

The Game of Pirate (the first chapters)

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Published by BlacknBlue Press UK
13 Dellands, Overton, Hampshire, England
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ISBN 978-0-9840718-6-9



At 196 for 220, seek the small harbour on the island of breasted stone.

Follow the eyes a full turn at seven for the first treasure sunken low and springing high.

Follow the Mermaid until you glimpse the Rock. Anchor before you founder and follow the mermaids' silver summons to worship.

Hand high, spy where the finger points. Be black widowed there widdershins and fight the black gulls for their booty.

Follow the plough. What fate and fortune are crafted of, there seek your fourth, sweet fortune beyond the fourth fate.

As the Whale spouts five, look upon the level and take up the crown.

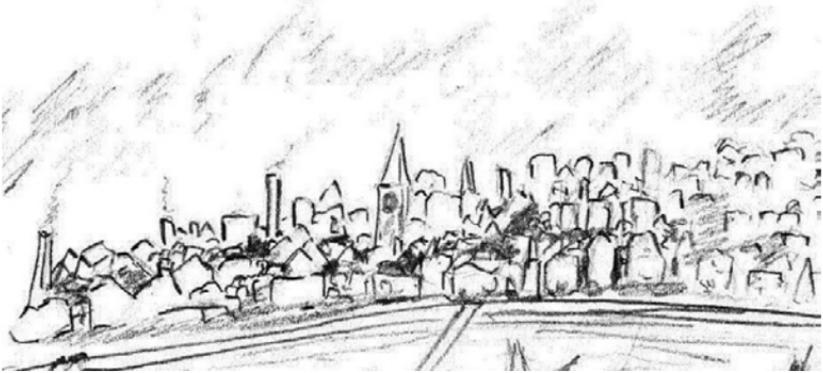
The dog hangs above and the old temple below, a hundred distant.

Take the berg two turns at twenty and climb the steeper path. Seek the maiden beneath the midden, two fathoms deep.

Hail the sun for seven days at full six, then pass on foot beyond the high pass. The lost one bides in the highest window of the highest tower.

1 *The King's Prison*

The equipment shall be the Spinning Compass, the Wind Dice, the twelve-sided Runes of Destiny and the cards of Fate and Fortune.



It's a gloomy start to a strange adventure. A slender, brown-haired youth of fifteen – myself – follows a fat prison warder through damp, evil-smelling stone corridors lit by oily torches. Outside, the sun hesitates at the horizon; but no daylight ever shines here, in the rocky depths of the King's Dungeons in the city of Magus...

I knew these cold flagstones well. I'd trodden them twice a week for the past year, carrying a basket of food and wine from my aunt, most of which the warder took as a bribe.

We reached a gateway. Keys clanked, hinges groaned, and we began to climb a narrow, spiralling staircase. This was the only entrance to the strongest cell, which was set at the top of a high tower. To escape, a prisoner would need to flee down these stairs, break through the iron gate at the bottom and then creep along dark passageways until he reached another set of gates, beyond which waited half a dozen bad-tempered guards armed with clubs and pistols.

The warder stopped at a dark oaken doorway and put

down the lantern he was carrying. He sifted through a handful of heavy keys, puffing noisily. He was a coarse, sullen man with tiny eyes and a dripping nose, which he wiped on his sleeve before pushing open the creaking door and waving me inside.

‘Get in, you.’

This was the second of three phrases I heard each time. The first was always ‘You again?’ and the last would be ‘Out you go, boy.’

I hesitated a moment, and the warder hit me on the back of the head with the keys. I stumbled forward into the greyness of a stony cell lit only by the twilight seeping in from high, narrow slits in the thick walls.

The warder entered cautiously, gripping his heavy club - not that he had much to fear, for he weighed more than the two of us together. I was a willowy boy and the prisoner was a man weakened by a year of imprisonment, and - if more advantage was needed - with his legs loosely chained.

The prisoner was seated at a small table in the centre of the room. His long black hair had been pulled back and fastened in a neat pony tail, and he was wearing his best uniform of deep blue silk with gold brocade on the shoulders. He rose as I entered and gestured to the seat opposite him.

‘Good evening, Jack,’ he said. ‘Good to see you again.’

‘Good evening, Captain Jones. Aunt Emma wishes to be remembered to you, and sends you this basket.’ The same stiff formula at the start of each meeting, with the same polite bows. Behind us, the warder locked the door and settled his bulk onto a broad bench next to it. The bench creaked and the warder began a tuneless mumbling to himself.

‘Pray be seated, lad. Sip of wine?’

‘Yes, sir. I mean - aye, Captain.’

The small table was set as usual: a star-shaped game board in the middle, its sixteen points matching the points of the compass. To one side, a wooden box held several

odd objects and on the opposite side there were two piles of wooden cards – one dark, one light.

'Good lad. We'll have a short game tonight, if you don't mind. We need to finish it, see. Did your aunt tell you?'

'No, Captain.'

'My appeal to the King wasn't successful, Jack. I swing tomorrow, an hour after dawn.'

I couldn't meet the man's eye at first. Then I was ashamed of myself and looked across at the seaman who sat so straight in his chair. The Captain reached to his left and lit a couple of candles against the nightfall. Their light picked out the white strands in his hair and showed the wrinkles at the corner of his eyes. Prison had aged him quickly.

'I'm sorry, sir.'

'Ah, Jack: I always thought it would be so. How many King's Pirates have died in their beds? I'm prepared for it. We won't let it spoil our game, right?'

'Aye aye, sir.'

'I don't want you to feel sorry for me, lad, and let me win out of pity!' He laughed freely and I joined in. I'd won only a handful of matches in twelve months.

The Captain began setting out the pieces on the board. 'We'll play the Typhoon version tonight. Remember how? ... I thought you would. Anti-clockwise winds about a chosen point, and tangled Fate and Fortune: that means you always draw a card from both. Here's to fine booty, fair women and a safe harbour!'

We clinked glasses and drank. The red wine was strong and made my eyes water: that, and the sudden thought that this was the last game of 'Pirate' I would play with Captain Jones.

I rolled the dice and spun the compass. My hand hovered over the board, choosing where to place my ship. You could start from any of the ports set at the compass points, each of which had its own hazards – and its own name.

The Captain nodded his approval. 'The Monkey, hey? I'd

have done the same, given that wind speed and direction. A rascal's move.' He laughed and picked up the dice, weighing them thoughtfully before rolling them and then placing his own ship. West by northwest: the White Whale.

'You've never asked about my crimes, Jack,' he said, passing across the dice.

'It's not my business, sir. And we've always had enough to talk about.' It was true. I'd begun the visits as the go-between for my aunt, but now I came for the fellowship and the fine tales.

The Captain said, 'I'll tell you about it now, for this is my last night and we've become good friends. I've no one else to tell, and I can't go off to the other world without having at least an echo - a shadow - a remembrance of me remaining. I've no family to carry on my name or cherish my memory. Even your aunt - bless her! - even she's unlikely to think of me in a few years' time.'

I was embarrassed at this and pretended to study the board. Aunt Emma's interest in the Captain had faded sharply when he entered prison, and many of her letters had been dashed off at the last minute as I fretted by her elbow. The past few weeks had been different, though. She'd even made a visit herself last week, after a full morning at her mirror. Perhaps she'd known something was about to happen; but she hadn't told me.

The Captain rolled the Runes of Destiny: a beautiful white stone, its twelve faces decorated with curious markings. The face that came to rest on top was like a spear piercing a half-moon: Fortune.

He turned over the first of the light wooden Fortune cards and exclaimed, 'Treasure, lad! But I need to secure it. And since we're playing Typhoon style, let's see what the Fate card brings... ah, I'm to be short-masted for the next move... what to do?'

He moved his ship, heading closer to the wind.

'What think you, Jack?' he asked, turning down the treasure card. I wouldn't be allowed to see it until three

moves later and so didn't know the bearings of the treasure. The Captain was smiling broadly now, taunting me. 'Where's the treasure, boy?'

'I think you're bluffing, Captain,' I said. 'The wind blows from the east for you and you're tacking into it, but I guess the treasure's north and west. That is - if there really *is* any treasure worth seeking.'

The Captain laughed. 'Well, you'll find out soon enough! Anyway - my crimes, Jack. It was like this. I was the King's Pirate for thirteen years, and gave good service to the kingdom of Albion - better service than anyone knows, lad, and much of it surprisingly peaceful.'

'Aunt Emma says you're a gentleman pirate.'

The warder on the bench snorted at this in a disbelieving way.

The Captain said, 'That's generous of her. And it's three parts true. I didn't set out to be the King's Pirate, not at first. I was a friend of your father's, Jack. You knew that?'

I shook my head. One of the first lessons I'd learned from Aunt Emma was that my parents, who had died when I was scarcely a year old, were not to be discussed. Their names were mentioned only in whispers between her and her friends, with much shaking of heads and sympathetic looks in my direction.

The Captain raised his eyebrows at my ignorance. 'Like him, I wanted to be a Guardian. But then it became dangerous to be a Guardian, and I hadn't the courage to carry on - oh, I know it's odd, hearing the King's Pirate saying he's a coward, but I didn't have half the courage of your father and mother. So when things became too hot, and the King began to throw the Guardians into the prisons he'd built throughout this fair land, I drifted away. I quietly joined a ship sailing to a far island. Your move, Jack.'

I threw the dice, spun the compass and drew two cards, neither of them helpful to me. I considered asking about the Guardians - of which I knew very little - but thought it best to let the Captain talk on. It was his last night, after all.

He shook his head at some memory. 'We were boarded by the nastiest set of cut-throats I've ever met. I was branded with their mark - you can just see the scar on my hand, Jack - and forced to scrub decks on their best ship. I learned quickly, lad. I soon knew everything about her - the ship's always a woman, you know - and everything about the men sailing her. I was scarcely twenty, but I had this instinct for the sea and an ability to command. Within a few months, that crew was mine and we tossed the captain and his bloodthirsty mate into the ocean and sailed back home laden with treasure, heroes to a man.'

The game continued, with many a stifled oath and some laughter. As always, he had the better of me: he knew what was in my mind before it was clear to myself, whereas his plans always baffled me. Yet he seemed pleased with me, saying I would make a pirate yet.

'King Arinaeus made me a Captain for that, and an Admiral soon after - at twenty-one! And for five years I floated around the seas that surround these troubled islands, excited at first but soon bored with it. I needed a challenge. And when the King's Pirate - Black Ben he was - was found floating in the Largando Sea, nailed to a rudder and his eyes pecked out by seagulls, I went to the King and made my case for taking the evil shilling in his place. No more to be a lofty Admiral pulling strings at court in Magus, wearing starched collars and commanding thousands: instead to be a mere Captain again in charge of a ship - ah, but what a ship!'

He paused, seeing a troubled look on my face. I'd always been quick with figures, and had worked out that his story had come to a time of sorrow for me.

He said gently, 'Yes, Jack: this was just after your parents died. Those strings I pulled at the King's Court - well, they weren't strong enough to save the only true friends I'd ever had. And suddenly nothing mattered, nothing moved me or made me desire to live - not food nor drink, neither

work nor frolic. Therefore, why not throw myself into something that would at least occupy me to the full and blank out my sad memories?’

I said nothing to this. I rolled the dice again, half-doubting his easy words.

He continued, ‘The King was happy to waste my youthful zeal on a couple of shady dealings he had in hand in the South Barbardies, so he gave me a chance on the *Firebird*, the fastest ship in the world, with a picked crew of vagabonds, rogues and out-of-work actors.’

I smiled at this. He had spoken often of his ‘Troupe’ of actors – more than he had spoken of his pirate crew. He reminisced about them now. The plays he had written on the tilting desk of his Captain’s cabin. The performances they had taken from port to port (‘They loved us in Rio, lad!’). The arguments between troupe and crew, and the mutiny when he brought the first woman actor on board. The greasepaint, the backgrounds constructed by the ship’s carpenter, the phosphorous lightings, the sorry band of pipers and fiddlers that he moulded into a twelve-piece orchestra.

He was a man for whom nothing could be straightforward; everything had to be twisted a little and then a little more, until you nearly had to stand on your head to look at it. He needed – always – to be finding something different, turning each idea inside out until the result was complicated enough and odd enough for his restless mind. And now that implacable mind was approaching its final resting place, its finale... but without an applauding, whistling audience demanding an encore.

He asked now, ‘Why should Piracy not be considered an art, Jack? Why should it not have style, and grace, and depth? And even a morality of sorts?’

He paused as if to ponder this, then said, ‘I’ll tell you something that no other King’s Pirate can claim. For the next thirteen years I did the King’s dirty work and did it well: but I kept my own hands clean.’

The prison warder laughed at this - a long, sneering laugh accompanied by a sly wink.

'Oh, but it's true, Jack,' the Captain said gently. 'I killed only when I needed to, and tortured only those I knew had tortured others - for I thought it only right that they should taste what they'd served up, damn them! And though I stole and lied and tricked and cheated, I did so only when on the King's business. I prided myself in this - that I would be honest and true, and not harm so much as one hair of an innocent man's head; but that I would carry out my King's orders without flinching.'

I asked, 'But how can that be right, Captain?'

'You talk like a Guardian,' he said wryly. 'Just like your father himself!'

He added more quietly, 'And Jack, I sometimes heard your father's voice in my head, asking just such a question. Him, I could ignore; but when your mother's voice started up as well, I was cut adrift; nay, shipwrecked. For I'd loved your mother - from a distance, young Jack, so you can take that look from your face! She chose your father, and thereby saved herself much heartache, I'm sure.'

He looked at me steadily for a moment, as if to reassure me of his candour. He continued, 'But to return to our tale: here was I, the King's Pirate, a man that others scarcely dared look in the face, a man for whom royal doors would open in any land, though usually they were the back doors, for most of my work was hidden and devious. And yet a whispered question in a half-forgotten voice could so unman me that I lost my bearings.'

'And at such a critical time, too, Jack. The Curchan Ruby! Believed lost to the world but within my grasp at last! The King's fortunes had grown immensely, his coffers swelled with my smuggled treasures and his reputation blossoming through my backdoor statesmanship. Albion controlled half the known world - and we didn't much care for the other half anyway. Except for the Ruby.'

I was on the edge of my seat now. He had never spoken

of the Ruby; I'd heard it mentioned only in whispers when Aunt Emma gossiped with other ladies.

'Ah, the Ruby... Power beyond imagining! *Magical* power! Not the weak mutterings of witches and uncertain spells of warlocks, not the enchanters' devious tools that so often wound those who wield them, not the sly genii who serve only for a time and then find a way to cheat and enslave their masters. No! Terrible, world-ruling power to him who holds the stone, power to create and destroy, unsearchable power!'

'The King had heard a rumour - he has spies everywhere - that the Ruby was back within Curchan itself. It's a small, weak country, rich only in mountains and mountain goats. The people are peaceful and clean, and live dull, tidy lives. They are innocent folk, and therefore easily tricked by someone like myself. A bit of clever talk, some flattery, some tales of evil strangers from the East trying to steal their greatest treasure; a promise to assist them; then the evil strangers arrive - being some of my own crew disguised as mysterious Easterners of course; I seem to save the Curchans from these evil folk; we are now great allies; I steal the Ruby and have crossed the mountains before they discover I've left the house they'd given me.'

I didn't like what the Captain was saying and my face must have shown this, for he laughed and said I was as solemn as my own father, and that I should know by now - being all of fifteen years - that this was the way of the world.

He added, 'It's a tangled world, Jack, and those called to rule it must embrace the bad with the good.'

'Then I don't want to be a ruler, sir.'

He looked at me curiously, then said, 'Oddly enough, that's the very thought that was troubling me then. You see, ruling was suddenly a possibility: I had the Ruby. I can feel - now - in this hand - the very contours of that stone.'

He was gazing at the open palm of his right hand, as if seeing something there that still astonished him. He shook

his head, sighed and picked up the white Runes of Destiny, weighed it a moment, then rolled it softly across the table. A lightning bolt showed upon its upper face: dangerous weather.

He smiled ruefully at this reminder of his position. 'And Jack, I knew how to use the Ruby. Oh, the King thought he had forestalled all that; he had two men put on the ship just to watch me, each with a key to the double lock of the metal safe built into a solid beam in my cabin. But I know how to pick locks, and can swap a fake for an original under the nose of any number of King's Advisers.'

'So here I was at midnight, stroking this beauty and wondering which name I should take when I became Emperor; I knew the words of command, see. And would you believe it, Jack? That sweet voice whispered once again and I slipped the stone back into its silk bag and hung the bag about my neck, renouncing my chance of immortal power. And then I climbed into my bed and slept like a baby for the first time for twenty years...'

At this the warder called out angrily, 'You lie! You stole the Ruby and wouldn't tell where you hid it! Everyone knows that!'

'*Knows?*' asked the Captain quietly, speaking to me. 'All that is *known* was taken from me by the King's Torturers. I hate such men. Experts at their craft, I give them that; but if I were out of this place tomorrow, my first task would be to ensure that they and their masters discovered how it feels to have your fingernails pulled out and red hot metal laid upon your most sensitive places.... Oh, you can be sure that I told them everything I knew, and quickly. But I knew nothing. It had gone, Jack: wiped from my mind.'

'But how?'

'I don't know. From the morning after I took the Ruby to a month later, all is a blank. Oh, the ship's log recorded our progress and the crew could list the places we visited, telling the Inquisitor they knew not why I took such an odd route - rounding capes that good sailors never went near;

landing upon islands known to be inhabited by savages or dangerous beasts; and at a whim climbing Cursed Rock, a slanting mass of stone that rises from the Boiling Sea and shakes an angry fist at the heavens, said to be the petrified arm of the Devil himself. There was no reason for any of the commands I gave at that time. I have puzzled over them myself, with a Torturer at one elbow and the Inquisitor at the other, calmly writing in a book the screams and babbled confessions of my ignorance.'

I asked, 'Were you trying to find a place to hide the Ruby?'

'I suppose so; and perhaps I did. But I couldn't name the day or place, or say how I laid it to rest. If indeed I did so; for perhaps I merely sent it to the bottom of the sea where it would be safe from faithless men like myself.'

I persisted, 'Why didn't they take you back over the same route? Retracing your course, in case that helped you to remember, Captain?'

'They did that, lad: and a sorry time it was for us all. I stared out to sea, or wandered moodily across sandy wastes with soldiers at my heels and a few of my old crew as witnesses. But it was no good. And Jack, I came to the same conclusion as the King: I took that Ruby, which in the King's way of thinking was *his* Ruby, and dropped it into the deepest sea, never to be found by man.'

He moved his ship one last time and pointed at the board. 'I'm back to port, Jack.'

'I almost caught you, Captain.'

'That you did. But you hesitated, didn't you? Five moves ago.'

'I played safe, sir,' I said. 'I always do.'

He laughed. 'There comes a time to gamble, lad: and you must seize that time with both hands. But I'm pleased you're not a gambling man. When you're sitting at your desk in a week's time, overcome with the boredom of another day's clerking, think of me: for I'm The Gambler personified, and here am I spending my last moments in a

prison cell, waiting for the hangman. Or think of your parents - for they gambled more recklessly than I did, and their end came much sooner.'

I remember that I nodded wisely then, thinking how true it was that a dull life was a safe one. I'd started my studies as an articled clerk and within five years would be a junior bookkeeper, and in another five years perhaps a fully qualified accountant; and then there would be a slow, dull climb to senior departmental supervisor, sitting in a quiet office and looking out upon rows of clerks and bookkeepers and accountants, all scribbling, pausing to work their adding machines, comparing, considering, and scribbling some more.

It was what I was good at. It was what I was comfortable with. Safe with.

'I'll remember your advice, sir,' I said.

We had another glass of wine, I recall. And as we sipped it slowly, he brought out a rolled, sealed parchment.

'Our friend opposite,' he said softly, nodding toward the warder, 'has agreed that I can pass this to your aunt. For a price, of course: there's a gold tooth I won't need after tomorrow morning, you see. The paper will guide her to a small investment I've hidden away. She reminded me a few days ago that I'd promised it to you, and therefore to her as your guardian. I give it happily in recognition of the friendship of your parents, and now your own friendship to me, Jack.'

I took the document and tucked it into a pocket of my light woollen cloak. I would have thanked him, if my voice had worked.

'And this is for you alone, lad.' He packed the remaining pieces of the Game of Pirate into its beautiful wooden box and handed the box to me.

He laughed lightly. 'I know your overbearing desire to always keep to the rules, Jack, so it's just as well that I wasted some thoughtless hours on my final, fateful voyage

writing them out, on the inside of the lid.' He removed the lid and showed me the delicate writing in good, black ink. I read the first line:

THE RULES OF THE GAME COMMONLY CALLED "PIRATE"

'Thank you, sir,' I said at last. 'I'll think of you as I play this. Always. And - and I hardly know how to say this, sir - Captain - but you've been to me like the father I hardly knew.'

He nodded his head slowly. 'And he would have been proud to hear you say that, Jack. Your hand, lad. We've had some good times in poor conditions, haven't we?'

'Aye, sir.'

And then I was gone, hustled down the corridors by the warder, who was now whistling to himself in an eerily cheerful fashion. He unlocked the final gate, nodded to his fellow guards, and pushed me roughly towards the open doorway that looked out upon the main street.

'Out you go, boy!' he ordered.

I felt him watching me as I walked away, the precious box clutched to my chest, thinking that it was all over now, that everything from now on would be quiet and unadventurous.

But I was wrong.

2 Losses



The players will choose one of the four ships: the brig, the caravel, the schooner and the sloop. To their ship they may earn the right to add one or more of the following during the game: the bell, the rat, the parrot, the monkey, the cannon, the seven-sided charm and the telescope. Each one of these provides an additional 1 knot of speed, except when totally becalmed.

I stood at the top of the steps for a moment, letting my eyes grow accustomed to the dark, dirty street lit by the occasional lantern outside a shop. The housetops of the dusky, sprawling city of Magus before me fell away towards the harbour in the south, from which a soft breeze drifted, salty and cool against the warm night. I heard seagulls calling in the distance.

There were many people hurrying home, and others dawdling about the shop windows. I counted the twenty steps down from the prison as I descended, and considered going home a different way. But I chose the route I always took: direct and simple, heading east. I remember that I laughed to myself, thinking of the shrewd assessment the Captain had made of my character. I was not one for adventure.

I crossed a couple of dark alleys to my left and then slowed as I came to another.

A man was walking just behind me and to my right. He was too close, almost pushing me, so I stepped away and was nearly touching the wall on my left as I came to the alley. I hesitated a moment on the curb, not liking to be so close to the odorous blackness to my left. I began to run

across the gap, but it was too late.

The man on my right closed in and put an arm about my shoulders, pushing me around and into the alley. At the same time, another hand seized my left elbow and I found myself being marched into the darkness, too surprised to resist – and too small for my resistance to have any effect anyway.

Just as I was wildly considering some foolish action, my captors pulled me around a second corner to my left and I found myself in the middle of a group of large men whose evil features were exaggerated by the smoking torches held by two of them.

One man – the tallest, with red hair and a freckled face crisscrossed with scars – snatched the box from my hands and pulled off the lid. He tipped the box to the light, swore, and threw it aside. Then he grabbed me by the jacket with one enormous hand and lifted me from the ground. His other hand was balled into a fist the size of a small pumpkin – or so it seemed to me.

‘Where is it?’ he demanded grimly, and then the fist hit me in the stomach. I suppose it wasn’t a hard blow by his standards but it hurt me badly and I hung there, sucking at air that wouldn’t come. He didn’t insist on an answer and I realised that the question and the punch had been for his amusement rather than information.

He reached into my cloak pocket and took out the rolled parchment, pushing me to one of his men to hold. He snapped open the seal, held the parchment to the light of a sputtering torch, and began reading it slowly with his lips moving and his brow furrowed, as if he found reading difficult.

Meanwhile, I was searched more thoroughly. The few coins I had were taken and snatched from hand to hand.

‘Treasure, boys!’ one of them joked. ‘Five coppers!’ I also had a clean handkerchief; one brute blew his nose on it and then stuffed it back into my pocket.

‘Is that all?’ the tall one asked. I nodded, not trusting my

voice.

'He's lying!' one cried out.

'Slit him!' hissed another.

'Shall I?' asked the man holding me, and I was suddenly aware of a cold, hard blade against my throat. The leader paused, thinking.

'No, lads,' he said presently. 'For as you know, I'm a merciful man.' There was laughter at this, and he smiled evilly.

'I'm a fair man, Jack,' he said to me - and I shuddered to discover that he knew my name. His voice was slow and menacing. 'I'm fair but I'm firm. It might happen that we need you, boy: just to ask a few questions, you know? So I'll make you a fair but firm offer, young Jack.'

He brought his face close to mine and I smelled the rum on his breath. 'If you promise to stay at home the next few days, then we'll let you keep those things that are dear to you, such as your eyes and tongue and liver. If we need to speak to you, we'll come see you at Aunty Emma's, right?'

He paused for my response, and I nodded.

He added in a chilling voice, 'But if you should feel the need to wander, and we was to come upon you in the streets, then we might feel we've been betrayed. And betrayal leads to revenge, don't it?'

I nodded again.

'I said "Don't it"! Answer me!'

Before that fist could punish me again, I croaked that yes, it was true. Despite this, I could see the fist preparing itself - and was relieved to hear shouting from the street nearby, and see the gang look to one another before slipping away into the darkness.

More torches came around the corner and their bearers paused to stare at me. I must have looked a pitiful sight. I was on my hands and knees, feeling for the pieces of the game with one hand and holding my stomach with the other.

'Are you all right, Jack?' asked someone tall and pretty with long black hair, whom I recognised as one of the women who sometimes visited Aunt Emma. She tried to pull me to my feet.

She asked, 'Where's the par-?' But she stopped herself and asked instead, 'What have you lost?'

'My Pirate game,' I said.

'Oh,' she said, sounding relieved. 'Is that all they took?'

'No,' I said. I continued picking up pieces. The cannon, the monkey, the spinning compass, the seven sided charm, the telescope... The lady was still talking, but I ignored her. I didn't like the way she talked to me. And I didn't like the way that everyone seemed to know about the parchment meant for Aunt Emma.

They helped me home, with miserable pauses for me to retch up my supper. The first lady's name was Minerva and her friend was called Amy. Amy didn't say much but appeared genuinely sorry for me. With them was an elderly gentleman they didn't seem to know; he hurried off as soon as we came in sight of Aunt Emma's gate.

Aunt Emma was a fussy woman who liked things to be neat, tidy, luxurious and fashionable. I now know that most of her money came from the Captain, who after the death of my parents had provided for me and her.

She was my mother's much younger sister and at one time had been the object of the Captain's affections - though he would have rarely seen her, being in port only one month in twelve, and with much business to attend to.

The house was in fact the Captain's, but Aunt Emma and I had lived in it for as long as I could remember. He sometimes visited, when he would stay in the attic room that was filled with his books, maps and formal costumes. I'd rarely had the chance to speak to him; and when he did appear at dinner, I was dumbstruck by a mixture of awe for the man and a fear of letting Aunt Emma down with a badly chosen remark.

The women hurried me along the garden path. The grand front door was opened by the ancient manservant that Aunt Emma referred to simply as "Butler" and I was taken into the drawing room.

What I most wanted was a drink of water, and then something warm to hold against my stomach; but apparently there were more important things to do.

A circle of ladies were seated in the parlour, waiting in some agitation it seemed. A shared gasp escaped from a dozen lips as I was pulled into the room by Minerva's firm hand.

'They took it,' she said grimly.

The gasps were succeeded by groans, hisses and a few swear words not commonly associated with fashionable ladies. But then, these were not common women.

'Bring him here,' said a calm voice.

Madame Helena was seated to my right, facing the one window. She was dressed as I usually saw her: in purple and black, with long sleeves, a high collar and a black veil across the top of her face. Her dark hair was neatly mounded beneath a small black hat. A hand gloved in black velvet took my chin and turned my face to look into the shadowed eyes that smouldered beyond the veil.

'You will tell me everything,' she said quietly. 'Begin at the moment you entered the prison.'

She held my face in this velvet vice as I stumbled through a patchy history of the evening. Her questions were few but piercing, like her eyes.

'Who else might know what he gave you?' she asked at one point.

I tried to think through this logically, which was strangely difficult with Madame Helena's veiled eyes searching mine. Somehow, the veil made me especially uneasy. It was as if she could see my very thoughts, whereas I could see nothing but shadows.

She had always made me nervous. She called herself a

witch, and a high priestess of witches. I didn't believe in witches: I thought they were just silly women playing games. But Madame Helena was different.

She was a woman of medium height and no particular features. You would pass her in the street without noticing her - but then you might stop, unsettled, as if you'd felt a cobweb across your face.

And if you met her face to face, at first you might think she was a sweet, middle-aged woman. At least I did once, though to be truthful anyone over the age of twenty-five was "middle-aged" to me then. But once she turned her eyes upon you, you suddenly weren't sure what age she was, whether she was beautiful or ugly, and whether she intrigued, disturbed or simply frightened you.

I finally came up with an answer. 'He - the Captain - only talked about the Warder knowing. I... I put the parchment straight into my jacket. So I'd guess that no one else knows, unless the Warder decided to tell someone, Madame Helena.'

I know this sounds rather stilted. I was trying to be precise; that's the way adults affected me. Especially scary ones.

Madame Helena nodded. 'And how long did it take you to walk from the prison to the street corner where you were taken by the two men?'

'About a minute. Maybe two, Madame Helena.'

I saw her gaze shift before I answered; she was looking beyond me, at someone else.

'And did you notice any of my girls on the street? Minerva or Amy perhaps?'

'No, Madame Helena.'

'And how long was it from the time you were taken until you were rescued?'

I considered. 'Maybe as much as five minutes.'

'Thank you.' Her eyes behind the veil stared into mine once more. After almost a minute of this silent interrogation, she said quietly to the Sisterhood, 'This boy is honest

but cannot be relied on. He has wrong dreams.'

There were worried murmurings at this odd comment, as if she'd said I had the plague. Then she nodded to Aunt Emma, who rose and escorted me from the room.

Aunt Emma hugged me in the corridor - she was genuinely fond of me - and told me to go to "Butler" if I needed something for my stomach. She looked at the box I was still holding and asked what it was.

'Just a game,' I said. 'The one I play with the Captain.' I opened the wooden box and showed her.

She wrinkled her nose at the lovely pieces made of brass and wood. 'If only you could have kept hold of the parchment instead of the box,' she sighed. 'This is such an expensive house to maintain. Ah, well - go to your room and rest there until the Sisters have gone. We'll have a spot of dinner later on.'

Then she hurried back to the parlour, leaving me standing in the hallway, stunned by a sudden realisation: she didn't really care about the Captain; not at all.

She hadn't asked how he was feeling on his final night alive, whether he had sent any final messages, whether there was anything he needed. All she'd been thinking about was his money.

I washed in my room and put on some clean clothes. Normally, I would have stayed there obediently. But something possessed me that night. I was burning with all manner of new feelings and driven by an odd curiosity.

I crept down the stairs and positioned myself near the parlour door. When I found I couldn't make out what was being said, I tried something foolish: I stealthily opened the front door and went outside, creeping behind bushes to the half-open parlour window. The curtains were thick and overlapping, but there was just enough of an angled gap for me to see about half of the room, through the uneven glass of the latticed windows.

The two young women - Minerva and Amy - had just fin-

ished giving their accounts of the evening and the room had fallen silent. The tall, pretty girl named Minerva was looking smug; Amy was crying. I couldn't see Madame Helena, but I heard her measured voice.

'Amy, look at me. Thank you. Why did you not see the boy as soon as he left the prison?'

Amy was about my height, with blond hair and a face that was pleasant without being striking. 'I was lookin' at the prison, Madame, really I was, whatever Minerva says. I was lookin' at it in the reflection of the shop window. I thought it'd be better that way. I thought someone might be suspicious if I was watchin' the prison direct.'

The reply was calm but ominous: 'You have not answered my question, Amy.'

Amy began crying again. 'I know, Madame. And I *can't* answer it. I just know that I missed him for a moment. When I turned around, he was already walkin' towards Miss Minerva. So I waved to her, as was the plan. And I hurried off after him, like I said before.'

'Why did Minerva not do anything?'

I saw Amy's face colour. 'I couldn't say, Madame. You'd have to ask her.'

Minerva put her nose up at this and spoke confidently. 'I didn't do anything, because Amy never waved. She was too busy looking at pretty dresses and flashy shoes.'

There was another silence, during which I had to fight the desire to cough. During that silence, Minerva's haughty nose had slowly dropped and her proud eyes had turned shifty.

'Minerva.' The calm, controlling voice again.

Minerva whined a little: 'I did my best, Madame Helena. The mistake I made was to trust Amy. By the time I realised what had happened -'

'Minerva!'

'Yes, Madame Helena?'

Madame Helena laughed drily and said, 'Although we serve the Prince of Lies, you will not lie to me, Minerva. I

will have from your lips either the truth or your final, rasping breath.'

Minerva's face went through an odd transformation. At first, she pursed her lips primly and seemed to return Madame Helena's gaze in a confident manner. Then her eyes shifted to one side, but snapped back again, as if she was trying to look away but couldn't. She pulled back her head and angled it to one side, but her eyes remained fixed at where her mistress was sitting.

Then panic rose in her face, and I could see that she was fighting for breath. Her right hand went to her throat and her mouth started opening and closing helplessly, like a fish out of water. Her face turned a dusky blue. Her other hand reached out, palm upward, begging. Her eyes bulged.

'You will tell me now?' asked Madame Helena calmly. Minerva tried to speak but couldn't. She nodded her head desperately.

'Speak, then.'

Minerva's lungs suddenly worked again, and she gasped at the air while tears streamed down her cheeks.

'Speak!'

'I - oh - sorry - Madame Helena, so sorry -'

'I don't wish to hear your pathetic blatherings, Minerva. Tell me what happened.'

Minerva gulped another litre of air. 'I was with Tom. He's - ' She paused a moment, considering a small deception I think, before rushing on. 'He's one of them, Madame. One of Red's crew that took the parchment. I've been seeing him off and on.'

'Without telling me.'

'Yes, Madame. But it wasn't serious, not on my part anyway. He turned up, and I suppose... maybe I was looking at him when Amy signalled. If she did. She never -'

'Minerva!'

'Sorry - I -'

'When did he leave you?'

Minerva considered. 'Amy came along, pointing down

one of those dirty alleyways. I followed her and I think he... yes, he must have gone then. We looked about for help, Amy and I did, and Tom wasn't to be seen. So we asked a middle-aged gentleman to come with us. And - and you know the rest.'

There was a long silence, during which Minerva gloomily studied her very elegant shoes and the ladies studied Minerva, mostly with rather nasty looks on their faces. Amy was looking away, embarrassed I think.

Then Madame Helena spoke again. 'Two things. First: Minerva, you are a very stupid girl and are not fit to be one of the Sisterhood. You have allowed yourself to be used by Red's gang, and have nearly ruined our chance of recovering the treasure we have schemed about for these past twelve months.'

'Yes, Madame.'

'I did not ask you to speak! Second: you are to take steps to repay us for this stupidity. You will find that man Tom and will use him on our behalf. You will employ whatever means you have - by lies, by promises, by witchcraft, by the offer of your fair body. You will enchant and entrance him. And you will make known to him that we have something they need. Do you understand?'

'I think so, Madame. But what do we have?'

'We have the boy; we have certain information they will require; and we have a ship. I purchased it this morning, and am looking for a crew. But you will not tell your man Tom any of this until you have snared him. Understand?'

'Yes, Madame. And how long -'

'We sail in two weeks. You have one week to make this Tom your personal slave, and use him to pry open the mind of his master. In a week's time, I wish to have Red seeking to negotiate a deal with me.'

'Yes, Madame.'

There was another long silence, during which there came upon me a feeling of dread, as if I'd blundered into a spider's web and was waiting, frozen, for the tickle of legs up-

on some part of my body. Then the spider spoke:

‘Emma, please ask your servant to go outside and bring in the boy, whom he will find near that window opposite.’

I prepared to run, but then recalled the Red-haired villain’s promise to remove my liver if he found me anywhere in the street. Therefore I walked slowly back to the front door, which opened to receive me.

I stood once again in that crowded parlour. The faces were no longer so welcoming, except for a sympathetic glance from Amy.

‘Oh Jack, how *could* you?’ my aunt exclaimed, and there was an awful tut-tutting from the other ladies in agreement.

‘Come here, boy,’ said the voice which now frightened me more than any other.

I stumbled across the room and stood before her. She had removed the veil, and I realised that I’d been wrong to think it was the veil that gave her an advantage. Her unshielded eyes transfixed me like a snake’s.

She said in a low voice, ‘You have been listening to words not meant for you. We have a penalty for that. Whatever nightmares you ever had, whatever terrors you have imagined in your waking thoughts, they are as nothing compared with the punishments we would apply in normal circumstances.’

I said nothing. My mind was suddenly alive with remembrances of dark dreams.

‘It is fortunate for you that these are not normal circumstances,’ the woman continued. Her naked eyes were dark and yet burning, as was her quiet voice.

‘You will come with us tonight to a place of safety. You will serve us while we recover the parchment and then recover the treasure. Then, and only then, will your crime be paid for and your punishment forgotten. Do I make myself clear?’

I tried to return her steady gaze, but failed. ‘Yes, Madame

Helena,' I said in a voice that sounded unlike my own. It was cracked and uneven and very, very frightened.

The next hour was confusing. I was taken to my room by Aunt Emma, scolded, hugged, forgiven and then condemned all over again for the shame brought upon her. Butler appeared with water and toasted crumpets. I was ordered to pack a case, then made to repack it into something smaller, then permitted to wash and change my soiled clothes.

As I pulled on my socks, Aunt Emma summoned me downstairs again. I meekly followed her into the parlour, to find a dozen ladies arguing about dress sizes.

'Stand over here, boy!' commanded one of them, taking some dressmakers' pins from her mouth to do so. Then she began measuring me against a scarlet dress held by another woman.

Despite my protests, I soon found myself wearing the dress, with a broad-brimmed hat to match. I refused to try the high heeled shoes, and they allowed me this small act of defiance.

'But you must wear the dress,' Aunt Emma insisted. 'It's in case anyone is watching us leave.'

We left the house in a tight group, Madame Helena at the front, wearing her veil again and gripping my hand firmly in her own. Behind me were two of the bigger "girls" (as Madame Helena called them - they must have been in their early twenties): Vicky and Sandra, both with short-cropped dark hair, short skirts and clubs in their hands. After them came Aunt Emma carrying my case, followed by ten or so other ladies.

We stepped through the gate of the walled front garden and strolled towards a carriage parked a little ways to the left. I tried to walk like the ladies but couldn't mimic their mincing steps and upright posture. I knew what I looked like: an awkward boy dressed as a girl.

As we drew near the carriage, a shadow left the railings opposite and crossed the road to stand in Madame Hele-

na's way. A low voice spoke.

'Excuse me, ladies, but ain't it a bit late for fine flossies like yourselves to be out walkin' the streets?'

I recognised one of the larger members of the gang - and was sure that he recognised me, too. A grin spread across his broad face as he stepped around Madame Helena and towards me.

Madame Helena spoke quietly: 'Vicky; Sandra.'

Vicky stepped in front of the man, who let out a sharp whistle, for she was a big-bosomed girl in a low cut blouse. But then she swung upwards the long club she carried in her right hand, striking him between the legs.

He groaned, then groaned again as Sandra hit him behind the knees with her own club. He fell upon his face and rolled about on the ground, clutching his private parts.

Madame Helena looked back at him over her shoulder. She said firmly, 'Please inform your leader that I will be in touch once he has learned some manners.'

Half of us climbed into the carriage while the others sauntered away down the road, laughing.

The carriage rolled quickly through the quiet streets and I watched to see where we went. We drove past the road I'd been dragged down, rattled along the cobblestones in front of the prison and continued westwards. As we made our way to a more luxurious part of the city, I listened with one ear to whispered conversations.

'Will they go and try to find the treasure immediately, d'you think?' asked one.

'I never trusted Minerva,' said another.

'That watcher saw the boy, I'm sure he did.'

'We should have known the dressin' up wouldn't work.'

Madame Helena's voice was icy: 'Of course it worked, Becky. It worked exactly as planned.'

'You mean he didn't recognise the boy?'

'He *did* recognise the boy. That was the point of the exercise. Oh, some of you are absurdly dense, aren't you?'

Think, Becky: we want them to believe there's something special about the boy, so special that we must try to smuggle him away unseen. The pirates are stupid (like most men), and we have to rub their noses in this fact. So we parade the boy past them, dolled up in a ridiculous disguise. Then we make our intentions and abilities obvious by a little thuggery. Now their leader will spend a sleepless night wondering what we know and what we have. He will invent half a dozen explanations, each more distressing to him than the one before. In a week or so, his mind will have been manipulated into the correct state of fear and exhaustion; then he will be like a weary child, and we will take him by the hand and lead him wherever we wish.'

There was silence in the carriage, while the feet of the horse clapped regularly along the uneven flagstones and I studied the street for landmarks. Then one of the ladies said reverently:

'Oh, Madame Helena! So clever!'

I looked across at the witch priestess and wondered at the depth of her planning. And a question came to me which I didn't share with the others: *Why had she sent Amy and Minerva to keep an eye on me, rather doing it herself with a team of her tougher girls?*

Perhaps she had wanted me to be taken. Perhaps it was her way of entrapping the pirates within her own plans. But as I pondered this, the carriage turned left through a high gateway into a short, curving drive. It halted before a large, square house with big windows and heavy curtains that allowed scarcely a gleam of light escape. From behind us came the sound of a heavy metal gate being shut, and then locked.