

THE
TREASURE
OF PERIL
ISLAND

C. W. JAMES

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2021906208

ISBN: 978-1-7368013-0-7 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-7368013-2-1 (hard cover)

ISBN: 978-1-7368013-1-4 (e-book)



**INSUNDRY
PRODUCTIONS
BOOKS**

Gardnerville, NV

www.InsundryProductions.com

Cover design and interior layout by MiblArt.com

*Special Thanks to
Sidney Drew*

CHAPTER ONE

*“Yo-heave-ho! and they call it piracy...
With the Roger at the truck, yo-ho, my comrades bold,
Yo-heave-ho! there’s lots of gold at sea.
A merry life, a short life, a noose for you and me;
And Davy Jones must have our bones,
If they call it piracy.”*

In the stuffy cabin of the barge, Jack Drayton looked up from his book of Shakespeare sonnets. He was hunched up at the small table, attempting to get the most light on the pages from the cracked lamp; it smoked in the draft, filling the narrow place with an odor of bad petroleum.

He turned his head to listen, irritated at the interruption. He had discovered the forgotten volume behind a bench while walking along the Embankment, and he pounced on it. The only thing he missed about not living at his uncle’s house was its library. Buying books was not in his tiny budget nowadays, so he hungered for print.

The hoarse and lusty voices swelled louder and nearer. Then they died away, and were followed by a slight shock and a grating sound as a boat laid up to Jack’s ancient barge.

“Steady, you clumsy lubber,” said a drawling voice. “Where are you steering?”

“I ain’t a cat, Honorable, am I? I can’t see in a fog thick enough to cut marlinspikes out of. Hello, it looks as if there was passengers on this floatin’ otel. Ahoy, messmate!”

Jack did not stir. He didn’t want to have his reading disturbed by a party of drunken sailors. Perhaps his unwanted visitors would leave.

“Ahoy, *Etruria*,” called a man’s voice. “Heave to! We’ve got dispatches for you from the German Hemperor.”

Jack heard a step on the deck. He sighed and leaned back in his chair. No, they weren’t going to leave; he had to talk to them. Taking up the lamp, he opened the door. The rain fell dismally, quenching the few sparks that sometimes shot from the chimney of his ancient barge.

A repulsive little ogre, stunted and hideous, leered at him as he stepped from the darkness. He held a clay pipe in his horribly twisted mouth. He removed it, spat upon the deck, and grinned, revealing two long teeth through his mustache. It occurred to Jack that the man bore some strong resemblance to an animal — a weasel.

“What do you want with me?” asked Jack in an uninterested tone.

“Where’s Lucknan’s wharf, my handsome curly-aired youth?”

“About six hundred yards below on this side.” The little man didn’t move. “Can I do anything else for you?”

“Got any drink aboard, my noble guide-book?” croaked the caller.

“Nothing except water, I’m afraid.”

The uninvited visitor spat again and leered at Jack with his ferret eyes. In the light of the lamp, they almost appeared red.

“It’s a good job I believe you, my young lad. If I looked and found you lyin’, I’d twist the ’ead off you. Good-night, mate. ‘Ere, won’t you kiss me good night? He, he, he, he!”

With one light, catlike bound he vanished into the gloom, croaking and cackling like a raven. Jack shook his head and returned to the cabin.

“Is it unhealthy in there, Monkey?” drawled one of the occupants of the boat.

“Smells like a gas-works, Honorable.”

“Dear me, how dreadful! I must let in some fresh air.”

An oar battered in the cabin’s little window.

“The drunken blackguards!” Jack spat out. He regained the deck, but the boat had already pulled away.

Jack swore. Outside, the black waves of the great river Thames surged past his anchored barge. London’s faint lights blinked from the farther shore, sirens snorted in the gathering fog, and ghostly vessels flitted seaward with the falling tide. He counted the hollow strokes of a church clock somewhere nearby: eight.

He again went down to the cabin, and felt a pang of hunger. He had been engrossed in the beauty of Shakespeare’s language and the joy of reading so much that he had completely lost track of time. He opened a cupboard. It was bare.

“Old Mother Hubbard, went to the cupboard,” Jack sighed. He dug into his pocket and brought out his entire earthly wealth.

“One and eightpence-halfpenny,” he laughed ruefully.

He stepped over to the tiny closet and opened it. His other suit and shirt hung in it, marginally better than the shabby ones he was currently wearing. Next to it was his steward’s uniform, still in good shape. Luckily, he decided not to dispose of it after his last voyage as he had planned.

He couldn't afford to buy a new one now. He had heard that the White Star Line was going to expand service on their North Atlantic runs, so he decided earlier that day, albeit with some reluctance, to visit their office. Signing up again as a ship's steward would be preferable to starvation, but he needed a new collar to be at least presentable.

"Say sevenpence-halfpenny for a collar, and I could eat for a tenpence," he calculated out loud. "That would leave something for tomorrow."

He pocketed his money, pulled on his ancient pea-coat and cap, and went back on deck. The rain had stopped, but he could feel its wet threat. Perhaps he could get to shore before the rain began again. It was then that he discovered his boat was missing. The severed hawser told the tale.

"Those drunken brutes cut it loose!" he growled. "If I can't get ashore, I can't eat ... hello!" He heard oars splashing. "Hello!" he cried out.

"Hello!" came back the answer.

"Going ashore?" shouted Jack.

"Aye, mate."

"Then you might come alongside and give me a passage. My tub has broken adrift."

There was a lamp in the boat. The tide was running out swiftly, but the man in the boat was a clever oarsman and started maneuvering to the barge.

"Hold on," Jack said. "I forgot to tell you I'm broke."

The boat pulled up next to the barge. "That ain't uncommon on the river, mate," said the man in the boat, "sailors can't hang on to guineas, somehow. I don't want paying for punting ye across. I'm pulling for Lucknan's Wharf."

Jack extinguished the lamp, locked the cabin door, and swung himself into the boat. "I'm much obliged to you."

The two sat in silence for a while as Jack stared at the approaching shore.

“Like a teeming city, the river knows no sleep. Day and night glad hearts and sorrowful hearts are rocked on its bosom. Day and night bears back men and women to happy English homes; night and day it separates loved ones from loved ones outward bound for lands of brighter sunshine and more gorgeous flowers, perhaps — but flowers and sunshine cannot make home,” Jack softly said.

“Very pretty,” the man at the oars said. “Are ye a poet?”

Jack shook his head and grinned. He pulled his pea-coat tighter. “No. I was just reading some.”

The man grunted something and continued to ply the oars. They were close to the bank before Jack suddenly remembered that Marsden, a friendly local waterman who extended Jack credit, wouldn't be working again until early tomorrow morning. Jack couldn't, in common decency, ask the stranger to row him all the way back to the barge. That meant spending the night on shore in the rain. It was not a cheerful prospect.

After more silent minutes, they reached the wharf, a dim gas lamp flickering dimly at the far end. As the man made the boat fast, Jack finally had a clear view of him as he raised his head. He might have been sixty, seventy, a hundred. Long hair, white as snow, hung over his shoulders. The long cloak he wore fell open, and Jack drew his breath with a soft hiss.

He caught a glimpse of buckled shoes, knee-breeches, and a coat with wide lappets and laced cuffs. A sword hung at the old man's hip, and two huge, old-fashioned pistols were thrust under his belt. When he lifted a three-cornered hat from the thwart and put it on his head, two little black eyes twinkled at him from under the shaggy eyebrows.

“You’re a bold lad or a brainless one,” said the oddly dressed man, “and by the build of ye, ye’d serve the King well. I like your figurehead and your spars. There’s a slimness about ye that means speed, and still a breadth o’ beam that shows ye’d ride out many a gale. Take my advice, lad, and get into harbor, or serve the King ye must, willy-nilly. Set all sail for port afore the press-gangs are on ye, for it’s trim vessels like ye are they want.”

Press-gangs! In 1903? Jack almost burst out laughing, but covered himself by clambering out of the boat. The Royal Navy ended that practice of taking of men into navy by force back in the early part of the last century. So the old man must be mad. He was one of the few grand old hulks who had out-weathered the gales of time, perhaps, and was living the old days over again when three-decker grappled with three-decker, and chain-shot snapped masts away like carrots.

“Did ye ever go to sea?” the old man asked.

“Yes, for a couple of years,” Jack didn’t think he needed to add that it was as a mere steward on various passenger liners.

“Ah!” The old man gripped Jack’s hand eagerly. “Did ye ever meet Dick Swayne?”

Jack thought it best to humor him, even though the name meant nothing to him.

“No, never,” he said.

The old man let go of Jack’s hand. “Then ye were in luck. I know him, and he knows me. He’s always hunting for me; but I’m too cunning. If ever ye meet Dick Swayne, lad, run him through, and when ye’ve run him through blow out his brains to make sure he’s dead. Then there’s the Frenchy, Lake, and the Honorable. Shoot ’em down, lad, shoot ’em down like dogs.”

The rain started again.

"You'll be drenched if you stay here," Jack said, trying to change the subject. "It's raining faster than ever."

The old man's jaw dropped, and his sparkling eyes grew stony with horror. He grabbed onto Jack's shoulders, his fingers digging in. "Hark! Did ye ever hear the old song? D'ye hear that? D'ye hear it, lad?"

Faintly through the mist and rain came the distant sound of voices singing the sea-chorus Jack had heard once before that night:

*"Yo-heave-ho! and they call it piracy...
With the Roger at the truck, yo-ho, my comrades bold,
Yo-heave-ho! there's lots of gold at sea.
A merry life, a short life, a noose for you and me;
And Davy Jones must have our bones,
If they call it piracy."*

The old man staggered, and Jack caught him, thinking he was about to fall.

"It's Dick Swayne and the Frenchy," he gasped. Then he stood erect, as though transformed into a much younger man. His voice lost its mad ring, and took on the tone of command.

"Stand by me, lad, stand by me. I'll take their challenge. Are ye armed? Nay? Here, take that. It's a hair trigger and the flint's new." He called out to the skies. "Have at ye, have at ye, dogs!"

Before Jack could answer, the old man thrust one of the monstrous pistols into Jack's hand and began to run at amazing speed towards the network of dark streets beyond the wharf.

By Heavens, he'll kill somebody! Jack thought. He cupped his free hand to his mouth and shouted. "Come back, come back!" Dreading that the poor lunatic might come to some harm, Jack started in pursuit.

He left the feeble, sputtering light of the gas lamp, and entered into darkness. Black warehouses pressed in on either side; the leaden sky overhead was only slightly less dark. He stopped at an intersection of two narrow streets. He couldn't see his quarry. Then he caught a glimpse of a flashing naked sword, and the old man's cracked voice rang out in wild defiance:

*“Yo-heave-ho! there's lots of cold at sea,
Aw merry life, a short life, a noose for you and me –
And Davy Jones must have our bones,
If they call it piracy.”*

A wolfish yell answered, and heavy boots clattered on the wet cement, on the street off to Jack's left. Four figures rushed out of the shadows.

“Have at ye, dogs, have at ye!” cried the old man.

“Stun him, but be careful,” ordered a second voice. “If we kill him the chance is gone.”

Jack charged toward the sound of the conflict. He unexpectedly emerged on the fight out of the darkness. The lunatic had his back to the wall, his three attackers around him in a semi-circle, like a pack of wolves closing in on a deer. As one of the three made a move in, the old man lunged at them with his sword as he hissed out a curse. Jack heard a scream. That quivering blade had pierced one man's arm.

In the dark, Jack tripped and fell. He sprang up again just in time to see the sword dashed from the old man's hand. The attackers rushed in, and the next instant Jack was among them like a wild bull.

His first blow sent one of the attackers to the ground. He grabbed another by the shoulder, spun him around, and sent him tumbling to the pavement with a right cross. He tripped

the third assailant, pushed him the ground, and planted a powerful kick to the man's stomach.

Then Jack felt his throat seized from behind in an iron grip and he was flung against the brick wall. Suddenly a loud report rang through the street, and a scream answered it. The clutch on Jack's throat relaxed.

Footsteps rang again, shouts drifted through the night and dogs bayed. A hand touched Jack's. He turned to see the old man, smoking pistol in one hand.

"Make a run for it, lad. It will do neither of us any good to be caught here. That's the police. Follow me; I know all the streets. Nobody but a fool gets mixed up with the police."

Utterly bewildered, Jack hurried after the old man. Police whistles were answering each other. Luckily they were moving through badly lit streets full of warehouses and offices. Jack wondered vaguely why they were running away. It was a clear case of self-defense, but this whole night seemed to be full of madness. He half expected to wake up presently on his barge and find it all a dream. It crossed his mind that, in his excitement, he might have made a terrible blunder. What if the people he had been using his fists upon were the old man's keepers? What if he had aided and abetted a dangerous lunatic to escape?

"Quicker, lad, quicker," urged the old man, even though Jack was having some difficulty keeping up with him.

It struck Jack, even in the excitement of their flight, that the old man's voice had lost its ring of command.

The old man turned into an alley. "This way, my lad, this way." Finally he slowed down. "Ah! we're safe. Give me your arm, for I'm a bit blown."

They passed under an archway, and all was dark. Jack could not see an inch ahead on either side. The old man

leaned on his arm and began to chuckle softly, then struck a match. In its flickering light, Jack saw that they were in a small courtyard, walled in on three sides by dirty brick buildings. One of the buildings had expanded over the top of the courtyard, giving the area a wooden sky.

“By Blake and Drake and Nelson,” he said peering into Jack’s face with his beady, twinkling eyes, “your figurehead needs no painting. Don’t be frightened. I’m sane and sober enough now. Perhaps I ought to send you away. Where do you live?”

“On the *Etruria*, anchored in the river, but I don’t have a way to get back ...”

“Ah, yes, I’d forgotten. Come with me, then, lad. Be careful how you go up the ladder. I’d better go first with the candle.”

Jack’s head was still in a whirl. He watched the old man with knee breeches and trailing sword move to a pile of crates. A candle flared and guttered and pushed back some of the gloom. Then he mounted neither ladder nor stairs, but ratlines, a rope ladder that once belonged on a ship, which were hanging down the opposite wall. It was enough and more than enough to make Jack think it was all a dream. The old man pushed open a trapdoor at the top, and climbed through to the floor above. Jack nimbly followed up the ratline.

“Home at last, lad, home at last.”

The trapdoor opened into a narrow hallway with only one door, now opened at the far end. Jack shut the trapdoor and stepped through the door.

The room Jack entered suited the man. The first object that met his view was a model of a fully-rigged three-decker hanging on the wall in a glass case. There were also skins of snakes, stuffed birds, carved elephant’s tusks, shells, and

gourds; dirks, cutlasses, flintlocks, dried alligator hides, shark's teeth, and a hundred other curios such as sailors love to gather. A fire blazed in the grate, and on either side of the hearth a couple of little carronades grinned at each other.

"Have ye killed Monkey Swayne, messmate?" croaked a voice so sepulchral and unearthly Jack shuddered.

"No, Jim, not yet," answered the old man.

"Slit his throat, slit his throat, messmate," croaked the voice. "Kill Monkey Swayne."

"Aye, aye, sir. We'll do it yet, Jim. We'll do it yet, never fear."

Jack looked around the room, and discovered the owner of the hideous voice was an ancient, mangy parrot, perched on one of the carronades. It tucked its head under one ragged wing and slumbered.

"What's your name, lad?" snapped out the old man in a way that suggested he was used to giving orders and having them followed.

"Drayton. Jack Drayton."

"Drayton, Drayton? Sink me, but I know the name. There was a Drayton with us at the battle of St. Vincent, when we pounded the French and Spaniards into splinters. He was a middy, and a bit of staunch timber. Dick Drayton his name, and a bright lad."

"My grandfather, Admiral Richard Drayton did fight at St. Vincent under Admiral Jervis," said Jack; "but what do you mean by saying —"

"Grandson of Dick Drayton, eh?" almost shrieked the old man. "Thunder and shrapnel! Let me feel your fist and look at ye. Sure enough, you've got Dick's eyes and chin. Ah! those were days! I saw his left wrist shot clean away, and he roared

out to me: 'They've clipped off one of my fists, Juan, but the other is good enough to maul any six of 'em yet.' And, as I live, he was first aboard the Frencher that day."

Jack had heard the story of his grandfather's heroism before, and here, sitting opposite him, was a man who declared he had witnessed the incident with his own eyes. Could it be that he had really shared in the stirring sea-fights of long ago, or was it only the mania of a diseased mind?

"Have ye killed Monkey Swayne, messmate?" croaked the parrot, awakening from its dose.

"Not yet Jim, not yet."

"Slit his throat, slit his throat, messmate. Kill him!"

The old man put a bottle of rum and two glasses on the table. While Jack looked on in amazement, the old man placed a little crucible on the fire. The crucible contained lead. It quickly became molten. Jack's strange host deftly molded a dozen slugs, let them fall with a hiss into a bucket of water, and when they were sufficiently cool, he filed off the rough edges.

Then he loaded two pistols to the very muzzles, tightened the flints, primed the pans, and laid the great ugly weapons on the table beside the rum.

"Lad," he said suddenly, "ye said ye were poor. Are ye brave?"

"I believe that I am."

"Look me in the eyes. Ah, ye can do that without a flinch. When I was such a lad as you they whispered my name with white lips. Aye, they feared to speak it aloud. Even to this day it is not for-gotten. Shall I tell it ye?"

Jack didn't think he had any choice, so he nodded.

The old man leaned forward, his little black eyes glowing.

"I am Black Juan Gaskara!"

CHAPTER TWO

Mad as a hatter.

Jack recognized the name of Black Juan Gaskara, freebooter and pirate, from one of the books he read in his uncle's library. No human fiend had ever slaughtered and robbed and ravaged as that monster of cruelty had done. His ship, the *Satan*, had pillaged from Charlestown to Trinidad. She was a phantom vessel and eluded every attempt to capture her. And then, towards the close of the year 1821, like a phantom she had vanished forever.

That the old man seated across the table from Jack was that man, that dreaded pirate, was an utter impossibility; he would have had to be born something like a hundred and ten years ago. Jack tried to hide a smile, but the man's twinkling eyes were too keen.

"So I'm mad, am I? I don't blame you for thinking it, but it's true. I am Black Juan Gaskara. Portuguese on my father's side, English on my mother's. Aye, and I fought well for England too, until a bragging officer struck me and I clapped a knife into his heart. The noose was round my neck, and the rope over the yardarm, but when the order came to run me

up, the mutiny began. Every officer was shot, and the King's ship, *Macedon*, became the pirate vessel *Satan* that very day. That's history, my lad, that's history. Even Jim knows it."

The parrot opened its glassy eyes and laughed horribly.

"So how old are you?" ventured Jack.

"A-hundred and twelve, or maybe more, lad. Don't start and stare. In my time I've sent souls without number to Eternity, but Black Juan was no fool. He smoked little, and drank less, when all the others were swilling out their brains. And I lived on Peril Island, where every breath of air means another year of life, my lad. But I go mad at times like I was mad tonight. For twenty years I have been waiting for this. I'm doomed."

"Doomed, sir?"

"As good as dead." His voice sank. "It was fate. They've finally found me out. There's Samson Lake, Vanderlet, the Honorable, the Frenchy, and that demon Monkey Swayne. It may be a week before they murder me, it may be a month, it may be tonight. They'll do it, but I'll cheat 'em. They'll never win the secret." He opened a drawer in the table and pulled something out. "Here's the oath they've taken. I found it on old Lake's body when I shot him. Can ye read?"

"Of course I can read."

"Keep your powder dry, lad. Read it. Read it aloud."

It was a large piece of yellow linen that had been probably torn from a shirt. Some writing was upon it on both sides, very faded and difficult to decipher. Holding it near the light Jack read slowly, stumbling over the poor handwriting and archaic spellings:

Peril Island, June 1825. To my dear and only son, Harold Lake. Knowing that I am about to die, and that the fiend Gaskara will have no mercy, I place upon you the task of avenging your

father's murder. The latitude and longitude of this beautiful and horrible place are both unknown to me. We were driven north for over eight months by a succession of hurricanes and storms that no vessel except this blood-stained and accursed ship could have weathered. For weeks we plunged through seas of crashing ice with the sky overhead crimson with flame. Eighty-seven men died, and fear killed them rather than scurvy, thirst, and hunger.

We had untold treasure on board, and every coin of it was steeped in human blood. While we were helpless specters, mere skin and bone, our accursed captain was lusty and strong. At last we mutinied and made a rush for the stores. He held the place against us single-handed, and shot nine of us. Desperate and mad with hunger and disease, the fifty of us who remained were about to scuttle the ship, when the icebergs vanished, and we sighted the paradise that Juan Gaskara has turned into a hell.

Jack looked up at the man calling himself Gaskara. He was slumped forward, his watery eyes seemingly focused somewhere in the past.

"Hell ... hell ..." The old man mumbled mournfully.

"Sir, if reading this is troubling you —"

The old man slapped the table with such force that Jack jumped. "Continue, lad, continue," he barked.

Jack returned to the text.

Heaven knows, my son, we were glad enough to land, but Black Juan remained behind. We had barely the strength to get out the four boats. He gave us muskets and powder. The island was lovely beyond all words, and we found fruits in abundance, but no game. Santley, our second in command, clubbed a seal, and we devoured it raw.

And then we plotted against the fiend who had starved us. We feared him as much as we hated him. We were all villains who had lived evil lives, and our souls were black with crime. We

were armed, and Santley's plan was to row quietly back to the ship and shoot him down.

And now comes the greatest horror of all. It was a shark-infested sea. Santley led the way in the long boat, in which were sixteen men. A puff of smoke appeared against the Satan's black bulwarks, and a round shot crashed through the boat, which sank at once. Those shrieks are in my ears now. I see the tossing arms of my drowning comrades, the fins of the sharks, the blood red tinge that came into the water.

Then a charge of canister raked my own boat, and we rowed like demons. He meant to murder us all. Twenty men instead of one might have been manning the guns. After every shot he sprang upon the bulwarks and howled madly. We snapped down our flints at him, but no report followed. Gaskara had served us out charcoal instead of gunpowder!

I lost my head. The sea was alive with sharks. Helped by the fiend his master—for without Satan's help no mortal man could have done it unaided — Gaskara brought the vessel round and fired at us with the larboard guns. He sank every boat and even the voracious sharks were glutted.

Here are the names of those who reached the shore: Jacques Guerin, myself, Ephraim Vanderlet, Santley, and Little Dick Swayne, the dwarf — five in all. Santley was shot in the jaw and died that same night. We fled into the thick woods, for we knew that the lust of gold had turned Black Juan into a madman, and that he would pursue relentlessly.

Again, Jack glanced at the old man. He was nodding sadly. He realized that Jack had stopped reading again, and he gestured for him to keep going. It was as if hearing this account served as some kind of penance for the old man. Jack went on.

Two days afterwards Guerin went to the spring for water. He never came back. I found him lying face downwards there. Shot

through the heart. Three unarmed men alone remained out of the whole crew of the accursed Satan.

We all had sons at home. Dick Swayne, a monster hardly less cruel than Gaskara, had appointed himself our leader. It was Swayne who suggested, when we thought ourselves doomed, to write down what had happened. Why, I know not, for we had no hope of escape. The murder of Guerin turned our hearts to water, and we moved to the other side of the island.

Here, a week later, we found a little cockleshell of a canoe of native make, washed up on the beach. That night Vanderlet went mad and ran shrieking through the woods. He came back no more, and then, as the boat would only hold one, Swayne and I cast lots. He won. We loaded the little craft with fruits and water, and rigged a sail of palm leaves.

I watched him as he sailed away over the unknown seas, and I was alone.

My son, I have made six copies of this my last writing on earth. Four, fastened with clay in hollow nuts, I have tossed into the sea, one I keep, one Swayne has taken with him. I know that I am very close to death. If Black Juan escapes, and this should ever fall into your hands, my dying command to you is to hunt him down. Even now he may be creeping upon me. Only an hour ago I think heard him moving through the woods.

And of the accursed, blood-stained gold for which we have murdered so many, and for which we are being in turn justly murdered — touch it not. He cannot work the ship alone, and he cannot carry away such wealth. He will bury it here, hoping to escape and return in another vessel whose crew will not know the secret.

Some day, if Heaven so wills, a good man will find this vast treasure and use it only for a good purpose. Such is my wish and prayer. It has cost me my life, and mayhap my soul. But touch it not, for in your hands it will turn only to sorrow and evil. It is

the price of blood: Hunt down Black Juan Gaskara and avenge your father. — Seth Lake.

To my son, Harold Lake, at the Gunwale Inn, Portsmouth, England.

The old man had fallen asleep before Jack had time to finish reading the extraordinary document. Was the thing real or a forgery? It seemed real enough, and his strange host had spoken of men who had certainly lived. The names of Juan Gaskara and his lieutenant Santley were connected with many a deed of horror. They were almost as infamous as that of the Pirate Kidd.

The black eyes opened and glared stonily around. The old man leaped to his feet. His voice rang out strong and lusty:

“Sail-ho! Out with every scrap of calico, ye lazy dogs. Stave in a keg and fill yourselves with rum. There’s red gold there, my imps of Satan. Curse ye, Santley, where are ye skulking? Try her now, Swayne, and put a chain-shot into her spars! Prettily done, prettily done! Up with the Roger and out with the plank! No quarter, lads, no quarter! A handful of guineas to the first man aboard her.”

Jack drew back in his seat. What vision was burning in the old man’s brain? His eyes were vacant. His wild talk made Jack nervous, but it was not the anxiety of possibly facing a maniac. There was something horribly uncanny and truthful in the way he called on those men so long dead to attack the merchantmen whose bones lay fathoms deep.

The old man dropped back into the chair. Jack slipped the piece of linen into his pocket without thought. Presuming that what he had read was not a myth, then no more bloodthirsty or more cruel monster had ever disgraced the earth than the man before him.

He remembered the strange people who had visited the barge. He recalled the word “Honorable” spoken by the dwarf, and the old man had mentioned that name too. And Swayne? The men who had formed the crew of the Satan were, of course, dead and forgotten. Did the strange vendetta still live, and were these mysterious people the sons or the grandsons of the murdered pirates of nearly eighty years ago?

But could this man seated in front of him actually be Black Juan Gaskara? How could he be? Before Jack could credit that he needed a more convincing proof.

The old man was awake again.

“I know, lad, ye doubt. Then look at this. Perhaps ye’ll believe yer own eyes.”

He pulled up his ruffed sleeve, disclosing a thin but sinewy arm. On it was tattooed in blue a skull and crossbones above the picture of a ship. Below were the words: “Juan Gaskara, Port Royal, February 9th, 1819. Done here by me, Ephraim Vanderlet.” Then came a scroll with a blowing whale at each corner, and then a few lines of the weird song that still rang in Jack’s ears: *A merry life, a short life, a noose for you and me, And Davy Jones must have our bones, if they call it piracy.*

Jack did not speak. Some strange influence seemed to be working upon him.

“You have told me a most amazing story,” he said tentatively. “I don’t ... don’t know what to believe.”

“Easy, lad, easy. Never try to tack in a strong cross current with the wind abeam. Ye cannot put a big ball in a small gun,” the old man cautioned.

“You tell me that you are Black Juan Gaskara —”

“I tell ye I am Black Juan Gaskara.”

Jack held up one hand. “Fine. I will take it as read. You are Black Juan Gaskara. You amassed a treasure ...”

“Aye, tis a king’s ransom.”

“You hid this treasure in a place called Peril Island.”

“Aye, that be the truth.”

“Science had made the earth such a tiny place,” Jack reasoned, “that it seems impossible for an undiscovered island to exist.”

“Ye have traveled the seas,” the man calling himself Gaskara replied. “Ye know how vast they are. The world may be ‘tiny,’ as ye say, but there are spots still hidden from the prying eyes of man. Peril Island is such a spot.”

“Fine. You supposedly have this huge treasure, worth millions perhaps, but yet you are living like this ...” Jack gestured around the cramped, dingy room.

The old man nodded sadly. “Aye. Heaven’s curse is upon me. I killed all of the dogs, left the *Satan* to rot and hid the treasure on Peril Island. And there it lies today. I tried to sail south from Peril Island alone in the one boat left. Twenty, fifty, a thousand times I tried to escape, but the moment I got afloat, a gale was sure to rise. No ship ever came near that desolate rock, and my only companion was that bird. I gave up trying to count time. I longed to die, but I could not. Instead of growing weaker, I grew stronger as the years passed. Finally, I made it off the island and sailed south. ‘Twould be little use to tell ye the rest, afore some whalers picked me up. They had stories of another small man who was in another port hundreds of miles away.”

“I knew that man could only be Dick Swayne, and while he lived my secret was not safe. I set off to kill him, but when I reached the port I found that he had left. Trying to return, I was driven south again and was stranded on another island.

“One day a fishing craft came in sight. They carried me to the place Norway, and I stayed with them for a long time.

You may guess, lad, how I felt when I found that between burying the treasure and ending up in that fishing village, it had been forty-seven years.”

Jack didn't say anything. What could all this be except the wild delusion of a madman's brain? But yet ...

“I tell ye,” the old man went on, ignoring Jack's silence, “all Europe rang with the story; but they little knew I was Black Juan Gaskara. But Fate knew. In Lisbon I nearly died with fear when I stumbled up against Dick Swayne. At least, it was his ghost, and he knew me, I fled, but I can't escape — can't — can't!”

“And was it Dick Swayne?”

“Aye!” hissed the old man. “Dick Swayne come back to earth again. The curse is on me, the vendetta lives. They'll kill me; but I'll cheat the dogs, I'll cheat 'em. You shall have the secret, not they. Ha, ha, ha, ha —” His wild laugh died away in a choked gasp of horror. He went white with fear. “Whisht! What was that, lad?”

Hollow footfalls sounded out below. Gaskara stood up, trembling in every limb, and seized a pistol.

“Kill Dick Swayne,” croaked the parrot. “Slit his throat, my merry dogs. Dicky, messmates.”

And then silence fell. It was broken by the creak of the trapdoor opening in the hall. Footsteps approached the closed door, and a hoarse, uneasy breathing came from beyond it.

“Who's there?” Gaskara cried out.

Again came the noise of hollow footfalls slowly retreating, and the closing of the trapdoor. Then faintly through the damp night sounded the chorus:

*“Dead men, live men, drink and gold,
Yo-heave-ho! and they call it piracy,
With the Roger at the truck —”*

The old man uttered a shrill cry, half laugh, half scream, dropped the great ugly pistol, and fell forward across the table. The parrot was croaking and screaming, but the old man did not stir.

Jack shivered. The rain lashed against the shuttered windows, the breeze wailed and moaned through the chimneys.