when even the ghosts no longer walk the ways, Anne woke up. She heard snoring down the passageway. She heard the roll and creak of the ship, the clatter of foottaps on the deck, some wicked laughter, the squeaking of a rat across the deck down here.

She squeezed open her door. Moonlight fell down the stairs, casting faint shadows across the planks. She heard the snoring from behind that locked door. She tiptoed down to the door, seeing the small window above the doorknob. She got her foot on the doorknob, clutching the bar across the window, pulling herself up to see through the opening.

Seven men lay along the floor, snoring, using their own hands as a pillow, curled up in corners, folded against each other. Only one man was awake. He looked familiar to Anne—could it be—it had to be....

‘Daddy! Daddy!’ she whispered as loud as she feared.

He sat up, seeing Anne. ‘Hey beautiful, but what—’

Just then foottaps came near the passageway hatch on deck, so Anne looked up the stairs, holding her breath. But he went away.

‘Daddy, what happened?’

Ben Greene stood, coming over to the door opening to touch Anne’s hand. ‘I’m sorry you’re here, but these pirates attacked our ship. They burned it, took us prisoner. They took the goods on the ship, sold them in Port Arthur and bought this old topsail schooner. They’re going back to some island, but I don’t know why.’

‘It’s Bitt Island, Daddy. I heard the captain say so. But why?’

‘They think something’s there worth stealing.’

Annie’s eyes bulged. ‘Treasure? You mean buried treasure?’

‘Maybe, beautiful, but I don’t think so. I think it’s something else.’

Just then one of the pirates came tumbling down the stairs, drunk, his shift over. Annie scrambled off the doorknob, ran back to her room, closed the door, pretending to be asleep. She closed her eyes and when she opened them, it was morning.

Gaffie leaned his eyes down upon Anne, in her hammock.

‘Hey, thing, girl, what ever you is, the captain wants to see you—now!’

He grabbed her arm, rolling her out of the hammock on her feet. She rubbed here eyes with the other hand, still a bit asleep, wondering about this.

‘What for? Did he take a bath?’

‘Bath!’ roared Gaffie. ‘Ain’t no bath taking on this ship. Sure not by Styxx, anyway. Now come running along.’

Gaffie shoved Annie to the captain’s door, rapped it and left.

Styxx opened the door, snickering, looking down at Anne like she was one of those women who carry rum in the taverns. He took her into his cabin, to his table where a map had been unrolled across it. She got on a chair, laying her arms across the old stiff parchment map, watching his eyes. He leaned on the table, gloating at what he saw, his eyes tracing around the lines of a cluster of islands, the compass point, his own position, and some crosses.



Anne saw this cute little model of a ship near Styxx's hand. She reached out to hold it when Styxx grabbed her wrist tight, shoving it away.

'Oh no, Spunkie, that's us. Got to keep it in the right position.' He aimed it south by southeast, toward the cluster of islands, one of which was drawn in faintly, like it was disappearing. Styxx had a little pirate flag on a stand on that island.

Styxx saw that Anne saw that flag.

'So's you see that, eh? Sharp as a cutwater, lassie, you are. But now, all this ain't your business, only one thing is. This is my map, stolen off a ship navigator's dead body. See that cut in the map? That's where he had this map under his shirt when I pointed my sword in his chest. It came out with some blood an' this map on the end of me sword. Now how about that!' he roared in laughter.

'You're mean,' she said, staring at him.

'Aye, lassie, yer on the mark, I am. That's how I stay alive. But now, what's on this map is a secret, can't no sailor decipher it but me. Even if them knuckle-headed jokers on deck run me gizzard through, they ain't ever gonna see what I see here.'

Anne searched the map for what he meant. She only saw a map of the Caribbean, south of Florida, with Cuba and the Bahamas and Antilles penciled in, compass points, longitude and latitude lines, and a circle around the faded outline of that sole island.

'Now you see that?' he jabbed his long finger to the little flag on that island. It's in invisible ink. I've made it show up so you's could gaze your pretty little eyes at it. It's between Bitt on the north, Bones Island on the east, Fort Royal and this here Davy's Shoals. Remember Davy's Shoals, lassie, cause that's where we anchor. I've brought you here to see this before it fades, so if they send me to the briny deep, you'll know where it is. No one else in this world knows but you an' yer old captain.'

'But what's there?' Anne said.

'Ah you is Spunkie, ain't ya, lassie. I ain't gonna tell ya until we anchor at Davy's, to row to the Invisible Island. Then it'll be you an' me only. Now it's fading, see, gone already. Invisible to yer naked eye, and everyone else's. Ha, ha, ha!' He took the little flag, stuffing it in his desk drawer, locking it shut.

He turned to her.

'Now you skedaddle back to yer room, wait for Gaffie to bring you some victuals to eat.' He took her down the passageway, past the prisoners door, pointing her to that room where she slept. When he saw her get in, Styxx went up the stairs to his quarter deck.

Ben Greene heard Styxx take Anne down the passageway. It angered him to see her treated this way, but he knew he couldn't let on she was his daughter. He knew she couldn't let on, either. He stood at the door opening, his fingers across the ledge, leaning his nose against the vertical bar. He saw her shoved, stumbling down, cutting her arm. His eye teared, but he wiped it before she could see him. He couldn't show any weakness in front of his men. His leadership was their only ticket out of here.

## THE KEY

On deck, Styxx yelled at everyone. They yelled back but he didn't always hear them since he was kinda deaf. He'd been shot at enough, and at close range so he didn't hear all that well. But he could read lips if a man was facing him.

The night wind blew northeast, as it usually does. Styxx had the sails taut as they could be at that angle of wind. The ties and halliards were tight, but the lifts and braces were old, worn, loose as a barmaid. The sheet block, clewline block and tack were worn and old. But Styxx knew these lowlife pirates wouldn't know what to do on a British ship-of-the-line, anyway. Nine fingers as good as ten, the saying goes.

Styxx saw one of his pirates stumble down drunk. When he tried to get up, he looked up the mast at the trestletree. Stumbling against a hatch top, he knocked himself out. Styxx laughed, then yelled out.

'Tie the sap-headed fool to the foremast!' he roared. 'I'll whip the fool with the cat-o-nine-tails later.'

Ben had heard about Styxx before. But it was one less pirate for Ben and his men to deal with. Ben didn't know if he'd have the heart to whip a pirate or not.

The schooner sailed on, churning waves and spinning wind, on southwest toward a destination hidden in the night. At midnight the wind turned cold, a heavy mist foreboding rain and a storm. Styxx saw off in the distance lightning light up the sky and sea. Through the flashes Styxx thought he saw a square rigger sailing far off on their leeward side. That might mean the *Wicked Rover* is in shipping lanes, which it shouldn't be. Maybe that ship's off course in this wind and storm...maybe the *Rover* is...he didn't know.

He checked his compass. They were off course, by a few degrees. Styxx thought, this fool at the helm must be afraid of the storm, taking us off.

'Hey! Get us back on course, you skunk-faced lizard! Now!'

That pirate was half-asleep, nodding off on his eyelids and yawning. He was as fat as the wheel, his dirty shirt sticking out, his dirty fingernails too long, his old beard sticking out of an old fat face.

Styxx walked away. Down on the deck, the pirates worked the lines, they lay around behind the mast where Styxx couldn't see them, they whispered and plotted and concocted mutiny.

'What's he got?' one said.

'It must be treasure, what with this ship an' prisoners, an' that fool kid,' another said.

'If'n he had treasure, he wouldn't no account have us an' them prisoners, too. No use for this many heads unless he's got somethin' up his sleeve we ain't got no idea of,' the one called Jellybones said. 'I says we kidnap the kid, an' hold her 'till Styxx spills the plot.'

'Damn kid, ain't no use for no kid on a ship with the likes of us,' Sawface said, chiming in at last. He never looked anyone in the eye.

'What about now?'

There was scuffling on deck. They'd found Gaffie.

'So's you's locked the arms up, eh?' Sawface said, with a fistful of Gaffie's shirt in his knuckles. He stared Gaffie nose to nose, snorting and smelling like rum.

'I'm following orders, which is more than you sot-heads would ever do,' Gaffie threw back at him, staring eyes right through him.

The pirates guffawed. Orders meant nothing to them. 'Orders! Ha! Now, where'd ya put that key? An' no funny business or I'll run ya through right here like you was pork on a spit!'

The pirates liked that. They chuckled and clapped their sides.

'I ain't telling ya nuthin' without an exchange,' Gaffie said.

'What exchange? Your life for a pence?' Sawface retorted while they all laughed.

One of 'em said, 'String em from a yard, then we'll bargain!' They laughed at that even louder.

'I give ya the key, you keep yer mitts off me an' the girl. You can have Styxx if you can take 'im. What say you?'

They quizzed. They scratched their chins, snickering wickedly, like a crew of demons counting change. Sawface looked around at them. He liked what he saw.

'Be it done as you say. The weapons for yer life, and the girl. But she stays out of this, one way or tether, I say.'

'Deal,' Gaffie said. He then leaned back as if he were reaching into his pocket for the key, when he pretended that it fell overboard. 'Damn, the key, the key!' he yelled looking down over the side.

All the pirates looked overboard, seeing nothing but black water beneath a deathly moon. Gaffie jumped overboard, catching the gangway ledges, climbing down. The pirates thought he was trying to swim for it. They ran to the whale-boats, four pirates lowering one into the sea.

Sawface yelled, 'Naw, don' do that! If'n it fell ya'll never find it!'

Meanwhile Gaffie climbed down the gangway ledges, into the porthole for his galley for the night. The pirates scraped the boat back up, cussing and shoving each other, till dawn. Then they got drunk on rum, so they wouldn't have to do any duty in the morning.

## OVER SHE GOES

At dawn Styxx woke up, hearing the thud of the boat alongside the ship. He knew the pirates were restless. They were fairly close to Bitts Island. But Styxx knew the last ten miles would be treacherous. Reefs, crosswinds, a doldrums, and the hidden cove of the island.

He got on deck, seeing his men drunk laying around the deck.

'So's, this is what I've got fer a crew, is it now?' Styxx boomed out. He came stomping down the ladder to the spar deck.

The men who could stand, did. Sawface came to Styxx. The two men knew each other well without any liking of each other. They matched knife

eyes without speaking just yet. Styxx knew one more night an' they'd be there, but he didn't want them to suspect anything.

'You know the contract, Sawface. Drunks go overboard,' Styxx said.

'Yeah, but yer crew's getting mighty thin. If ya send these two over, have you got enough for rough weather?'

'Maybe, maybe not. Over they go,' Styxx said sticking his sword into the neck of one, enough for him to sit up. Sawface motioned for two of his pirates to throw the man over, with a splash and a cry full of ocean water. The other one saw this, sober enough to run down the deck. He ran to the longboat, trying to get it roped down the side, at least for survival. Styxx wouldn't have one of his boats lost at sea. He ran down there, cut the davit ropes so the boat fell on the man, crushing his skull. Dead, no one minded heaving him over the side. Splash, but no cry.

Styxx turned back, coming to Sawface again. 'You think I ain't meaning business, do ya? The code prevails, lads, no matter who ya are. Now get to them sails, trim 'em right. We have a long day and night of sailing left. We'll be making a course before that there storm comes down upon us.'

He pointed to the horizon, dark with gathering clouds. The men could see the rain falling in the distance, the darkness, the swirling clouds showing the wind coming.

The men took to their sailing stations, manning the lifts, braces, and halliards. Styxx felt the storm outrun them, coming on faster. Could he drive the ship away from it? Not without leaving his course for Bitts, and that meant starving the men to make the provisions last long enough. His mind tossed with choices, but in the end he knew what every man of the sea knows. You have to face down your fears or they never go away.

## STORM

Below, Anne felt the storm coming even though she couldn't see it. She ran to the prisoner door, to see her Dad.

'Annie, don't get caught,' he said seeing her and getting on his feet. He came to the door. He touched her hair.

'Daddy, I'm afraid. It feels like a storm,' she said nearly tearing.

'It may be, Annie, but we'll make it through. You and I, we always do,' he said. His men stood, gathering around him.

'What will we do?' she asked.

'Right now, we wait. The crew is shorthanded...they'll need to use one or two of us, then we'll see about getting away. Our days down here are numbered, girl, don't fear, just be patient.'

She shrugged. 'But I'm never patient, Daddy.'

He laughed. 'I know you're not but you can be this time. Now here comes somebody down the stairs—you go hide in your room like you're asleep. Go on, Annie.'

She ran back to her room, jumping in the hammock. One of the pirates came down to the prisoner door. Ben's men pretended to be asleep.

‘Hey, you, bigun’, yeah you. I’m talking to you, come on deck. The captain wants you up there,’ this pirate said, then unlocked the door for Annie’s Dad to go above.

Ben Greene still had his handcuffs on. He stumbled as it had been so long with the ankle chains on. So the pirate unlocked his ankle chains.

‘Come on, stumble-bum, you ain’t dead yet. Get yerseff up these steps, an’ be ready for orders.’

Ben got up the stairs, the blood returning to his iron-chafed feet and skin. He grabbed the rails, then the pirate shoved him up the hatch. Ben covered his eyes with his sleeve, till he saw well enough to know it was nearly night. Ben heard the footstomps of Styxx coming at him.

‘So, captain, we meet again,’ Styxx said with sarcasm.

‘We do,’ was all Ben could get out of his throat. He hadn’t had anything to drink in a day, Styxx heard the roughness of his throat.

‘Here, have some rum,’ Styxx said, handing him a bottle. With his hands in locks, Ben took the rum, downing it in a moment. He spilled as much as he drank, which made the pirates laugh. ‘Now you’re up here because with the storm comin’ I need another hand. You’re the best of ‘em down there. Take the wheel, set a course for 48 degrees, keep it there until I say otherwise.’

‘Now, Slade, you give the wheel to Captain Greene, here, an’ go to the fore topgallant braces and lifts, furl ‘em.’

Ben took the wheel, looking over his shoulder at the coming storm, a burling waving line of darkness across the sky, coming at them like a charging army. Ben knew they’d be furling topsails soon enough, but where were they trying to get before reefing? Ben couldn’t see any island, or any land anywhere along the horizon, but he suspected Styxx knew some place where they had to be.

Styxx yelled out, ‘Reef the main topsail, lads, or ye’ll be swinging in the wind like a lantern snuffed out!’

Suddenly the wind turned cold, shivering the sails, whipping the flags in all directions as if the wind came from everywhere at once. Ben knew this meant trouble. The wind came straight down as black clouds fisted together overhead. The topsails whipped confused, nearly ripping. The royals wheezed and jerked the sheets this way and that. The men knew this was a night from hell.

Waves jumped up above the bulwarks, leaping with frost foam. The ship pitched its bow down into the sea, diving too deep, then slung up with a deck full of icy water. The wind howled in a shriek, the sea convulsed in fits, the sails slapped around the spars, lines spun out of their tackle, bulwarks creaked, the sound of the storm was deafening.

Men slid across the wet deck, they grabbed for any line, any hook they could grab. Ben held onto the helm with both arms through it, his feet slid out from under him but he held to the helm. Styxx seemed to be enjoying the panic, the fear, the dread of this night. Ben thought about Annie, in her room. He hoped she was on the floor, clinging to a corner. He knew she’d be knocked around with the ship pitching like this.

Ben prayed his little girl would be all right.

Lightning came streaking down like a jagged scar, striking the foremast top, splitting it. Everyone looked up...the lightning struck the topmast, splitting it in two pieces, falling on fire with a twirling trail of smoke as they fell into the sea. Was that an evil omen?

The men on deck ran away.

The ship got blown off course, leaning, till the sea came in its ports like a tidal wave. Three of the four longboats ripped off their lines, smashing to bits against the hull, planks scattered like leaves, sails and masts tangled, swept away with the furious waves. Styxx knew only so many men could get in the one longboat left—he knew he'd have to see who's with him and who is not.

Now every one of the pirates knew the one longboat only held 25 men. It would be them or the prisoners, to the death.

Styxx held to his rail, rain splattering off his chin, wind whipping his hair, the wet deck sliding his feet. Sawface clawed his way up to Styxx.

'Cap'n!' he yelled against the wind. 'Ain' all of us gonna survive this damn storm. Ain't enough food or nuthin'.'

Styxx laughed to the sky. He felt the storm sweep down his throat.

'Aye, now, sailor, what's yer plan? Who yer gonna throw over?' he yelled back, his words flying with the wind.

'Prisoners...they gotta go overboard!' he yelled. 'Ain't no sense feedin' them, they ain't good for nothin.' He grabbed Styxx by the shirt.

Styxx slipped, but didn't fall as a wave washed over him and Sawface and Ben. 'Get yer filthy fingers off'n me shirt, ya little snake. Why should I spare you, they ain't causin' no trouble. Besides, I got somethin' fer them to do. Get back to her station and shut yer face or I'll shove yer teeth out yer ear! Ha, ha!'

Sawface got himself down the plank, straining to stay on board, but he didn't like what he heard. So Styxx has something up his sleeve he ain't telling us about, is it.

Just then the ship's keel hit rocks, tipping it over till the sea nearly engulfed the deck, then the ship tilted off the rocks, righted itself again.

Suddenly Styxx yelled at Ben, 'That's what we's looking for. The Skull Rocks, right here, just like I knew! Now straighten her out, Ben, an' aim for that peak there on that island!'

Was Styxx crazy, or did he know something?

The darkness lifted into a heavy falling mist, rain plopped hard on the deck, but not cold. The mist was hot and heavy, dripping down on every man's hair, on his fingers, into his boots. The ship rocked again and again, Ben could feel there was a current below curling under the keel, whirling the ship between two islands. The wind whipped across the deck, swirling on between the islands, drawing the ship on.

But where was he, Ben wondered.

Styxx seemed to know where they were, he smiled that wicked smile he had, showing gold teeth and deep cuts in his face beneath his beard. He knew these waters like he knew his own memories.

Ben didn't know where they were. He stared into Styxx's eyes.

Styxx leaned back, yelling at the sky. ‘Ya ain’t gonna keep ol’ Styxx away! Ya ain’t gonna keep it all till yerself! I’ve come for mine, an’ I’m gonna have it, against ya all!’

Ben held tight to the wheel, his feet slipping when a wave washed over the deck, but he held. The rudder creaked in this sea, but it held.

‘Ya ain’t gonna keep it from me!’ Styxx yelled again, at the storm like he was in a sword fight with the sky. ‘It was mine once, it’ll be mine again!’

Just then Ben saw the pirates bring one of the prisoners—Ben’s crewman—up on deck, tied hand and foot. It was the old cook, Benson, a wrinkled old man who couldn’t defend himself against a pup. The old man’s eyes said nothing, he had no fear of death, as old as he was. He knew death was coming for him, on land or on sea, sooner or later.

Ben started to say something to Styxx, but then his mouth just gasped open without a sound. Immediately he thought of Anne. Did they know where she was? Would they throw her over? He knew if they did, he’d have to jump in after her, even if it meant they both drowned together. Ben knew he was behind Styxx, where he was not easily seen.

Styxx came down the stairs, to the pirates who had the old man in their hands, mashing his old skin in their fingers. It was Sawface, three o’ his scrawny worthless pirates, and old Benson.

‘Tell you what, men,’ Styxx yelled at them through the rain and wind. ‘You four get in the lifeboat, lower it away, take ‘im to that sand bar there an’ leave him. We’ll drag you back with these ropes. Leave him a gun with one bullet, so’s he can shoot hisself if he don’t wanna starve. We’ll keep the sail, so’s it don’t rip in this wind.’

Sawface and his pirates stared at each other, whispering. They didn’t really trust Styxx, but they knew this was the only lifeboat he had. He couldn’t do what he had up his sleeve without it.

Sawface yelled, ‘Sure, captain. We’ll give him the old stand, an’ get back here with the lifelines, four of us pulling.’

They took the sails out, tossing them on the hatch roof. They tossed old Benson in the boat, jumped in, and lowered away with the ropes. Then Sawface untied Benson’s hands. Styxx leaned over the side, smiling that way, laughing with his teeth to the storm. The waves of the sea leaped up like an octopus, smashing against the boat’s keel and garboard, trying to suck down the boat and the men, to drown them all. The boat was away.

Styxx said, ‘Furl sails men, till the ship returns!’

He said it loud enough for Sawface and his pirates to hear, but not facing the topmen on the masts, the wind blowing his voice off into oblivion. The *Wicked Rover* then kept on sailing away from the boat, away from the island. Sooner or later, Sawface would see this. Then Styxx threw the lifelines out through the davit blocks, falling away into the green heaving sea.

Sawface saw Styxx throw the ropes overboard. He knew this meant death on the island. Then his men saw the ropes floating in the sea. They cursed Styxx all to Hell, they screamed for their lives, one jumped over trying to get himself

back to the *Rover*, but the overwhelming waves simply swallowed him down to the briny deep. The *Rover* disappeared into the storm's darkness and fatal mist, a faint laughing heard up atop the wind.

Styxx laughed from here to Hell, his teeth sawing, his skin cracked with age, his evil eyes rolling, his beard drenched in black rain. He was giddy like a wolf with a carcass. The men on the ship knew what the message was—either you're with Styxx or you're a dead man.

He turned to his crew. 'See that, ye sot-headed yellow-bellied blubber-hands? That's what ye get fer crossing swords with old Styxx—death on an island. An' ain't no rum, no wenches, no taverns on that spit o' sand, by cracky!'

Ben saw that, he knew that. He hoped to God Annie was all right. He leaned over the side to watch Sawface and his pirates when suddenly—he saw old Benson swimming by the hull, grabbing a line that came from the captain's rear cabin window.... Annie! It had to be! She'd thrown Benson a line, he must've jumped the boat before Sawface knew, he dragged himself up upon the rudder's three inch straps, to climb in Styxx's own cabin! Oh how Ben loved that little girl.

No wonder Sawface and his pirates screamed and yelled and cursed Styxx, shoving oars so hard against the storm's waves that they broke. But old Benson would have to stay out of sight until they get where ever it was Styxx was going. Maybe he can hide in her room. Ben just hoped Styxx didn't see.

The *Wicked Rover* sailed on without any lifeboat. Ben thought about saying this to Styxx as he came back to the quarter deck. But Styxx only smiled. He knew what Ben and every man was thinking.

'Ain't you thinking, I's dumb, is you?' Styxx said between laughs.

'Every man knows we have no boats,' Ben now that the storm was moving on.

'What you ain't knowing is that I got lumber and clenched nails below, an we'll make ourselves a boat when this storm passes. I got tools in that little room by where you was with the prisoners. I knew you know how to design and build a boat. It'll be a big scow, to carry the load and the men. Them dories can't carry enough, anyway. You'll be getting to work when I say.'

Ben knew, that little room was Annie's room.

Now the storm was mostly gone west. The moon peeked out, with a few stars around it, as Styxx looked north.

## AT THE WHEEL

Later that night, one of Styxx's men relieved Ben at the wheel. It was nearly dawn, a slender oval glow of light appearing on the east horizon. Ben was sleepy but he knew he had to tell Annie to move from her room, soon.

When Ben came below, the prisoners were awake but not on their feet. They heard Ben come down, thinking it might be the cook with some food. They rose to peek out the grated window, then they groaned when they saw he had no food.



Ben went right to Annie's room. He opened the door slowly, hoping she'd still be asleep. But she wasn't there. Then he saw what Styxx was talking about—the planks of wood laying in a long box, with a huge sack of nails in one corner. The place was so dark, no wonder no one saw. But Annie wasn't here...where was she?

Ben closed the door, then he saw her come running down the hallway from the captain's cabin, running straight into his arms. He picked her up, grinning ear to ear, just to hold his girl.

'Where've you been, beautiful?'

'I had to clean up the water that older man spilled getting back into the ship. I had to close the cabin windows, they're kind of heavy.'

Ben then realized, if Styxx saw the water on his floor and the opened windows, he'd know someone got the old man out of the sea, someone from down here. No one was loose down here, except Annie. Ben knew his girl had done the right thing. He hugged her.

Ben put Annie down, even though she didn't want to be put down. But she heard Gaffie's steps down the same hallway with the day's meal for the prisoners. Ben would have to get inside before anyone could eat, so Annie ran off toward the door to her room.

'Can't go back there, Annie, Styxx is coming for the planks in the long box. You'll have to hide out somewhere else.'

Anne thought. 'I'll go to the kitchen with Gaffie. He likes me, and I can learn some cooking, too.' Then she ran off to the galley before Gaffie got down here to the prisoners. He came with tin plates and cups of rum and soup and an apple. Ben stood at the door.

'Saw you go up an' handle the wheel. Never seen Styxx let anyone do that before,' Gaffie said, putting the plates and cups down to unlock the door. Ben went in. He let everyone else take their ration before he did. Then he took what was left over, if anything. While Gaffie's back was turned, he took an extra apple, for Annie, in case she came back today.

When Gaffie left, the men gathered round Ben without speaking. They all knew something had changed. Maybe it was the course, maybe it was the four pirates abandoned on the island, whatever it was the men felt something had altered course. They searched Ben's eyes.

One said, 'What do ya know, captain? We have a right to know, being prisoners on account of you, all this time.'

'You're right, Stevenson. You all have a right. Well, I don't know everything but I do know we are all being preserved for some duty he don't want his own pirates to do. I do know there is some unknown island or cove or reef where he's got something for us to get.'

The African slave said, 'Gold, ain't it cap'n, gold as much as the hands can hold.'

The men murmured about gold.

'Gold ain't as good as bein' home with your life an' limb, I says,' Stevenson said for many of Ben's men. But another one, the Irishman, Lillivan, agreed

with the African. 'Aye lads, Styxx wouldn't be totting us out here for no small matter, he wouldn't. He has plenty up his sleeve, an' I aim to see it once before I dies.'

Ben said, 'We're all gonna see it, but then what? I don't aim to see any of my men die out of greed, when we can all get out of this alive. They've been working the sails through this storm, so they're tired until they eat. We've got seven good men, we can take them one against one if we have to. But I don't want any backstabbing over a handful of coins when we're so many miles from home.'

Most of them nodded.

'Now I'm getting some sleep, I've been up all night. We'll talk more when I get up. Just lay low until we get to Styxx's secret place.'

## SCOW

Two days later, Ben was at the wheel when Styxx came up from his cabin with a rough drawing of the boat he wanted Ben to build. It was a scow 20 feet long by 10 feet across, two lug sails and a little dandy over the rudder.

And rough it was, but Ben knew what Styxx wanted.

'Keel?' he asked Styxx.

'Two keels, for beaching the boat,' Styxx said.

'How much ballast?'

'The men will be the ballast,' Styxx said cryptically.

Ben wondered about that. Does that mean what they carry won't weight that much? Or is Styxx just being evasive? Styxx had two men get the lumber from below, stack it between the masts, and clear a space for Ben to work.

He then selected the straightest planks, with the clearest grain for the topsides. Without any way to steam-bend the planks Ben knew the scow would have a flat bottom, flat sides and a slanted stem and stern. He knew he'd have to put on more sail than Styxx had drawn, otherwise the men would run out of food and water before they got anywhere.

First, Ben painted the planks white so they wouldn't swell up too much or get too hot in the sun. Then he clenched-nailed up lapped sides. That night, tired as an old dog, he looked at his frames, sides, and transoms laying there. Good work, he thought, but in any event it would have to do since this was the only planks he was given. He knew 20 feet wasn't long enough for everyone. Maybe his crew of prisoners or Styxx' crew of pirates but not both. He hoped he got it done before talk begins over all of this.

Ben slept on the deck, inside the two topsides with a tarp over his head. In the night he awoke without opening his eyes. He heard the whispers, the sly talk of taking hold of this scow. He heard the talk of which way was due north, how much food there is on this ship, how long could a man hold out on the high seas.

Ben turned over. He heard their voices, hoping he'd remember those same voices when the time came. Somehow he knew it would be himself, Anne, and his men against all these pirates, even Styxx himself.

In the grey shaded dark of midnight, when the shadows of ropes slide across the deck, when the ship squeaks with the roll of the ocean, the pirates disappeared like a wisp. Their talk trailed off, their footsteps echoed faintly in the distance, their sly eyes closed out of the night.

Ben knew he'd have to watch his back. He knew he'd have to tell Styxx exactly when the scow would be finished, otherwise the pirates would attack as soon as Ben came close to finishing. Did Styxx have weapons he's been hiding, to get into the scow unnoticed? Did Gaffie have food no one knows about? Was there fresh water on the ship, down in some hold?

When morning came, Ben hammered the transoms into place, stem and stern, using trunnels. The scow now was tight, but not ready for the sea. Ben realized he'd have to make the masts and sails last, or risk the scow being lowered over the side when no one's watching.

One of the pirates came up to Ben while he worked. 'That thing can't sail on this ocean. Keel ain't deep enough.'

Ben knew he made the two keels just as Styxx drew them, but did that mean Styxx never intended to sail across the sea? What did this old joker know about keels, anyway? Maybe this old joker was scoping Ben out, seeing what he knows about keels and ships. Maybe he knew something of where Styxx was headed, Ben didn't know.

'It'll do,' Ben said without any inflection in his voice.

The wrinkled old pirate went off somewhere, spitting out the side of his mouth, cussing the world.

Ben worked on the cabin, tall and strong. It would have to protect them against rain, waves, the hot sun, and each other. He used old fashioned joinery to save nails. Ben made it tall, with a hole in the roof for the smoke of a fire. He just assumed they'd have to boil water to make it drinkable. Sooner or later, they'd run out of everything but each other.

Just then Styxx appeared, out of nowhere.

'Enough for today, captain,' he said to Ben with a strange air in his eye.

Ben stood up, stared at him with a question in his mind, then put the tools away. He went down below, to join his crew the prisoners. Inside their room, he had some leftover soup and rum. Annie was asleep in the corner, her tiny chest heaving just so slightly with her breath.

'We're close,' Ben said to them all. 'He don't want me to finish too soon, just on the day it all happens.'

One of them said, 'What happens?'

'I'm not rightly sure, but I'm getting it like we're being kept to do something he doesn't trust his men to do.'

'Treasure?'

'Maybe, but I don't think that's all.' Ben found the time for sleep just now, laying with Anne inside his arms and chest. All the prisoners slept, as there wasn't anything else for them to do. Night fell, and with it the quiet like a funeral, a stillness as the ship glided on toward a mysterious island and a destiny.

Sometime after midnight, Styxx himself came down the passageway quietly, stopping with a hand on the wall, listening for any movement above him, or behind him. He didn't want any of his pirates to know he was here.

He came to the prisoners' room, gradually pulling out the keys to the door. He turned the key round as quietly as he could. He stepped between sleeping bodies, till he shook Ben awake.

'Get yerself up, captain. Got work for you,' Styxx whispered, watching all around him to see if anyone arose.

Ben got up, following Styxx out of there. They went on deck, to the scow.

'Now here's what I want you to do. Make a drop keel on the bottom of the keel you got on there. Make it quietly, swiftly, right now.'

Ben did it. He slowly screwed another plank to the bottom of the keel, with a wood dowel at the stern end to lower the drop keel when it was needed. He made one for each of the scow's keels. Every noise he made echoed long and seemingly loud in the night. Styxx's helmsman didn't see, or he didn't let on that he did.

Then Styxx and Ben lowered the scow over the side, alongside the ship till the waves drove it to the *Rover's* stern. Ben and Styxx secured the scow to the stern, really out of sight of anyone leaning over to see what they'd done. When it was done, Styxx smiled proud. He'd done it without alerting the pirates, as far as he knew.

'Now, captain,' Styxx whispered in the night, 'you go back to sleep, an' keep yer trap shut about this, understood?' Styxx said that with his hand on his pistol. Ben had never seen Styxx wear a pistol before. His game was afoot, whatever it was.

Ben went back to the prisoners' room, wondering how much of this he could divulge to his men. The next move might reveal it all. So he slept, but not well.

Meanwhile Styxx woke Gaffie up, dragging him to the galley for some talk. He didn't want any of the men to hear this. They both leaned over the galley table, without any light but their own eyes.

'Now listen, Gaffie, we's close to it all.'

'I know, Cap, I could feel the time from the reef. But who do you trust?'

'Ain't trustin' nobody but the dawn. Get to the firearms cabinet. Get all the firearms an' take 'em to my cabin. Lock 'em in my locker, underneath by bed. Then throw the key to the locker out the stern window.' Styxx looked around. 'I got the scow secured to the sternpost, trailing the rudder. Throw the key into the scow, I'll pick it up later. None o' them fools a'fore the mast will ever know where the key is.' Styxx chuckled proudly.

'I gotta get movin', it's daylight sooner than later,' Gaffie said, slipping away. He did the deed, tossing the key into the scow, bouncing up and over the waves, then sliding down with them. Gaffie came back to his bunk in the galley. He heard footsteps, the crew was awakening a bit too soon. Did they know something was a' brewing?

Maybe they did.

So Gaffie locked up the medicines, the fruit, the rum, the soup and cans of what was left over. The flour would be of no use, once they leave the *Rover* for the scow. But now, fresh water would be like gold.

Dawn then came, with a grey drizzling mist. It hung over the horizon, as if Styxx had thrown it over the sea. The *Rover* headed right toward that mist. The rain came down heavier upon the ship's deck, stinging and draining off the planks searching for a place to collect at an edge. The *Rover* glided right under the mist which dripped off the sails, the spars, the coaming, every man's beard, collecting at every man's neck.

The sails failed to move the ship, they were just too heavy with rain. Styxx looked around hastily, like he expected to see something emerge from this darkening grey mist. His eyes were a lance, prodding the dank heavy rain. Suddenly a single breeze blew the mist to starboard, across the ship.

The men ran to the starboard bulwark, leaning over, staring out. They only saw the grey rain soak the ship's planks, they only heard the waves trickle at the hull as the *Rover* tipped forward...but were they going in a circle? Styxx smiled—he seemed to know what was happening.

Now the mist divided as if it were being peeled apart. Then the crew saw the mist lift to expose the sea forward. The sight of the sea led in a wedge toward a cove. But Styxx heard the current under the waves churn over a reef. He knew this place.

‘Helmsman, steer to port 20 degrees, now!’

Every pirate on board felt the ship's deck tilt. They ran to the port bulwark, watching the mist lift to reveal that cove. Grey rocks everywhere around the *Rover*. Styxx heard the current's churn, bubbles near the surface. He knew what to do.

‘Slack sails, men. Drop anchor! Any further an' our ship'll split on the reefs!’ He yelled this out urgently. The men responded. They ran to their positions, pulled on ropes, their feet squeaked on the wet deck, they yelled out orders, got the ship to a halt.

Then the pirates came to the quarter deck, with devious greed in their eyes, hands on hips, spitting out what they're gonna do if Styxx gets in their way. They gathered round him, smelly, wet and dirty, snickering, spitting, just itching for action.

‘So,’ Styxx began slowly, as if he had a great deal to say, ‘we're here. You've made it, Jacks and Jims. Now we get what we came for.’

One of them yelled, ‘What'd we come for? That's what I'm pluggin' for.’

Styxx smiled. He loved this, having his men around him, wildly hungry for action. ‘I gonna tell ya, mates.’

‘We ain't yer mates just yet, Styxx,’ some other desperado said. They all laughed showing dirty teeth.

‘Ain't that just like you, Scabbface,’ Styxx said. ‘Just like that mutiny you led on the *Jynx*, ain't ya.’

Scabbie twisted on his beard. ‘Possibly.’

Every man laughed, knowing full well Scabbface loved to hang captains.

‘Enough talk, Styxx,’ the old pirate sitting on the cabin said calmly. ‘Now what is we here for?’

‘It ain’t just you,’ Styxx said. ‘It’s them damn prisoners we been feeding all along. They’re gonna work for us.’

While Styxx laid out his plans, he saw the old pirate lead two of them below. Styxx knew they were headed for the ammunitions room where the weapons were. He signaled Gaffie to unlock the prisoners’ door, get them through Styxx’s cabin and out the stern window into the scow. They’d each have a weapon as they lowered themselves down into the scow. The pirates might hear their steps, but it would be too late.

While all this running went on below, Styxx said, ‘Now here’s me plan. As you know, all of us are running from a court-martial. Our only chance is get on the island, get to the gold we carried to Port Royal, and get our privateer papers back.’

‘So what’s the prisoners for?’ Scabbface said, angry.

‘If we all leave the ship, it will found on these reefs. We’re gonna stay here until the prisoners sail the scow into the cove an’ return with the royal gold and our papers.’

Scabbface said, ‘Why should we let ‘em?’

Styxx grazed his moustache. ‘Cause they can’t go anywhere by themselves but to get the gold. It don’t mean a thing to them, they won’t stab each other in the back like you’s would. They’ll come back unless they want us to leave ‘em to starve and kill each other to stay alive, one by one.’

The pirates murmured. They saw the sense in that. They didn’t see Gaffie and the prisoners load food, water, and weapons into the scow. Styxx went down the passageway, to his cabin and out his stern window, hopping into the scow. Ben cast the bowline off, he raised the sails, the bow turned toward the cove. The pirates watched for a while till the scow landed on the beach. Just then the old pirate came up on deck, furious.

‘They stole all the food, all the weapons. They ain’t comin’ back, men! What’d we gonna do? Either we go in, risking the reefs, or we leave to get Sawface an’ come back to hang ‘em all after they’s dug up the treasure, for us.’

‘I say we get Sawface an’ come back,’ one of them said.

They all raised fists against Styxx and the prisoners.

‘Then let’s strike sails back there for Bitts Island, if we can find it.’

While they struck sails, turned the ship around for Bitts Island, Styxx, Ben, Annie and Gaffie led the scow through the mist. Ben had seven men here, things were crowded, you might say. They raised three sails, then settled in. The mist hovered over them like the dome of a church, thicker and thicker.

Anne said to Styxx, ‘You take up a lot of space. You need to lose some weight.’

The men laughed. Styxx said, ‘Spunky, you is somethin’ else.’

Ben put his arm around Annie. ‘She’s my daughter.’

Styxx stared at her, his mind whizzing with plots. So, this is how I can get a handle on Ben and his men...the girl.

The men looked out toward the mist, seeing weird shapes hidden in its' grey obscurity. They murmured about it.

Styxx said, pointing, 'Captain, look for a rock the shape of a boot, called Dead-eye Island. It has one single tree on it, a palm tree that leans east, no matter what the wind.'

One of the men called out, 'There it is, just ahead, steer to starboard captain, now!'

Ben leaned the tiller over, tilting the scow on its drop keels, to starboard. When they passed the island, they saw the crows and vultures huddled on the tree's branch, leaning it up and down with the wind. That branch waved up and down in the air like the call of misfortune, beckoning with a yellow squealing snicker. Then the mist covered the island over.

Coming around Deadeye Island, the swirling mist revealed two rocks just above the surface, thirty paces apart. Styxx said, 'Steer between 'em.'

'They're mighty close together,' Ben said, staring at them.

'Yeah they is. But sharks can't get in there between 'em. If we go around the sharks'll ram us, trying to split us up. I seen this before,' Styxx said. He leaned over, his hand grabbing the tiller till he pulled it right at the twin rocks. Then Ben yanked his hand off the tiller, aiming at the opening. Styxx said, 'They're called the Eyes of the Sea. There's a little valley with reefs on either side, we'll make it if yer steady with yer hand.'

Annie looked at her father, seeing if he was afraid or not. When she saw he was not, she relaxed, leaning against him with her hands on his chest. Ben raised the drop keels.

Styxx said, 'The wind'll die out when we get between the reefs. We'll have to row through.'

Sure enough the wind did die, and when it did Styxx smiled. 'Good job, captain, right down the nose of the Eyes.'

Ben said to his men, 'Strap up the fore and main.'

With sails curled to the masts the men took their stations with crudely shaped planks as oars. They dipped them in the shallow, motionless water, watching the water gleam by, tiny ripples coming from under the scow, only the lonely sound of oars dipping and dripping as they came out of still water. Annie leaned over to see the reefs. She saw the bubbles of the sharks swimming around them in furious circles, careening outside the reefs.

To Annie the sharks looked so smooth-backed, snorting, whirling faster than any fish she'd ever seen, all around her. Annie thought, They're nice fish, I wonder if they talk to each other.

The scow came up to the Eyes, so close the men had to use oars to push off the rocks, to shove themselves through with nary a stitch to spare. The men held their breath, as did Styxx. There might not have been a wisp of wind anywhere in the world while they were between the rocks. Time seemed to grab them, holding them there. When they finally did get through, Styxx did

breath easier, a slight night breeze returning.

For some reason, the mist disappeared now that they were through the Eye of the Sea. The air felt cool, as if it were fresh. Now the men saw off the port bow the island Styxx had come for. Styxx pulled out his map, staring at it, watching the island come close, staring at his map, then at his island.

He laughed a high, wicked laugh. 'There she is, right where I left her—ha, ha!'

Annie sat up to see. She saw the beach first, gleaming white sand with overhanging palms trees and an island that rose behind the beach to a gentle point. At the top of the island stood a house on stilts, watching over the island and the sea.

She said, 'Look Dad, a house!'

'I see, lassie, I do see.' He turned to Styxx, 'Is anyone there?'

Styxx hesitated, his eye turned to one side. 'Maybe not. Maybe so.'

Ben said, 'So you left someone there till you got back, is that it?'

Styxx then looked down at his map, turning his face away. 'Something like that.'

Ben said out loud what he was thinking. 'There's more to this tale than just gold, ain't there, Styxx?'

'Might be, captain, might just be,' Styxx said.

Bouncing up and down, Annie said, 'I like a mystery.'

'You, Spunky, you is somethin' else,' Styxx said slapping his thigh.

A current drew them into an enclosed cove within the island's shape, revealing a perfect shimmering beach with blue slender water lapping the shore. The men couldn't wait to get off this little scow.

Styxx grabbed the arm of one of them. 'Don't be so unwary. It's been two years since I been here. No telling what you might see, or hear. Be looksin' out, men. I warned ya.'

Ben said to his men, 'Every man take a weapon. Stevenson, you take the rifle, you're the best shot.' Then the men climbed out of the scow, pulling it well up on the shore, more and more. Ben and Styxx jumped out, watching the jungle line carefully. Styxx knew what he searched for, Ben did not. Anne ran over to make a sandcastle, while they were still there on the beach.

The men dragged the scow up and up, tying it off on one of the palm trees, covering it with branches they broke off, hiding it best as they could. They all heard the screeching sounds of birds overhead, gulls swooping down to the beach, one perched on the scow's cabin.

'See's what I mean,' Styxx said, 'this island ain't deserted, just yet.' He gazed around, peering hard for something without telling what. Suddenly he said to Ben, 'Get her with us,' pointing at Annie.

She came running to her Dad, holding his waist with all she had. Every man looked up toward that house, wondering.

Styxx took hold of his short sword, sweeping it at the gull perched on the scow. 'Not good luck, having it sit there a'watching us, our every move. I'd rather hav'em fer dinner than fer a lookout.'



Annie said at Styxx, ‘Don’t you dare cook my friend. That’s mean.’

The gull then swooped off the scow, toward the sea and then up and around to the house.

Styxx watched the bird like it was an enemy spy. ‘See’s what I mean. Went right for the house. We ain’t alone.’

Anne then walked up off the beach by herself. Ben came after her. ‘You’ll have to stay with me until we see who’s in that house, an’ what’s here that’s so valuable. Stay with me and my men.’

She took her Dad’s hand as the men cut a path through the palms and brush and vines and cool moist darkness. Ben lead the men with Styxx last. Suddenly Annie broke free, running up the slope, through the brush.

‘Hey, girl, where you going?’ her father yelled at her.

‘Daddy, I hear it, I hear it.’

‘What do you hear, little one?’

‘A stream coming down, and voices.’

That caught the attention of the men, from Ben on down. Voices—but who? They all ran after her, shoving huge leaves out of their way, getting cut by the branches, cobwebs in their faces, soft mushy ground underneath their feet. They caught up with Anne by a clear sparkling silver stream. She was kneeling by it, feeling the cold water in her small hand.

‘Here, Daddy, here it is,’ she said.

When Ben and the men came, Styxx was out of breath. He sat down with a plop, leaning against a palm tree. He got out his map of the island, studying it privately. He put his finger on the stream’s location, looking around with a wary smirk. ‘This ain’t right,’ he said to himself, while Ben stood nearby out of sight.

‘What ain’t right?’ Ben asked, coming to him.

Styxx shoved the map into his shirt. ‘This stream ain’t the place to be,’ he said, struggling to stand up while the others came around.

Annie stood with her little feet in the stream—a few inches deep—cool and refreshing. She felt the water with her fingers, tracing little ripples back and forth. Just then two swans, huge and gleaming white with black beaks came gliding down, just upstream. One of them had a black spot on its back. Annie saw them. They looked so soft and furry with bright white feathers. Anne got out of the stream to walk up the sandy bank toward them. As soon as she came within a few feet, they fluttered wings to take off, flying above Anne in a circle until they flew off north, toward the top of the island.

Styxx saw this, he knew those swans meant something, but Ben only went after Anne, to protect her.

‘Black spot flying,’ Styxx said, ‘I knew it was.’

Ben’s men now listened to Styxx. Gaffie said, ‘What’d you mean?’

‘It’s the riddle of the Black Dog. When I was a young buck in Nassau plyin’ for a ship, at the Black Dog Tavern, there was a riddle carved into the wall right there where I sat with rum and a maid. It said—

Black spot flying,

means someone's spying,  
beware of the well  
where he fell,  
there's a crossing here,  
the last fear.

They all said, 'What's that mean?' looking at each other.

Styxx said, 'It means we got to leave this stream. Don't drink. Follow them swans but watch out for a well. Don't use it, neither.'

'That's all superstition, Styxx,' Ben said, trying to calm his men down. 'You brought us here, now you lead us. Get this over with.'

Anne seemed to lead the way toward the swans, as if she knew them and they knew her. She ran up and up the slope where it yielded to her. The men had to shove their way through the brush, through wet leaves, spiders and rats and snakes curling around the trees. Then the swans alighted on the side of a stone well, in a clearing at the base of a stone cliff.

Anne ran toward the swans.

'Don't get too close,' Ben said running after her, catching up at the well. The men were not so anxious to get near the well. Styxx came to the well, looking at his map with a finger.

'Right here it is, just where I left her,' he whispered to himself. Everyone heard.

That Annie leaned over to see down the dark deep well. Ben caught her leaning over, pulling her away from the stone edge. He said to Styxx, 'What'd you know about this well?'

'See that cliff?' Styxx said pointing up at it. 'There's been a few men fall off that cliff right into this here well. They went to their grave, face down, an' never even made a sound.'

'Sounds fanciful to me,' Ben said, but his men hung on every word Styxx uttered.

Styxx said, 'See, there ain't no rope here to raise water in a bucket. This well ain't for water, it ain't for staying alive, it's for the dead to see the dead.'

The men murmured on that. Ben said, 'What in heaven's name does that mean?'

Then Annie came to her father, saying, 'Daddy, there's a smell in the well.'

'Like what?' Ben asked leaning down to her.

'I don't know, like not anything I ever smelled before.'

Just then a bat came flying up out of the well. The men scattered, scared. They said, just about all together, 'Get us off this island. This ain't no place for living men, get us outta here!'

Styxx said at them, 'Too late, me hearties. We's here, we have been this far, there ain't no turning back till we have what I came for.' He put his hand on his pistol, put his other hand on his sword, just in case they had any ideas.

Ben said again, 'What kind of smell, Annie?'

'It wasn't anything I've ever smelled before. It was like a bad medicine.'

Styxx said, 'It's the alcohol down the well to preserve what's down there at

the bottom. And I don't mean bodies. It ain't dead men, it's the gold and a canister that has what I've come for.'

Now that brought the men close to Styxx and the well.

Just then Annie looked up to the top of the cliff. She saw a scaffold, leaning over the cliff with a worn rope dangling. Ben then saw what she saw. Now he knew what it was for. Annie then ran alongside the cliff, looking for a place to climb up.

'Oh no, young girl, not even you could get up this cliff. You'll have to climb on my back an' hold on, all the way up,' Ben said, picking Annie up onto his back. She put her slender arms around his neck, leaning her head on his shoulder, smiling at him the way girls do.

Styxx and the men came over to the cliff, seeing some hermit had twisted a vine from top to bottom, wrapped around protruding branches, coming down from the top of the cliff.

Styxx said, 'It's been used before, it'll hold one man at a time.'

One of the men said, 'How'd ya know that?'

Then Annie pointed at the vine, Ben took hold of it, clawing his feet into the cliff anywhere he could. He pulled himself and Annie up, a few feet at a time, slowly but surely. Ben said, 'Because it's a vine wrapped around a hemp rope, been here a long time.' He peeled back some of the vine to show the hemp wrapping.

Another of his men said, 'We ain't alone, is we, cap?'

'No,' Ben said, on his way up the vine, 'we are not. It's strange here.'

'Is that good, Daddy?' Annie asked.

'I can't say yet, darlin', not just yet,' Ben said. He was halfway up when the men saw how it was done, but how would the old cutthroat Styxx get himself up like this? Swinging down from one deck to another is one thing, climbing your own weight up a cliff, now that's another. Nearly at the top, Ben looked down to see where Styxx was, but he didn't see him.

Anne saw him, on top of the cliff before Ben could get there!

'Look Daddy, there he is!' she exclaimed, tugging on Ben's shirt.

When Ben got on top, putting Annie down, he said, 'How'd you get here?'

'The cliff ain't no cliff, it's just stairs covered with vines and grass and moss. See there, the stairs in a winding circle, once you cut the brush out.'

The men followed Styxx up the winding stairs to the top of the cliff. Styxx got his map out. 'See, this is Gallows Hill,' Styxx said to them all.

Anne went over to the scaffold, touching the rope hanging down, spinning it in the wind where it had been eaten through. It was the same smell. She looked down from the top of the cliff down into the deep dark well. It frightened her. She ran to her Dad.

Ben saw the scaffold, too. He thought about it, hanging just over the well with a frayed rope dangling from it. Too ominous, too much a coincidence, too much here that's unsaid.

Ben turned to Styxx. 'What's this all about?'

He only said, 'More than you know. More than you should know.'

The men gathered around. Ogilvy said for them all, 'There's been death here, cap, ain't there been?'

Ben said, 'Looks that way.'

Gaffie laughed to himself. Styxx then put his map away. He said, 'You know why this scaffold is just over the well, mates?'

They didn't breathe. Ben said, 'We all got our ideas. Spell it out, Styxx. None of us wants to spend the rest of our lives here.'

'An' you ain't, matey. Ol' Styxx ain't gonna, myself. I'll tell yas. Somethin' had to be lowered down the well, fast and hard to hit the bottom just right. Couldn't slap off the sides, an' couldn't be lowered slow. Had to be fast and accurate, like a gunshot.'

One of the old men said, 'Glad it wadn't me.'

Ben realized what Styxx was getting to. 'No, no man would volunteer for this duty—it's instant death if you miss by a foot, either side of the stone well, right, Styxx?'

'You speak the truth, captain. Whoever it would be had to be a condemned man, a coward, or a traitor. Not work for the young,' Styxx said.

Ben then had an insight. 'And that's because the bottom isn't the bottom, is it, Styxx.'

'You're a fine man, captain. Should have been with me in '26 when men could take what they saw—treasure, women, ships, anything you desired. But you're right. That bottom ain't a bottom, that's what little Spunky smelled, the medicine. It's a top that spins on a rod. Only a thin man could get down through the well, hit the top hard enough to spin it, an' fall down below the well, to the cave where the gold lies. It's hot, it's suffocating down there, it's dark, ain't no telling what snakes or lizards or rats or what'all lives there now. Been there a decade, mates.'

Ben said, 'And it's more than just doubloons, right, Styxx?'

'Aye, lads, yer captain's smart as paint, but who among you is brave enough to claim it all fer yerself? Who is bony and brave?'

They looked at each other. Any one of them would have done it with a shipmate alongside, but not one of them dared it by himself. Except one.

Annie took hold of her father's hand. 'Daddy, I could get down the well,' she said looking up at him with all the innocent hope in the world. But Ben couldn't risk her life.

'Annie, love, there's poisonous snakes, there's poison gas down there, there's rats—which you don't like—and it's dark. If you fell, you'd never come back. How would I live without you?' But just as he said it, he knew she was the only one who could get through the well.

'Well, then, Daddy, why don't you drop one of these stones down the well so the top turns up?'

The thought was so simple they were all amazed at this little girl. The men laughed. Styxx threw his head back. Ben knew it had to be, but could his hands be steady on the rope that lowered his little girl down this well? What bat, what creature from Hell would come after her?

be up there all along, what he feared he'd have to face when he came back here, all along.

'I don't know, darlin', maybe those bats we saw come out of the well,' Ben said to Annie.

But Annie knew there was more than bats in that house.

Styx said, 'Now, Spunky, don't you go off on yer own like that. Ain't no place for a young girl up there.'

Gaffie shook his head, agreeing.

But Ben saw in his daughter's eyes that she was thinking of what was in that little house. Then what Annie had thought now occurred to Ben—maybe the poison is up there in that house. He didn't know why he thought this, but he knew that Annie had the same idea. For some reason she didn't go bounding out on her own, like she usually does.

'Daddy, would you take a look in that house?' she asked him.

Ben said, 'We'll all go together.'

He led, holding Annie's hand, with Gaffie, Styx and Ben's men following along. The way up was marked with wood steps dug into the ground, a foot apart, rising up and up the side of a hill. The path up had been used enough for the way to be clear of brush, branches, vines, and trees. In the silent burning sun of the day, the path seemed an invitation.

They came to the house. The air was cooler up here on top of the island. Ben's men looked around, seeing far out into the ocean. They could see the crystal blue water around, the Eyes of the Sea off in the distance, and even the tip of Bitts Island far off on the horizon. They all felt a breeze up here, fanning their faces, blowing west.

The house was built in an old tree, old dirty planks streaked grey, dusty, splintered in some places. The house was square, with high small windows, a slanted roof of lattice, a porch with one door to it. Annie ran around to the door, by herself but followed by Gaffie, then Styx, then Ben and his men. Annie halted before the door, waiting for her father. They all gathered around her, waiting for something to happen. Just then the breeze seemed to blow the old door, creaking, open slightly, enough for a shadow to emerge. That shadow crept across the porch, spreading out in a triangle, laying across the porch, the men, the hill. No one moved, they felt the shadow's presence all over them, cold and bare and dark. It was the spectre of someone watching, as if through a looking glass.

Annie heard it first, the talk of a parrot inside.

'Daddy, did you hear that, it's a bird inside,' she said.

'I heard something, Ann, but I don't know what. Maybe it'll talk again,' Ben said. Styx put one foot on the porch, knowing more than Ben did.

The parrot squawked again, speaking a name. Styx knew the name, but no one else did.

'I heard it again, Daddy,' Annie said.

'I did, too, girl, but I don't know that name,' Ben said. The men spread out, figuring there might be someone in there looking for a fight.

Styxx said, 'This stone will do.' He said it with authority, like he'd done this before, with this stone. It had an inscription, carved.

Then men then gathered the scaffold rope around the stone, heaving it into place, then gradually lowering it below the scaffold till the rope held...for now. They then backed off, gingerly, as if any sound might break the rope, and dash all their hopes...the rope held for now.

Ben then looked down at the well. He steadied the rope as it swung gently in the wind. When he thought the rope was perfectly still, vertical, and ready, he took Styxx' sword to cut the rope. The stone fell through the air—for an awful instant they heard nothing but the whistling of the stone falling down—then the stone clanged loud and hard against the well's bottom, spinning the top, bending it, till it stopped spinning. Ben looked down—the thing worked!

'Done,' he said.

The men cheered. Annie jumped up and down. Styxx laughed like a looney bird, their yelps echoed all over the island.

Ben took Annie's hand, taking her down the stone steps inside the cliff, down to the well. Ben and Annie looked down the well. What they saw wasn't what they expected. The bottom of the well had tilted up, exposing what was below. But what was below was no treasure. It was only this huge silver key. No more than that.

Not only that, the bottom of the well had twisted itself off, rolling away off to one side. A tunnel, a tunnel, Annie just knew it. Then she saw what Ben saw in the tunnel—snakes.

'Oh, Annie girl, you see what I see?' Ben said, pained.

'The snakies, Daddy?'

'That's what I see. They're guarding the key. But we've got to get that key.'

Just then Styxx and Ben's men arrived, circled around the well, seeing the silver key and the black snakes, their yellow almond eyes burning bright in the darkness. 'But how...' Ben said his voice trailing off.

Annie said absently, 'That smell, what is it Daddy, it's back again.'

Styxx knew it. 'That's some sort of snake poison. Whenever someone wants to go down there, they pour it on the snakes. Prob'ly it don't last forever, but for long enough to get the key.'

'But what is it?' Gaffie asked.

No one answered. Silence fell among them all. Then Annie looked up to the house, only she saw it wasn't really a house. It was a small tree house just enough for birds or a man by himself, or no one, perched among strong branches of a tree. That tree had grown around the house till the branches bore an odd resemblance to the scaffold. But who was in it?

'Daddy, who is in that house?' she asked clear out of the blue.

'What?' Ben said, caught off guard.

Gaffie looked up, too. 'Now ain't that a question from a young mind,' he said, slapping his thigh.

Styxx looked up, too. He saw what he didn't want to see, what he feared to

Styxx stepped up onto the porch, as quietly as he could. He put his hand on his pistol, he took his sword out of its holster with that soft sliding scrape swords make. He came close to the door, deft steps, no breath, no sound but the breeze.

Just then that parrot squawked that name again. Styxx knew it well, but no one else did. No one moved, not Annie, not Ben, not any of the men. Their eyes squinted, their ears pricked up, the mouths opened agape.

The door then eased itself open—maybe by the wind, maybe by a hand, maybe by a ghost or a spectre or a dead skeleton leaning. Anne put her hand over her mouth, she turned to bury her face in her father's chest. Ben hardly breathed.

The door swung open, near Styxx. The parrot sat on the inside doorknob, squawking, jerking its beak around to see.

Then it said the name again, 'Sticker lives, Sticker lives, Sticker...'

Ben relaxed. 'Who is Sticker? Styxx, who is he? Someone you murdered?'

'Hush,' Styxx said softly, still wary, still looking around for someone to jump out to stab him. The parrot flew back inside to its perch. Styxx knew Sticker was here, just behind this door. But the door opened more, with no one there. Styxx wondered if Sticker was a dead skeleton, come back to life to steal his soul. But he saw no one. He heard footsteps, somewhere.

The men came up on the porch with Ben. He put Annie down, standing her behind the men where she'd be safe. Ben heard the footsteps, too, but he knew they came from the roof or a cellar. Inside, the house was small, a low bunk, a table in the center, some old sea charts, books, a tall feather pen, a sailor's chest locked, and an ancient mural of a ship with skull and crossbones flying from the yard.

Anne stayed outside.

Suddenly Styxx shoved the table aside, revealing a trap door beneath it. He jerked up the floorboards, dragged up a bony old man with a long beard, bulging eyes, stick fingers, and droopy clothes. Every man got his weapon out. Was he a ghost, was he real, was he come back from the dead?

Styxx knew better. He knew old Sticker. 'So,' Styxx said, nose to nose, smelling the old man, his sword in Sticker's belly, 'you ain't dead yet, is you?'

'Not hardly, Mister Fang, or Benbow, or which ever name you's goin' by now. Not hardly at all,' Sticker said with sarcasm dripping from his old tongue and rotten teeth smiling.

'Styxx, to you, you mongoose, you hanging dog, you damned barnacle chaser. An' don't forget it,' Styxx said.

'Real name, Blackstone, Eloth Blackstone, half-breed, traitor, slime-ball, an' above all, liar,' Sticker said right back at him, spitting as he threw out the words.

'That's me,' Styxx said, 'down to the last drop.'

'I knew you'd come back with some treacherous crew, I knew you would. I'd seen your topsails on the horizon, I knew it was you an' your cutthroats,' Sticker spat at Styxx.

‘They ain’t who you think, Sticker. I captured them on a commercial ship bound for Baltimore. My usual crew are still on the *Rover*, hanging around Bitts Island, waiting for us to return.’

‘You ain’t never gonna return, Blackstone. I’ll see you hanged on this island, myself,’ Sticker laughed like a cackling crow.

Blackstone was shook for a second, then he regained his meanness. ‘To Hell you ain’t. I might just hang you myself, before I’m through.’

Then Annie said, ‘What’s all this talk of hanging? Don’t you touch that parrot, he looks nice.’

‘A kid, a girl!’ Sticker exclaimed. ‘Blackstone, you ain’t...’

‘Naw, I ain’t. It’s the daughter of that captain, there. He got me here, an’ he’s gonna steer us outta here.’

‘Ain’t never seen a female kid before, just wenches and slaves,’ Sticker said leaning down at Annie. When Annie touched the parrot, it flew to a window sill.

‘Enough of that,’ Styxx threw back, grabbing Sticker’s bony arm. ‘We came to get what we came for. They don’t know what it is.’

‘Do they get a cut?’ Sticker asked close to Styxx’s face.

‘Maybe, depends on getting outta here in one piece,’ Styxx then said to Ben and the men. ‘They’re here because they ain’t likely to mutiny like my usual jackals. Ben, here, he can get us home from any sea.’

‘I see. You come for the key,’ Sticker said smiling at everyone.

‘That we did,’ Styxx said. ‘Now do your duty.’

‘With what?’ Sticker said right back.

‘What does he mean?’ Ben asked, with his men coming closer to Sticker and Styxx.

Styxx said, ‘He means he wants something in exchange for the key. You see, only the parrot can get it without getting swallowed by them snakes. Some of ‘em are ten feet long, a hand around in the neck. No man could do it. So what’d we offer him to get the parrot to do it?’ Styxx looked at Ben like Ben had the answer.

But Ben didn’t. ‘Now look, both of you sidewinders. Both of you got something you’re hiding from us. Both of you need to get off this island. Now what’s the game, here?’

Sticker said, ‘I’ll tell the world. Blackstone was first mate of the frigate *King’s Ransom*, 24 guns, 1200 tons from Portsmouth to Port Royal. In the hold it was carrying—’

‘I’ll tell me own tale, mind you,’ Blackstone said. ‘She carried gold bars and the king’s jewels for the governor of Port Royal to pay buccaneers to burn the Spanish ships plying the seas thereabouts. We was near Port Royal when a storm hit us broadside. We were unloading weight to ride the waves when a Spanish galleon struck us, killing enough for the crew to mutiny against the captain. It wadn’t my idea, but I went along to save my skin. The *Ransom* went down, everyone drowned but the crew that mutinied. The captain kept a diary, which I left here with Sticker. The gold in barrels washed ashore, an



it's still here. We buried it in a cave by the beach. Then we covered the entrance. Sticker knows where the captain's log is. The diary will put me in the clear, the gold will give Sticker and me a new life, somewhere that no one knows our story, like Charleston.'

'We need the key to get the log. It has the exact location of the cave,' Sticker said, 'an you're gonna get the gold outta here with all of us alive.'

Ben said, 'So you need each other, and we all need the key. So get that parrot a working on the key.'

Styx said, 'One of your men needs to lower the poison down the well.'

The men jumped on that, running back to the scaffold, ready to get the key and get off this cursed island.

Sticker then dragged a chair over to the trap door in the floor. He lowered a string down the hole, pulling up the poison. Oh, did it stink! Ben grabbed it, holding his nose and mouth, the men scattered from that stinking smell, Anne fainted, Ben ran out to the scaffold where he and his men lowered the poison into the well. The string broke at just the right moment, dropping the poison in. Ben heard the snakes squirm and squirl and whirl away from the poison. Their crawling away drew the poison's smell down with them.

Then Sticker said to the parrot, 'Key to Paradise, Key to Paradise!' He said it loud enough to wake Anne up. The parrot flew off out the window, down the well, and back up with the silver key in its beak. The parrot then dropped the key on the table—Sticker swiped it up before Blackstone could move a muscle.

'Ha, ha!' Sticker said to Blackstone, 'you ain't the pirate you once was, is you, now?'

Then Blackstone dragged the chair over to the center of the room. Sticker stood on the chair, used the key to turn a lock in the roof joists above his head, just where he could reach it. A lid fell down, the log fell down, Sticker fumbled it, Blackstone grabbed it in midair.

'Ha! More than you think, old man, you're just a bag o' bones,' Blackstone said waltzing out of the little house, down the cliff stairs, and on toward the beach. Then men followed while Ben carried Anne down the cliff stairs to the beach. Everyone was there, looking around as Blackstone studied the log. He turned one way, the men ran that way; he turned another way, the men ran off that way till they stopped, seeing he was still reading the log.

Then it hit him. He wouldn't have to find the entrance, it would find him. He walked along the beach, watching everywhere.

Sticker came down. He knew what Blackstone knew. 'Watch for them snakes. They'll come spinning out the cave 'cause it leads to the bottom of the well. That's how we go the lid an' the key down there, in the first place.'

Just then, snakes appeared through the sand from a bank a distance away. They came squirming out through the sand, barely able to stay above the soft sand, crawling for the water. They were covered with this lime green bright stuff, the poison. They tried to throw themselves into the sea, but they wriggled right there on the beach, a tangle of slender twitching bodies, dying.

Annie gasped at the sight of their thin green slimy bodies. Ben went over, kicked them all into the sea, they disappeared...maybe dead, maybe alive but not coming back.

Ben's men traced the snake tracks back to the opening they made in the sand. They shoved sand away. A door three feet tall stood in their way with the lock for the silver key. Gaffie blew sand off the lock opening. Blackstone put the key in, scraped it around. The door jerked open, when it did the wood door fell apart in their hands. Now there was nothing between them and the gold but this dank darkness and plenty of work.

Blackstone said, 'I'm going in first, to make sure none of you honest sailors stuffs yer pockets.'

Ben said, 'It's a long sail to anywhere before that gold'll do any of us any good. No reason to be stealing, do you hear me, men? Might be rats, might be spiders or lizards, so watch your feet.'

'I like lizards, Daddy,' Anne said.

'Well, darling, you stay back from the cave until we've got the scow loaded. Now,' Ben said to two of his men, 'you two row the scow over here. Snap off some thick branches, to roll her onto the beach, but not out of the water. She'll get heavy as we load her.'

They ran off to the scow.

Meanwhile the men began to carry the gold bars out of the low black cave. The bars were heavy but small in their hands. When the two men pulled the scow over branches up on the beach, the other men loaded the gold bars into the scow. Annie stood by the scow's hull in the shade, touching it with her finger, running her finger along its lapped plank.

'I think I'll call you *Ducky*,' she said.

Ben started thinking about leaving the island. They'd need food, but for how long? Port Royal, that's where they plot a course first. Then maybe he and Annie and his men can sign on a schooner heading for Florida or Charleston, or even back home in Baltimore. The only food would be on these trees, these fruits and maybe if they can trap a bird or a crab or fish the waters as they sail.

The men were happy, knowing they're gonna leave soon. Blackstone, though, was not smiling. He hadn't seen his pirate crew in a few days. He still had to get rid of Sticker. And he'd have to get to Nassau to clear his name. Maybe they knew of his pirate acts, maybe they didn't. He might get lucky or he might get a hangman's noose.

The bars didn't take long. The afternoon was fading now. Tired of carrying the gold, the men lay down in the shade of the palm trees for a nap. Ben knew they'd have to get out of here on the tide, full of gold, men, and food. They'd have to boil water as they went. He went into the scow to arrange the gold as ballast, along the keel line.

Ben didn't see Blackstone anywhere, which bothered him. Where was the old pirate, so jealous of his gold and that ship's log? And where was his little Annie? Knowing her, she was probably sticking her finger in a bee's nest.

With the men snoring in the shade, Ben went looking after Anne. He first went up the trail that led to the house. When he got to the top of the cliff where the scaffold stood, he looked around. He gazed at the sea all around this island, the Eyes of the Sea out there, and off in the distance there sat Bitts Island. He knew the reefs were out there, and beyond Port Royal.

And then he saw it—the tall topmasts of the *Rover*, anchored on the other side of the island—how did they get past the Eyes of the Sea? There must be some other way here, even Blackstone don't know about. But that's no matter...the pirates are on the island. They'll get up here to the house soon, maybe tonight.

Then he heard Annie's shriek! From the housetop! Ben turned, he saw the pirates grab Anne, rope her to the roof of the house where a tiny bell stood on top of a square mast. They were laughing, just like they did in Baltimore. Annie was scared to death, she wrestled around but she couldn't free herself from the ropes. They were too tight, they cut off her circulation, making her sleepy.

Ben knew it was a trap to get him and his men up here for a fight. But the men were asleep as dusk fell over the island, over the sea, over the world. He thought desperately. He'd have to rescue Annie, get down the island to the scow and get the men off before the pirates came after them. He'd have to wait for the night.

Ben crept to a place among the palms where no one would see him. Now night had fully come, a purple shining dark with stars out and a deceptive wind. He hoped Anne wouldn't wake up till he got there, so she'd make no noise. Ben crept up to the house. He studied the roof all around; there was one chance and one chance only.

A tall palm tree grew next to the house, shading one high window. If he could get the vine from the cliff, tie it off on the top of the palm tree he might swing himself across to the roof just enough to grab that mast where Anne was tied. One chance only. The pirates must be asleep in the house, Blackstone and Gaffie with them. They must be plotting some evil scheme for tomorrow. They had a ship; Ben only had a scow, so they wouldn't be concerned with the scow. But now the gold—that was different.

Ben got the vine Sticker had made, threw it up the palm tree, tied it off as best he could. He jerked on the vine, hoping it would hold. If it breaks, the pirates wake and they'd capture him.

Ben got out as far on one limb as he dared. He held his breath. He grabbed the vine, wrapping it around his hands. He said a prayer. It was now or never. Midnight came with the full moon overhead, a shining vagrant light on the rooftop, the mast, and his little girl. She woke up, maybe sensing he was near. He put his finger to his mouth, showing her to be quiet.

'I'm coming, Annie, just stay there and stand still,' he whispered, hoping no one heard. That parrot squawked. The wind twirled the palm leaves in the night. The sea's waves lapped the shore, slapping gently against the *Rover's* hull. Ben took a deep, long breath and leaped.

Hands tight on the vine, he swung out from the palm across the air, his feet landing hard on the roof, sliding up the roof till he could grab the mast. He released the vine, taking hold of the mast with both arms. Annie giggled. She'd never seen her Daddy do something only crazy young boys do.

'Wow, Daddy, you did that?' she whispered.

'No talk, girl. I'll untie the rope, we'll use it to get down. Then we've got to race to the scow before they all wake up. The boat's loaded and ready. Here we go.'

The parrot squawked again, this time louder. The parrot knew feet were shuffling on the roof. Ben threw the rope over the mast, tied a bowline hitch, put Annie on his shoulders to lower himself down the side of the house. His feet slid down the old wood, splintering some of it, peeling it, crackling some of it. The parrot squawked again. Ben wondered if anyone was awake...

He got his feet on the porch, holding Anne for dear life. She was giggling all this time, this was such fun, especially at night. Ben got off the porch, ran for the cliff. When he got there he heard commotion in the house. That parrot had aroused someone. He looked back. It was Blackstone and Gaffie. Would they betray him and his daughter? They'd have to come after the gold. They didn't need the scow, they had the ship's log, but they weren't about to leave the island without that gold.

'Are you going to put me down?' Anne asked.

'Not just yet, darling. We're going to get down to the scow, wake the men, and get out of here before the pirates come after us.'

'Are they going to say goodbye to us, Daddy?'

Ben smiled, 'No Annie, they don't like us here, so we'll get away before they wake up.'

Annie looked at the house. 'I think it's too late,' she said seeing the lights on in the house. 'Here they come.'

When Ben looked up he saw Blackstone with that parrot on his shoulder, he saw Gaffie, and he saw the pirates come out to the porch to see Ben and Annie escape. That made 'em all jump into action, scramble back inside for their weapons, their pants, their bandanas, their shoes. Ben knew he had a couple of minutes to rouse his men before the pirates came stumbling down the hill. The pirates came on, cussing, yelling, swords clanging and pistols firing already. All this noise awoke Ben's men.

His men saw Ben and Annie come racing down the hill, they saw the pirates come fumbling down the hill, their swords sticking into trees and brush, stabbing themselves in the foot and the shin. Annie laughed at them.

'Get our gold!' Blackstone yelled as he ran. 'You damned parrot, get yer claws outta my hide,' he cussed, tossing the parrot off his shoulder. For some reason Gaffie didn't come after them all. He went around the other side of the island, for the *Rover*. He seemed to know something.

## THE BATTLE

Now Ben's men had the scow in the water, just enough for Ben and Annie to

jump on and get out to sea. The pirates came stumbling down the hill, swords swiping, pistols firing, men yelling that stupid way pirates yell, and that parrot flying over them, dropping dung in their hair.

Ben came out of the brush, dropped Annie on the sand, they both ran at the scow as fast as Annie could. And this girl could run like the wind. When Annie got to the waves, Ben picked her up, threw her through the air into the arms of his men on the scow. Ben shoved the bow of the scow into the sea, hard as he could. It grinded over sand, water now surrounding it, finally it lifted off the sand onto the waves, floating up and down. Ben jumped in, the men rowed the scow, Ben took the tiller to turn the scow around, facing the wind and the waves crashing in.

Just then the pirates emerged from the brush, screaming bloody murder, cussing up a storm, waving swords and pistols out of shot, running desperately as the scow bounced over one wave, then another, then another. Blackstone and Gaffie got to the beach. Blackstone raised his pistol to aim at Ben, who was handling the tiller at the stern of the boat.

But the scow couldn't get out to sea. One of Ben's men said, 'We weight too much, cap. We got to throw out some weight.'

Ben said, 'All right. We'll throw out four bars of gold, onto the beach. That might delay them, some.' Ben went to the gold while Annie held the tiller.

With the gold gone, the scow lifted enough to get on top of the waves. Ben's men saw the pirates running after the scow with all their might. Suddenly the pirates halted, they started dancing wildly, like loony men who'd lost their minds or got nails in their boots.

For some reason, those snakes had emerged from the water, curling and crawling right at the pirates. Now this was something to see. Those pirates had never seen so many snakes, they jumped up yelping, they hopped their feet, they dashed here and there chased by snakes, stabbing their swords at the snakes, even Blackstone ran away with a ten-footer at his heels, snapping and coiling after him.

Annie had never seen men dance and run around like this. She laughed and laughed at the sight of those pirates running around, trying to swipe at those snakes, keeping their rear ends from being snake-bit. Now even Ben's men laughed at this spectacle.

While this wild merriment went on the beach, Ben had Annie hold a course around the island. They hugged the shore, out just enough to make good through the sea. When the men saw Ben followed the island's contours, they talked to themselves. One of them, Ogilvy, said, 'Cap, where we going?'

Ben said in a loud voice over the sound of the sea and the wind, 'We getting around to the *Rover*. We're gonna give this gold back. It ain't ours, an' I don't want to be taken by the British for stealing. I want to be free, with no guilty stain on my soul.'

Then men groaned, but they knew Ben was right. He was always right. They drew sail lines in, filling the three sails with a fine wind, all creases out and full, the scow shoving through the sea.

The island passed alongside them. Annie said, 'I named our boat *Ducky*. Is that all right, Daddy?'

'It's a fine name,' Ben said, and his men concurred. They were a happy little crew, without Blackstone or Gaffie or them all. The *Ducky* showed her shallow draft, foaming the waves, on around the island. The *Rover* came into sight. Ben hoped the pirates hadn't got there yet. And he was right. He saw Gaffie lean his elbows over the bulwark, seeing him. They exchanged glances, not friendly but not quite enemies.

Ben steered the *Ducky* alongside the *Rover*, under the channels at the foremast. Ben and his men loaded the gold bars onto the channel between backstay thimbles and painters. Gaffie started guessing what had happened.

He called out to Ben, 'Hope you make it, captain. You're a good man, by the grace of God. See you again on these seas, maybe.'

'The same to you, Gaffie. We're sailing for home,' Ben called back. 'We'll keep four bars to buy our way home.' Then the *Ducky* shoved away from the *Rover*, heading out to the Eyes of the Sea. Ben's men were happy, sailing once again, heading for a horizon, free men, full of adventure and the sight of sails, singing as they went.

Annie sat with her Dad at the tiller, bouncing up and down in his lap. She couldn't wait to be in her own bed, back in Baltimore.

Sails full and by, the little *Ducky* with Annie, her Dad and his men sailed off with the wind abeam, this happy little packet over the blue Caribbean Sea. In four days of happy sailing, singing songs they made up, taking turns at the tiller, watching the stars at night and the horizon during the day, they made Port Royal, just when their food ran out. They traded their gold bars for a 25-foot Bahamian sloop of their own, which they repainted as the *Silver Key*. With the *Ducky* on board as a lifeboat, they set sail from Port Royal for Baltimore. They were sailing for home.

They had fish and shrimp and salted meat and fruit from the Bahamas. They had fishing poles and live bait, for fishing along the way up the coast. They had new white clothes, and this funny hat for Annie—which she loved—and good times by all.

After a few days of the wind abeam, they saw the Bay.

Seeing the entrance to the Chesapeake thrilled Annie. She jumped up and down, holding her Dad's shirt. He smiled as did his crew. They were all glad to be home.

Later, when they glided to within sight of the red brick warehouses, Annie said to her Dad, 'That's where I live,' she said pointing.

'Me, too, Annie. It's our home,' her Dad said for them all.