

Fame is an odd thing. Sometimes it has value, but at others it's less than useful. For a writer in my line of work, fame is definitely a two-edged blade. Perhaps you've heard of me? No? Name's Edward Charles Johnson. Doesn't ring a bell? Perhaps you've heard of my book? A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the most notorious Pirates?

Johnson is, in fact, my real name, but in truth, I've never been a Captain. So, you won't find my name on any list of ship commanders. But that's to be expected. At the time I wrote the book, I didn't want to be found. When the first volume was published out of Rivington's shop, I was working the trade you see. If I had been located it would surely have led to my wearing a hemp necktie. Nor did I write about any of my compatriots; for if they had found out, I'd have soon acquired a knife between my ribs. But the sun has set on those days. Let us then, call this volume two.

I never knew my parents. I was brought up by a group of monks, who made it their oath to teach me to read and at least to sound educated, even though my schooling lacked any refinement. Nor was I particularly good at my studies. I found the life dull and brutish. The life of piety and restraint, particularly regarding eating, held no fascination for me. The adults about me desired I should learn to be a "fisher of men," yet as a constantly hungry boy, I yearned for a far smaller catch, one that would fill my belly not my mind. I was mesmerized by the dream of a full plate. I am, when all is said and done, only a man, not fit to do the work of God ... But I do have an affinity for the work of the Devil.

Thus, at thirteen I ran away, intent on becoming a true fisherman. Near the monastery there was always an early morning fog bank to the north, so I headed for that. Once deep in the fog, I ran north. After that I ran north some more. When I ran out of land, I stowed away on a boat, which took me yet further in my chosen direction. I kept going north until there was no more north to be had. There I plied the waters of the Orkney Islands in search of fins and tails. Although as a young boy, and long into my adulthood, I had more of an interest in tails if you catch my meaning. At first, being an orphan boy of no standing, I did my catching with a self-made net, standing in the water, not far from shore. This activity yielded little, I was obliged to do the same task every day, regardless of the weather. Good thing it was too, for in three-year's time it allowed me to acquire a boat. Not that I could afford to purchase one, mind you, such was far beyond my means. But I did have some skill at catching, if I may say so.

One day, the sky was black as night. A storm raged like none I had ever seen. The ocean was a dark as the sky above it. As it happened, it was a good day for fishing. The sea spit up upon the land quite a number of fish. They merely had to be collected as they flopped about the sand. I had a bag full up with them before you know it. As I struggled to gain my way back inland, I saw another struggling form. This one had three masts, but although it had more timber than I possessed, it had less luck. It floundered upon a set of rocks, exposed to rip apart its hull as the water was removed to make great waves elsewhere upon the sea. Before long the gaged edges of granite had turned the vessel into scraps and chips of kindling. I stayed to watch, observing the flow of the lumber upon the waves. It was in my mind to catch some of these as well, for I would need to build a fire to cook some of my new found scaly friends.

As I observed the travels of my future firewood supply, I glanced upon a single small boat. No doubt launched from the doomed craft. I followed its path to shore and moved to meet it as it approached. It looked a fine craft. Well made, complete with a mast and a sail; although at this time they were lashed to the seats to prevent them from being dragged overboard. The boat safely made it to the sand and I rushed to greet its fortuitous arrival. On board was a single sailor, perhaps the sole survivor of this sad maritime event. I welcomed him ashore with the small knife I used to gut my fish. People being somewhat larger than fish, it took me several blows to dispatch the poor man. But, even before he had made it to shore, I was determined this would be my answer to any concerted attempt to discuss ownership of the diminutive boat.

There after I made my catch farther out to sea, where the fish were more plentiful. After a time, I even had enough extra in my nets to make a coin or two. With those I made my presence known in the local taverns. Up until that time, I was known to those about by my initials, EC. However, the ladies in the tavern shorted to "Easy" after the effortless way my meager coin could be separated from my grasp. There might be some still about in the land of my youth that would recall the face of the frantic boy once known as "Easy" Johnson.

It was in one such tavern I saw her. She was not employed in these establishments, but visited them from time to time. She had the darkest hair I had ever seen. If there was a name for a black shade of black, it would be barely adequate to describe her mane. She kept her hair cropped short, in the style of a man. Some would say her attire was also masculine; but it had more of a pretense to practicality than to style about it. I would say this about her, despite the cut of her attire, there was nothing manly about the form it enclosed. I had never seen anyone like her; not lady-like nor a business sort, she walked with an air of determination far beyond most males.

Sometimes she left with a crate of goods. At other times she would leave in the company of one of the patrons. I made note of this because the one's she made off with were of the most penniless types; so if her intent was murder or some other devil's trade, her choices were poorly made at best. The pickings would not have been worth the effort. When she purchased goods, she seemed to have no shortage of coin, so I determined one day to shadow her.

Carrying a large crate with the ease most women conveyed a ball of yarn, she made her way to the quay. She lay to in a small boat and I set off behind her. She travelled north, far out to sea. Most of the locals avoided this area, as it was perpetually banked in fog. Yet she proceeded into it as if the sun was shining over the water.

I kept my oars wrapped in rags to deaden their sound as they struck the water. It had been my intention to follow her by the sound of her rowing, yet I soon lost her sound in the mist. Most places, even in the high wilderness are not silent. So it is with the empty sea. The careful listener will hear all manner of things. The buzz of insects, the water lapping against the shore, a bird grabbing a fish that dared to break the surface in search of food. But out here, not a sound could be heard. It was unnerving to say the least. Without a trail, it was not long before I was hopelessly lost. With not a lick of wind to be felt, I might have spent the rest of my short life lost in this fog, until I came upon the marker.

I discovered it by narrowly avoiding running into it. It was a statue. Once it must have sat upon the dry land, but now it lay, half buried in the ocean. The figure was that of a Viking warrior, twice the size of a

man. But only its chest and the upper part of his round shield crested above the waves. He held a sword high above his helmed head, its blade pointing skyward. The waves had worn down the bottom of his chin, so that the head appeared like a skull, the lower jaw of which had fallen away ages ago. The effect of which was to render the statue, not so much an aged warrior, but as a fellow of the undead, keeping watch over the bones of his prey.

Its face seemed to be looking at something, so I turned my boat in that direction and pulled off with my oars. It was only a few stokes after I lost sight of the warrior that the island crept up out of the fog. This was Vlims Island. I had heard tales of the place, but as it was not drawn on any map or nautical chart, I had reckoned it a myth. Yet here it was.

The island was a tall pillar of dusky rock, fit only as a nesting ground for birds. It had no harbor, nor even a fit anchorage or any sort. What it did have was a cave at the waterline, suitable for small boats to enter. I made my way into the vaulted opening. Drifting with the tide, the tunnel curved around to port. Once I had made the turn, I saw, high above me, an opening, as if the island was an old, hollowed out tree trunk. I imagined a giant Norse god, his axe cleaving down the tree that would become Vlims Island, leaving light to pour into the empty void at the tree's rotting center. Across from me was an open beach and nestled upon the sand was the hull of a grounded schooner, its masts removed to fit beneath the low ceiling. It seemed in decent shape, its well-kept gun ports open to reveal six cannon that loomed menacingly beneath an empty deck. Alongside the schooner were several smaller craft, their keels resting calmly on the sandy shore.

I beached my craft in the center of this make-shift harbor, hoping it would go unnoticed snuggled amongst its cousins. I crept silently up a rope that lay carelessly over the side of the de-masted schooner. I held my breath beneath the gunnels, straining for any sound that might give me a clue as to what might await me on deck. Satisfied the inhabitants were either gone or safely ensconced below, I clambered onto the ship's surface. Almost at once I was surrounded by a sea of cutlasses, daggers and loaded pistols.

"Thank heaven's you found me," I blurted out as if pleased to find the inhabitants.

They let out a deep growl in reply, as a dog might do to announce an intruder. In the center of this throng was the comely woman I had followed from the tavern.

"I see you made it," she announced, "You were beginning to worry me. I thought you might have turned back." She returned her sword to her sheath, although none of the others cared to follow suit. I put one finger on the tip of one the blades and pushed it down in an attempt to lower it. It nearly pierced my skin.

"Sharp little article," I said trying not to sound threatening, "You should be careful where you point that thing."

She looked me over, a girl I had once thought of as easy prey. Yet she looked at me like a helpless catch, caught in her net. "Today the ocean is green with greed and envy," she said with a wry smile, "somethings you know ... sometimes the ocean is blue."

I was indeed the catch of the day. It was only at this moment that it dawned on me I was just the penniless sort of waif that was the type she collected. I wasn't seeking employment, but she wasn't seeking to pay. Sadly, as a fisherman, I didn't have any skills they needed. All they could use was my skill gutting the poor creatures. They put me to work below decks, in the kitchen. There I learned to become a cook. Well, not a cook per say, not even a sous chef. I would not be rightfully called a Chef de Partie, but a lowly Commis, an apprentice. Or perhaps, more appropriately an apprentice to the other apprentices. I would say this status was apply illustrated by my intimate connection to the wall via a length of iron chain. Conceivably one might best express this as my ankle's personal, and rather permanent, attachment to the ship's interior.

It was at least a life, if a trifle banal. The food was hot and there was plenty of it. I liked everything about it except the taste. Few spoke to me. The best I could say was the head cook didn't take an instant dislike to me. He was the only person to express any sentiment to me that wasn't a work assignment. When I arrived, he smiled at me like I was a side of beef and exclaimed: "Welcome aboard the Morning Star."

Together with another boy about my age, we cut and gutted fish and beef. I lost count of the number of days my ankle kept its well understood connection to the ship's hull. As well as the days I spent trying to break that connection. One day, a man came down the gangway and headed for the cook. He was a huge mountain of a man with a mane of wild red hair and a beard to match. More hair than I'd ever seen. If I were to make a drawing of a giant, it would look like this man.

"We've a big load today, I have need of your cutters," he explained.

"Take them," he snorted, "just make sure you have them back by dinner."

"That shouldn't be a problem," he snickered. He approached me with a gleam in his eye and a knife in one hand. At that moment, I had my last and only desire to become a monk. I had seen men throw hunks of meat and bones onto the cooking fires. It this moment, I imagined myself dismembered and parts of me slowly feed to the flames as I watched, the result of loss of perceived value. Fortunately for me, he bent down and unlocked my shackle.

"After you, squire," he prodded me his knife towards the gangway. I was happy to oblige.

He ushered me into a large skiff, sitting with the others, their hands on the oars. He reached down beside me and clamped my leg in irons. "In case," he muttered threateningly, "you get any ideas about abandoning ship."

We cast off and set to our rowing task with a will. I myself was pleased to breathe air that didn't smell like old fish. Strange how a such smell can become a burden when it accompanies prison. Once we cleared the ever-present mist, I spied a becalmed brig, it sails furled. She was a thing a beauty, built for speed. No doubt it's owners looking to slip past any revenue cutters fruitless chasing it like a pack of wild dogs. We pulled alongside a rope ladder and stowed the oars. One after another, the crew of the skiff ascended the stairs. Afterwards my knife wielding companion unlocked my chains. And pointed at the rope ladder. As I made a move toward it, he grabbed me by the shoulder, "Don't get any ideas," he snarled at me, "You wouldn't want to be making my blade here thirsty, now would you?"

I climbed the rope and made my way to the brig's main deck. On board was the woman I had followed. She was dressed in leather britches that fit to her like a second skin. They were tucked into a pair of boots that ventured up and over her knee. Above that she wore a dark man's shirt, which appeared to be missing its buttons from stem to stern. The sides blew in the breeze like a topsail cloth. As a young man, I was transfixed. My associate was able to prod me back into focus with the point of his steel, and we set off for the captain's cabin.

The former commander of the brig was laying on some rumpled-up sheets of the bed, his eyes staring upwards, a long stiletto handle stretching out of his chest. He had the most surprised look on his face. I didn't have much time to get any more detail. The red headed man pointed at the captain's chest and together with the other cutter boy from the galley we were instructed to bring it out onto the deck. It was no easy task; the chest must have weighed half a ton at least.

Once on the deck, my friend and I started wrapping the chest in a net, readying it to be lowered over the side to one of our small boats. As I worked I noticed a scene taking shape behind me. Several members of the brig's crew were tied wrist to wrist, until the lot completely encircled the main mast, their backs facing the wood.

The handsomely dressed woman was busy interrogating the former brig's crew.

"Who is that?" I asked my partner.

"I take it you haven't met?" He spat, gleefully, "That's the Captain, Halla Solvidottir."

"Captain?" I enquired.

"Yes," he snapped snidely, struggling with the net, "You've not been to sea much have you? The one's that strut around giving orders to everyone is usually the Captain."

Following her with my eyes, I lost focus on the task at hand. My partner had to come over to my side to shore up the load. Halla stood examining the prisoners, the big knife-wielding redhead at her side.

"So," I listened in on the conversation, "the Quartermaster tells me you lot are the only ones on this scow worth anything," Halla informed them. "I have a little expedition I'm planning. Those who ask, may swear an oath of loyalty. After were done, you'll be free to go, a handsome share in your pocket. Those that refuse will be staying here."

An older looking man, bald from ear to ear, leered at her in a manner I found most disturbing. He spat vulgarly in her face. In a flash, a long, thin blade appeared in her hand, like the one I'd seen in the captain's chest. I had no idea where it came from; it seemed impossible she could have hidden such a blade on her person. I heard the spurt, as she slit the man's throat to the bone before I saw the gush of his blood. He fell to the deck hard, dragging his companions down with him. They struggled to regain their footing, hauling the bleeding corpse up with them. Soon they were all agreeing to oaths and pledging their undying service.

"Captain," The red-haired man protested, "About this little excursion you've a plan to make. You wouldn't happen to ..."

“Yes, Mr. Campbell, we’ll be heading south,” she announced. “Mammuleli, set the banner please. Keep the stores and power on board lads, take the rest of the cargo back. We’ll be needing the room.”

The crew cheered heartily.

“Begging the Captain’s pardon, but I told the cook I have this two back before dinner.” Campbell declared.

“Not to worry, Mr. Campbell, the cook won’t miss them,” she smiled enticingly at him. “You two won’t mind coming along on a little trip, will you? Better sound off now if you have any objection.”

She looked directly at me, a glow in her eyes. I could hardly move my tongue, let alone raise any objection.

“There, you see?” She announced in a definitive air, “Ready and able. No objections at all.”

Seems I was about to take a sea voyage. She walked off and I saw the banner raised. It was a solid black rectangle without ornamentation, but below it was a group of pennants. Each appeared to be a strip of a different flag, most likely from the prizes the Captain had taken. There was a portion of a Union Jack, The red and yellow stripes of a Spanish flag, the solid blue of the French royal house and the green and red of the Portuguese.

Striding back from raising the flag came a short man, not even as tall as myself. His skin was as dark as night, and every inch covered in more tattoos than I had seen any man wear. What astounded me was the size of his head. Large and round, it seemed too big for his frame. As the brig Captain’s chest was hauled over the side, he looked at us and declared, “You’re now the ship’s power monkey. Follow me, I’ll show you to your duties.”

The two of us made after him for the lower decks, but he stopped me. “Not you,” he said, showing me the whitest, and certainly the sharpest, teeth I’d even seen, “You’re now the ship’s cook. Let’s hope you’ve learned something in the galley.”

As we finished offloading the cargo, the rest of the ship’s company arrived. I was astonished to discover a goodly number of them, especially the officers, were women. I’m afraid I stared. Before I realized it, the Quartermaster was slapping me on the back. I almost fell over from the blow.

“You ‘nere seen women before?” He crooned.

“Not on a ship, no sir. I thought women weren’t allowed on ships?” I suggested, a little concerned Mr. Campbell might put his knife between my ribs for my wondering eyes.

“This is no ordinary ship, you lucky bastard,” he laughed. “This is the Morning Star.”

“I thought the ship in the cave was the Morning Star.”

The giant red-head glanced over at Halla. “Any ship she’s on is the Morning Star.”

“Tamara,” Halla cried, “Heave the anchor to. Set a course for the Ivory Coast.”

After a full day's work, I stretched my hammock between the beams of the galley. I was asleep before my head hit the strings. But it didn't last long. It's hard to sleep in a hammock when there is someone else taking up the same space. More so when it's a girl your sharing it with. In any case, I woke up with a start.

"Did I disturb you?" she asked in a quiet voice.

"No," I'm afraid my answer was a bit groggy, having awoken abruptly, "I'll sleep on the floor."

"Why?" she asked, "Am I not agreeable enough company?"

I can tell you straight away she was more than agreeable company. About my own age, she had a mane of long brown hair, with a tinge of red in it. She also had other, definitely agreeable features as well.

"My name's Bridget ... Bridget Hunston. I'm your cutter." She explained.

"Cutter?" I slurred in a half-awake tone.

"You're the cook, aren't you?"

"Well, yes. For as long as that lasts." I added.

"Then I'm your cutter." She smiled.

"Johnson," I said, "E. C. Johnson."

"Easy Johnson?" she asked, recognizing the name. "From what I heard you're not one for leaving a lady's bed so swiftly."

"Well ... don't get me wrong, I wouldn't normally ... you see ... it's that I rather prefer my gut not be the new home for Mr. Campbell's knife, you understand."

"Not to worry," she said sweetly, snuggling closer to me, "Mr. Campbell was the one that assigned me to you in the galley."

"Assigned?" I asked, shaken ... and not a little bit angry, I can tell you. I been with girls before mind you, but only when I had paid for the privilege. At least I was in control. Here I felt, well, a bit exposed.

"Yes," she smiled back, "I think you find the Morning Star has some alternative 'methods' to insure a crew's loyalty. Although in my case, I was rather looking forward to working *under* you."

That did it. I was out of the hammock in a flash. "I'll be no one's assignment, by God!" I'm afraid I spoke rather harshly to the poor girl. "You stay there," I shouted angrily indicating the hammock.

"Suit yourself." She curled up without any further a due, looking at me with those bright hazel eyes of hers. As for myself, I curled up on the galley deck. The wooden planks were seriously uncomfortable, but I was too exhausted to notice for long. I awoke in the morning with Bridget curled up tightly behind me. Before I could say anything, she was up, "Best we get to work," she announced, "The crew will be down soon and hungry."

I made breakfast, keeping half an eye on Bridget. OK, maybe too many eyes on Bridget, as I burned some of the hot cakes as a result. If that wasn't bad enough, Bridget came over to me as I handled the skillet.

"You've got to oil it," she said, "Until it's nice and wet."

I almost burned my hand. I had a vision of Mr. Campbell's knife dripping with my blood, so I managed to get my focus back on track. Although it was far from easy, I can tell you.

During the first meal, the Captain came down and hung a frame upon one of the beams. She grabbed the meal, as if she was one of the crew and marched back up on deck as the others sat eating. While I was cleaning up, I had a glance at it. It was an old letter of marque, it authorized the Morning Star to attack and capture any vessel carrying slaves to the West Indies. It was signed by Queen Anne Stewart of Great Britain and Ireland herself and dated 24th of March 1705.

The Queen, I was told, had no love of the slave trade and desired it abolished. She and the captain turned out to be of a like mind. I must have made some kind of snide comment out loud about the chains I had so recently been wearing. Mammuleli, the dark little man, slapped me on the side.

"Think of it as a kind of indentured servitude," he laughed, "Where I come from you'd be sewed into a bag filled with rocks and thrown into the sea for trying to sneak about a ship that wasn't yours."

He was as strange a creature as I ever met, but what he said was true. Thieves were rarely treated so well and I seemed to be left about without the chains at present.

"Where do you come from?" I asked with absolutely no tact.

"Never you mind, boy. You'll be seeing it soon enough," he sneered, "Best you worry that you're not left there when we arrive." With that comment the entire crew in the galley chuckled.

The voyage south was monotonous and hot. I could have left a skillet on the main deck in the afternoon and cooked eggs on it that very night without the use of any flame ... that is ... if we had any eggs left. Like myself, the crew grew restless. Although not too restless, as I had Bridget to keep me company. And fine company she was at that. At last, I heard a commotion on deck.

I went up to see. Off on the horizon was another ship and we were turning to meet it. I thought it might be fleeing from the sight of our banners, but when I turned they were gone. In its place flew the standard of the Spanish king. As we approached I noticed the other ship flew the same cloth. Finally, both ships put up their sails and stood drifting on the same ocean currents. I was instructed by Jurrien Hietland, a tall Dutchman with a unkept mustache, to help with the brig's launch.

As I tried to board the small boat, Halla stopped me. She was wearing the same blouse with all the missing buttons I had seen her in when we first took this ship. Mesmerized by her shirt, I practically ran into her chest as she stood there to stop me from boarding. It was an experience, might I add, that was worth more to me than a fist full of gold.

"Not you little man," she explained, "Best not to rush things for your first time ... so to speak."

I stood on the deck with Margerie Scrope, the sailmaker, as we watched the launch cross to the Spanish ship. The waiting seemed like forever, Margerie's hair blowing in the wind like a field of fine grains. As the crew watched, the Spanish ensign came tumbling down.

"That's it," cried Margerie, "Give me some sail and we'll pull alongside of her."

"That's it?" I asked incredulously.

"Best not to waste powder and shot if a prize can be taken by other means," the glorious light-haired young Margerie announced, "It improves the profit margin." I didn't know what was going to take more getting used to, the crew women all wearing men's clothes on their oh-so-fine forms or the fact they these women, most only slight older than myself, knew twice as much about the world as did I.

Only a few of the Spaniards agreed to join us. The rest found themselves on a personalized tour of the ocean floor. I found I felt nothing for them. They were men who built their lives on the shattered dreams of others. A few moments after that, their cargo was released on deck. Never before had I seen so many of Mr. Mammuleli's dark shinned comrades in one place. They danced upon the deck like it was Christmas, Easter and St. Vitus' Day all rolled into one.

"Gráinne Ní Mháille, Gráinne Ní Mháille," the crew chanted.

"Come on boy," Tamara U'Ren hit me on the back, "join in." She was a physically fit young woman from Cornwall. Master of the Morning Star, she was stronger than half the men on the crew with an iron will to match. 'Ner before or since have I seen anyone could hold a course in a storm like her. In any wind she'd hold a course ... and by herself alone. So, when she commanded, I joined in.

"Begging your pardon," I leaned in toward her, "But what in Almighty God's name am I chanting?"

"Gráinne Ní Mháille," she replied matter-of-factly.

"Yes, I know, but what does it mean?"

"She is our mother, Lady of the Ní Mháille dynasty in the west of Ireland. She founded this company many years ago. It's in her service we sail. It's her personal mission were on. Although she died many years ago, we still do the work of Grace O'Malley. Why?" she smiled at me, "Did you think we were a bunch of pirates?"

As she walked toward the bow, still calling the chant with the crew, my eyes followed her, "Yes," I said, "I rather did."

For the next several days we sailed as a fleet. Until Halla was sure the former cargo of the Spanish ship was capable of sailing her. The former slave ship headed off to the east. In a way it was a sad moment. We who knew no home, were sending others back to theirs. While we ... we continued our hunting.

After the sun set, I overheard Josias Throkmorton, the ship's Carpenter speaking with other members of the crew. I gathered from their discussion, not a pence was made as the result of taking our prize, but more importantly, I learned this was the expected outcome. There was no grumbling as you might expect among such men, not a lick of discontent. No, in their case, it seemed to be a matter of pride.

Mind you now, I was beginning to feel the same pride. It was a strange feeling, for I was not accustomed to it. Most people in my station would say the same. But this was a different place, one might even say a different world entirely. I'd not had a desire to put to sea. I'd heard of the life. On board a ship, it was a mirror of society, all encased in a small space. There were the haves and the have nots. For those who occupied the bottom of the rungs, life was hard and brutal. But unlike on shore, it was concentrated in a prison-like space. Ships often put to sea undermanned, forcing each man to work his shift and another as well. After all, fewer crew, less costs. On the Morning Star there was more than enough crew, so the work was light and a man could breathe.

We stopped to make landfall several times. On one of these trips I joined the launch. It was a lush land all filled with the likes of Gunner's Mate Mammuleli, though none of them were as diminutive as he. It was a bit hot for my taste. They spoke a gibberish I could not for the like of me fathom, but Mammuleli explained to us he had learned were the other European ships were. I gather he got this information from the natives as they frantically pointed down the coast. As I say the meaning of those words were lost to me, but the anger in their voices was more distinct than the beating of a drum.

A few days later we found another ship, but she was high in the water. It was a sign she held no cargo. We spared her. She going her way and we going ours.

"Let that be a lesson to you Mr. Johnson," Tamara U'Ren explained in as sly a tone as ever I have heard, "Never rob an empty hull or a poor man. The sentence is the same, but the rewards are slight."

Our next encounter was less peaceful. As soon as we spotted her she laid on all the sail she could. Still it was to no avail. Slavers are not built for speed, but for cargo space. As we approached a shot landed well short of our bow. It seemed clear to everyone this ship was having none of our friendly ruse. Tamara ordered the Union Jack lowered, and in its place the ship's all black banner was raised. The pennants of all those nations fluttered beneath her as ship eased into keeping pace with the slaver.

As night fell, Margerie Scrope put on all the sail we had. I was ordered to douse the galley fire and we sailed in utter blackness. Only the sounds of the waves lapping the hull and the creak of the rigging could be heard as we made our way with the wind.

All at once pandemonium erupted.

"Fire! Lay it into 'em boys," I heard Mammuleli scream at the top of his lungs.

The night sky was torn with the sound of thunder. In the flashes, some bright as daylight, the slaver so close it would be possible to lay a plank between our decks. In the light of the gun roar, splinters were flying everywhere. Muskets cracked from the rigging. Our men filled almost every inch of the ship's rigging ropes. The carnage on the slavers deck was horrible to witness. Limbs and blood. Gore and cries. It seemed as if the atmosphere was at once half air and half timber fragments. Their ship made a feeble attempt to fire back, but her muskets were less skilled than those on the Morning Star.

Truth be told though, even a poor marksman hits a target every once in a while. After one volley from the other side, a dull thud landed on the deck before me. It was our powder money, the boy who I'd come aboard with. He sat still on the deck, like a stack of potatoes. Believe me dear readers, it was as much of a shock to me as it is to you. I had thought the boy safe below decks. But the sight of his hands still clutching a bag of balls and several powder horns told me he had been sent aloft to resupply the

musket men. Even now those same men poured fire into all that moved on the other deck to avenge his death.

I must confess after this sight, I made myself one with a tiny corner between the rails and the deck. I had a memory of gutting a man for the ownership of an insignificant boat. But at this moment, it seemed as if this had happened to someone else, not to me. The boy who did that deed didn't belong anywhere and his courage was born from a soul with nothing to lose. Now I knew where I belonged and I knew what it truly meant to be afraid. It's easy to show no fear when you have nothing to lose, when you have nothing but a selfish purpose in mind. From this point on, I was aware of little as the battle raged around me, except for more flashes and the roar of thunder. It seemed to go on for some time, but be that time minutes, hours or even all night I have no recollection.

When next I moved it was dawn, and the slaver was more a sinking ruin than a floating raft. The captain and a few of his officers stood huddled, back to back, swords drawn in the center of this floating mess. Barely lifting my eyes above the rail, I saw Halla, swing across on a rope. She landed squarely before the commander of that hell-spawned ship. Unarmed, she took two steps forward and slapped him across the face with the back of her hand. Shaken, the man, dressed only in a night shirt, dropped his weapon. It clattered to the deck, like the ringing of a bell. The other ship's officers soon followed suit and a cheer rose from our crew.

The carnage aboard was terrible, but it was nothing compared to the scene we found below. The slave masters, not wanting any of the cargo to fall into our hands, had begun to slaughter them. Men, Women and children. The hold was littered with bodies, their guts spilling out from the thrust of the slaver's blades. The bodies stilled chained together. Fortunately, they were not able to finish their gruesome work. By the gangway lay a pile of bodies. One huge African lay atop the murderous slaver his huge distended belly filled with the slaver's steel, pinning the devil of a man to the ground. Around this homicidal man's neck was a circle of chain, his mouth in the position of an airless struggle. The two had joined each other in death.

Slowing taking on water, the slaver's ship was a pointless wreck, but its boats were in good order. Being close to the shore, we ferried those who remained ashore. In one of those trips, we ferried the slaver captain as well.

"Captain," asked Tamara, "May I ask your intent?"

"My intent, Master of the Boat," she snarled, "is to put this man in the same condition as he would have of his cargo." Halla stopped as if rethinking her decision, she turned around, "Now he can be a captive of those he put in chains. It seems like a fair exchange to me."

I was stunned to find Mr. Campbell, standing next to me without his knife, "For a fine-looking woman," he let his brogue leak out, "She's got ice in her veins that one."

This evil ship had at least one other yield. The arrogant British captain kept the ship well stocked with Madera. We emptied much of his fine stores. I would have been a night I would have been proud to remember, until I saw two men carrying a white sack. Inside the shroud was the power monkey. They tossed him over as if he was one of the empty bottles. I couldn't drink after that. I stood at the railing and watched the sack sink below the waves. It was not that we had been the best of friends. Not at all. It

was, in fact, my realization that I wasn't even aware of his name. No man should go beneath the waves with no record of his name. No one to recall his worth. It was on this railing, on the Morning Star, I swore before God Almighty that I would 'ner let another man pass before me that I couldn't recall his name. I suppose this event was the beginning of my book.

Our fourth ship must have also recognized us or merely desired to be unfriendly. As soon as we sighted her, she put on more sails. Margerie put on more canvas and the chase was on. For two days and two nights we followed, flying the same French flag as she did, but they always remained painfully out of reach. Most of the crew thought it apt to let them go, but Halla was determined. With its speed, it was unlikely she carried slaves, but the Captain grew a great desire to determine why an empty ship should run.

Before the sun set on the second day, musket fire echoed from her deck. Even though we were well out of range, the crew ran to their guns. The sharpshooters took their posts. After a time, the firing was reduced to a sporadic pop. To everyone's surprise, she furled her sails after the shooting came to an end. Mr. Campbell warned us all to be wary of some subterfuge.

"Be on your toes," he yelled to the crew, "It may be that the crew has decided to turn and fight."

In his next breath he ordered me below decks, "The Galley's your station, Mr. Johnson, see to it."

I admit to a small bit of mutiny here, as I ignored the Scotsman's orders. I was terrified. But even as I shook from the thought it might be my body on the deck next, I was even more petrified at the thought of going below. I saw myself unable to observe what was going on, set upon by a ruthless and bloodthirsty boarding party crowding the gangway, blocking my only means of escape. I was determined to at least be aware of what fate had in store for me from the main deck. Even if, while on deck, I was busy cowering in a corner. At least I knew what was going on, from time to time, by peering over the rails.

Margerie dropped the sails on the Morning Star and we approached. To say we came up on our quarry slowly would be an understatement. A snail swimming upon the waves would have outpaced us. After a time, the royal blue flag of the French King came fluttering down, and a large white bed sheet took its place. Still we remained cautious. What I, at first, took as poorly stowed portions of the sails took on the appearance of men hanging from the ship's yard arms. They wore the white uniforms of the ship's officers, or perhaps the nightclothes of some poor unfortunate crewmen. Without their air of superiority officers are hard to tell from crew.

The crew of the French ship was shirtless in the hot evening air, but as we approached there were other causes for the men to shed their attire rather than the oppressive heat. Their spines were covered in the scars or repeated whippings. Some of the men appeared as if they were wearing elephant hide on their backs, with scars built upon scars. It appeared, for all intents and purposes, flogging wasn't a punishment, but merely a way to make the time pass.

As we came alongside, I made my way to the launch to join the boarding party. I soon found my way blocked by Joyce Fyneux, the ship's Master at Arms. Besides being responsible for the distribution of muskets, she was also responsible for ship's discipline. A good decade older than most of the crew, she had an uncombed mop on her head that resembled a nesting street dog. But beyond that she had one

brown eye and one green eye. Her face was painted with black tar on one side, such that it made the green eye jump out at you like a beacon. I often found it difficult not to stare at this, like it was a giant wart on a man's nose. The kind of thing that draws your eyes to it, no matter which way you tilt your head.

"And where do you think you're off to, Mr. Johnson," Joyce quipped.

"To help oar the launch," I answered politely.

"Didn't Mr. Campbell order you below?" she asked, well knowing the answer.

"Well, I ... ah ..." I stumbled for a good word to say in my defense. Any word. About all I could muster was gibberish and nonsense.

"You'll get below as ordered, Mr. Johnson, to work the evening meal." She shook her head, "We'll speak of your disobedience when I return."

Now Joyce didn't frighten me as much as Mr. Campbell's knife did, but the way she said it gave me the shivers. I was of half a mind to skip making dinner and get to work sewing my shroud. But my legs moved to the gangway, even if I had not bidden them to do so. Perhaps it was her hair. I tell you truly, if she had tied burning embers to the ends of that mop, even Edward Teach would have taken more than a few steps back.

At dinner I overheard the story of the French ship. Her crew had killed all the officers and requested the privilege of joining us on our cruise. They offered us half of what was in their hold and a stock of fine rum from the West Indies. When the Captain explained our tour was a hunt for slave ships and nothing more, they took a fair amount of offence and sailed off to the west. Halla let them go. The crew had unanimously supported her decision, feeling they had earned the mastery of their ship with the skin off their backs. Although Carpenter-Master Throkmorton, did lament not obtaining the rum.

I spent a sleepless night cleaning things I had no idea beforehand how they were ever cleaned. And I tell you even though I now know, I would much sooner have it be that I should never have had the experience. Still today I am not one to be too squeamish to tell a vulgar tale. I am not one to take account of its attributes or the gruesome nature of any story, yet this one I do not tell. I prefer my food to remain in my stomach, thank you very much. I will leave that tale to your imagination. Knowing your most horrid nightmares would be a pleasant diversion from the reality of the tasks I undertook that night.

It should go without saying that from that day on, I was more than compliant to follow orders as stated, rather than fall prey to Joyce's little tasks of repentance. Some say in their darkest dreams they are visited by Old Scratch or tormented by wicked spirits. But my dreams are terrorized by her one single green eye in its dark frame. Like a lighthouse it shines its warning about the dangers it hides, and like the beacons in those lonely towers it is not a warning to be ignored or treated lightly.

I was only lucky Mr. Campbell, did not, after that day, force me to go below. His understanding and generosity in regard to my fears of being below deck during combat where more than I can fully appreciate. His knowledge of men's hearts was why Halla made him Quartermaster. It was not something you'd think of at your first sight of the red-haired giant. Still he knew when we first came

aboard, I was ready to jump ship at the first opportunity, so he showed me his knife. But after but that vision in my head, we also knew I was not any more in need of my iron anklets.

The next day we came upon a lowly schooner, it's sails torn and frayed. It was an odd sight. It weaved and leached its way over the waves, as if its unseen crew was intent on avoiding us pulling up to her side. Truth be told, it gave us a better chase than did the French ship, although the schooner carried no banner. Finally, when we were far to the west, the winds died and we both rested, becalmed. The crew had to man the launch and drag the Morning Star to the ghostly ship's gunnels by pulling on our oars.

I went aboard as the crew was removing the cargo. It was a sight to make brave men feel ill at ease. The wood seemed to creak in a sad lament for the dead. Although the sails were in screeds, everything else was put away skillfully and in order. The captain's clothes were all neatly packed in his chest. Charts and navigational equipment were stowed in their proper places. And all the boats were firmly tied to their moorings. There we no logs, no written words of any kind. The ship even lacked a nameplate. She had the look of being built in Amsterdam, but she might have been Greek for all anyone could tell.

That night the ship was lashed to our starboard side, still singing its sad and voiceless dirge. A watch was set on her deck, as the crew debated its fate. Some were for setting it adrift, saying it was a sign of bad luck. Others wanted to put a prize crew aboard her and sail her to the Azores for a quick sale. Mr. Throkmorton was for taking the best of her fine spars and planking and cutting a whole in her keel, allowing her to join what must have been the final resting place of her crew on the bottom of the ocean. In the end, the prize crew won out, and the ship's company made for their respective sacks. The prize crew to be picked in the morning.

Yet by the dawn she was nowhere to be seen. The lashing ropes that had once held her, drifting uselessly from our sides. Joyce put the crew to a grueling set of questions. The watch crew insisted they'd been called back aboard, but by who's voice they couldn't say. When they went to return to the nameless craft, it was already gone, the ropes slack. Each swore on their own grave they were off her decks for less time than it would take to tie the mooring ropes, never mind untie them.

Now I can tell you, I'm a one for a tale, but when her green eye looks at you, only the truth can flow. If Joyce had wanted it I have given her my mother's real name. Her single jade orb was like a drill that bores into your soul ... or further if that had been Joyce's aim. I swear to you no man's look can cause another actual physical pain; Joyce's one green eye being my only known exception. I'd sooner be stretched on a rack, then suffer the agony from a prolonged stare from that solitary sphere.

Yet the watch suffered no further punishment. Even I was inclined to believe them. Any craft that could, on its own, shed its crew so completely should have had no trouble eluding our capture. I know few things with certainty. But one of them is she was a dark ship and all of us are better off not knowing where it came from or where it went.

We set sail east and continued until we came within sight of land. Our intent was to send a party ashore to obtain fresh water. So, we laid anchor and set about lowering the launch. What greeted us was a band of warriors outfitted in large canoes. Mammuleli yelled to them as they came within earshot with that Pig Latin he claims is a language. The sound of his voice did nothing but anger them beyond all reason. They waved clubs and spears at us in a most unfriendly way. Mammuleli shrugged his shoulders at the captain and she ordered the anchor hoisted.

Even though we hurried to put on sail, they were upon us faster than I can tell. I had never seen man nor beast row with such a will as these men did. Their oars were above the water for only a brief moment and they were back in the water pulling their crafts ever closer. A round of gunpower from the 12-inch cannons did not dissuade them, nor did the boom of musket fire.

Upon arrival, they drove spears into the ship's hull to form a ladder of sorts, each spear making a rung. One of them made to climb it, carrying a sword that had more the look of a cleaver to it than a saber. Jurrien, however, was having no part of this intruder's intended visit and put a pistol ball directly between the man's eyes. But still they were not deterred, more of them followed. Pistols and muskets may be effective, but they lack a certain speed when one is attempting to reload. The natives were more than happy to make good use of the reload time.

They showered us with arrows. Such items are primitive weapons to be sure and not particularly accurate. What I can tell you is that a native with a bow can reload much faster than a man with a musket. This fact is perfectly understandable. What I don't understand is why, with so many of these barbed sticks flying through the air, they never seemed to run out. The sky was filled with them, like a rain storm of wood. The other thing I can tell you is that men used to working with cannons and muskets tend not to be well armored. Which is exactly the type of targets our natives were looking for. This was going to be a bloody affair.

The fighting was fierce, it was like trying to repel a line of ants intent on your afternoon meal. No matter how many lifeless bodies we splashed into the sea, still more attempted to cross our threshold. Odd thing was they were singing. Assuming the peculiar melodic wailing they exhibited could be considered a song. To this day I find it incredulous that men who both fought and rowed with such a will would still have the strength left to lift their voices in tune. There were no ballads sung in return I can assure you.

Up until that moment I was content to remain in my hiding place. Yet I felt two soft pillows pressed into my back and I turned to find Bridget behind me. She carried two pistols and passed one to me. At first, I sat there, unmoving, holding the weapon clumsily and without purpose. However, the appearance of one of the natives, with a savage look on his face and cleaver over our respective heads changed my mind. I pulled the trigger and was rewarded with the sight of his form flying backwards several paces. From that point on, I blasted away as Bridget reloaded for me.

Although she was not one to favor the discharge of a pistol. But she did show me that the ramming rod of a pistol makes an excellent stiletto, especially if you put the rear end through the eye of your opponent.

Wherever they came from or why they stopped, I have for you no answer. But at last it did come to an end. The positions of the defenders could be marked by the piles of corpses before them. I would like to say few of our number joined them in death, but that would be a poor lie. It would, however, be appropriate to say this unequal contest took the fight out of us. We were now shorthanded, and in the case of one Luis Sáez it was literal. And in his case, the left hand.

It didn't shock me he lost the hand, considering the cleaver-like weapons being used by the natives, what surprised me was that he didn't bleed to death. He simply took his own empty wrist and thrust it into the galley cooking fire, to cauterize the wound. He walked away, like it was a perfectly normal

Sunday afternoon. After seeing this sight I was much closer to fainting than Luis was. That would have been bad, considering that things were about to get busy.

As the cook, I was responsible for medical care. Not that I had any experience in such science mind you, but I did know how to handle a knife better than most. More importantly, I suppose, was that as the cook, I was responsible for the Madera.

My first patient was Mr. Campbell. He had taken several of the native's barbed arrows. One remained deeply imbedded in his left shoulder. After all my worries, it was me using a knife on Mr. Campbell as opposed to the other way around. After one particularly unsuccessful attempt to remove the point, he flinched. Much to my surprise.

"Sorry, Mr. Campbell."

He took a large swig from one of the Madera bottles and looked at me, "Think nothing of it. You're doing a fine job. Considering how personal our relationship is at this moment," he remarked taking another swig, "I think you can call me Billy. No need to dwell on formality."

"Who calls you Billy?" I asked, trying to break the tension. Essentially, I was trying to get him to think about something else besides the fact I was digging around in his shoulder with a piece of sharp steel.

"No one," he replied between drinks, "You'll be the first."

The barbed point finally fell to the blood covered deck with a clatter ... followed soon after by Mr. Campbell's unconscious form. Fortunately, he survived, otherwise I would have missed that big, red-haired Scotsman. Although I must confess, I never did learn to call him Billy.

When I was finally done and we were away from that place, we set sail back for the north. The ship was mostly empty, since we had spent most of the voyage releasing slaves and not much else. On the way back, we stopped in a port in France. We traded, not with the French, but with the other sea captains in the port. Rather, I should say, Halla traded with their captains. She'd go to visit one or another with her buttonless shirt and return with a launch full of cargo.

We picked up cotton for the Americas, sugar from the West Indies, spices and tea from the Orient. In a few days the holds were full. We even took on a load of rum. Although I will say the rum did not make it as far as our next port of call.

When we put down anchor next it was in England. And we sold off all the goods in the hold for a handsome profit. Some port inspectors demand your documents of the sale for our goods, to ensure we weren't trading in stolen cargo. But the Captain always found ways to distract them, so the question never came up. With empty holds we sailed north again, where the seas were colder and the air had a familiar icy sting to it.

We sold the brig in Glasgow, and we were set to our freedom on the roads of the Highlands. I was expecting but a small share, if anything at all, but the prize money was settled equally. I found myself more well off than you might imagine. In fact, I felt rather odd, being unaccustomed, as I was, to being flush.

Bridget Hunston and I spend some time together and then, even though I had more than enough coin in my purse, we both started walking north. We walked north and after that we walked north some more. I am partial to sunrises and the roll of a low hill. Yet I was never more pleased to spy the figure of that half-buried Viking warrior, his chest and shield raising above the oily water. I had come home.

Many years later I wrote my first book. It contained all I had heard of what others called pirates, as they once called the crew of the Morning Star the same. Many would have gladly put us to dance at the end of the same rope, so you'll pardon me if I kept the best parts of the story till the end. The real story. Until now. Some stories, demand to be told.

Yet in the passage of the time since my first book, those who sailed upon the Morning Star are gone. Some of their fates are known, and some of them are not.

So now you have a bit of my story. It might help you understand why I wrote the stories of those who plied the Caribbean in search of glittering glory. But the likes of Anne Bonny, Mary Read and even Ching Shih were but a pale shadow to Halla Solvidottir and the crew of the Morning Star. Yet those in this tale are now long gone, they belonged to a different time and a different place. They live now only on the whispers that float across the ocean currents, back when sometimes the ocean water was blue.