

THE BLANK SHOT

Rafael Sabatini

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CAPTAIN EASTERLING, whose long duel with Peter Blood finds an important place in the chronicles which Jeremy Pitt has left us, must be regarded as the instrument chosen by Fate to shape the destiny of those rebels—convict who fled from Barbadoes in the captured Cinco Llagas.

The lives of men are at the mercy of the slenderest chances. A whole destiny may be influenced by no more than the set of the wind at a given moment. And Peter Blood's, at a time when it was still fluid, was certainly fashioned by the October hurricane which blew Captain Easterling's ten-gun sloop into Cayona Bay, where the Cinco Llagas had been riding idly at anchor for close upon a month.

Blood and his associates had run to this buccaneer stronghold of Tortuga, assured of finding shelter there whilst they deliberated upon their future courses. They had chosen it because it was the one haven in the Caribbean where they could count upon being unmolested and where no questions would be asked of them. No English settlement would harbour them because of their antecedents. The hand of Spain would naturally be against them, not only because they were English, but, further, because they were in possession of a Spanish ship. They could trust themselves to no ordinary French colony because of the recent agreement between the governments of France and England for the apprehension and interchange of any persons escaping from penal settlements. There remained the Dutch who were neutral. But Blood regarded neutrality as the most incalculable of all conditions, since it implies liberty of action in any direction. Therefore he steered clear of the Dutch, as of the others, and made for Tortuga, which, belonging to the French West India Company, was nominally French, but nominally only. Actually it was of no nationality, unless the Brethren of the Coast, as the buccaneering fraternity was called, could be deemed to constitute a nation. At least it can be said that no law ran in Tortuga that was at issue with the laws governing that great brotherhood. It suited the French Government to give the protection of its flag to these lawless men, so that in return they might serve French interests by acting as a curb upon Spanish greed and aggressiveness in the West Indies.

At Tortuga, therefore, the escaped rebels—convict dwelt in peace aboard the Cinco Llagas until Easterling came to disturb that peace and force them into action and into plans for their future, which, without him, they might have continued to postpone.

This Easterling as nasty a scoundrel as ever sailed the Caribbean carried under hatches some tons of cacao of which he had lightened a Dutch merchantman homing from the Antilles. The exploit, he realized, had not covered him with glory, for glory in that pirate's eyes was measurable by profit; and the meager profit in this instance was not likely to increase him in the poor esteem in which he knew himself to be held by the Brethren of the Coast. Had he suspected the Dutchman of being no more richly laden, he would have let her pass unchallenged. But having engaged and boarded her, he had thought it incumbent upon him and his duty to his crew of rascals to relieve her of what she carried. That she should have carried nothing of more value than cacao was a contingency for which he blamed the evil fortune which of late had dogged him, an evil fortune which was making it increasingly difficult for him to find men to sail with him.

Considering these things and dreaming of great enterprises, he brought his sloop Bonaventure into the shelter of the rock-bound harbour of Tortuga, a port designed by very Nature for a stronghold. Walls of rock, rising sheer,

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and towering like mountains, protect it upon either side and shape it into a miniature gulf. It is only to be approached by two channels demanding skilful pilotage. These were commanded by the Mountain Fort, a massive fortress with which man had supplemented the work of Nature. Within the shelter of this harbour, the French and English buccaneers who made it their lair might deride the might of the King of Spain whom they regarded as their natural enemy, since it was his persecution of them when they had been peaceful boucan-hunters which had driven them to the grim trade of sea-rovers.

Within that harbour, Easterling dismissed his dreams to gaze upon a curious reality. It took the shape of a great red-hulled ship riding proudly at anchor among the lesser craft, like a swan amid a gaggle of geese. When he had come near enough to read the name *Cinco Llagas* boldly painted in letters of gold above her counter, and under this the port of origin, Cadiz, he rubbed his eyes so that he might read again. Thereafter he sought in conjecture an explanation of the presence of that magnificent ship of Spain in this pirates' nest of Tortuga. A thing of beauty she was, from gilded beak-head, above which the brass cannons glinted in the morning sun, to towering sterncastle, and a thing of power as announced by the forty guns which Easterling's practised eye computed her to carry behind her closed ports.

The *Bonaventure* cast anchor within a cable's length of the great ship, in ten fathoms, close under the shadow of the Mountain Fort on the harbour's western side, and Easterling went ashore to seek the explanation of this mystery.

In the market-place beyond the mole, he mingled with the heterogeneous crowd that converted the quays of Cayona into an image of Babel. There were bustling traders of many nations, chiefly English, French, and Dutch; planters and seamen of various degrees; buccaneers who were still genuine boucan-hunters and buccaneers who were frankly pirates; lumbermen, beachcombers, Indians, fruit-selling halfcastes, Negro slaves, and all the other types of the human family that daily loafed or trafficked there. He found presently a couple of well-informed rogues very ready with the singular tale of how that noble vessel out of Cadiz came to ride so peacefully at anchor in Cayona Bay, manned by a parcel of escaped plantation slaves.

To such a man as Easterling, it was an amusing and even an impressive tale. He desired more particular knowledge of the men who had engaged in such an enterprise. He learned that they numbered not above a score and that they were all political offenders, rebels who in England had been out with Monmouth, preserved from the gallows because of the need of slaves in the West Indian plantations. He learned all that was known of their leader, Peter Blood: that he was by trade a man of medicine, and the rest.

It was understood that because of this, and with a view to resuming his profession, Blood desired to take ship for Europe at the first occasion and that most of his followers would accompany him. But one or two wilder spirits, men who had been trained to the sea, were likely to remain behind and join the Brotherhood of the Coast.

All this Easterling learned in the market-place behind the mole, whence his fine, bold eyes continued to con the great red ship.

With such a vessel as that under his feet there was no limit to the things he might achieve. He began to see visions. The fame of Henry Morgan, with whom once he had sailed and under whom he had served his apprenticeship to piracy, should become a pale thing beside his own. These poor escaped convicts should be ready enough to sell a ship which had served its purpose by them, and they should not be exorbitant in their notions of her value. The cacao aboard the *Bonaventure* should more than suffice to pay for her.

Captain Easterling smiled as he stroked his crisp black beard. It had required his own keen wits to perceive at once an opportunity to which all others had been blind during that long month in which the vessel had been anchored there. It was for him to profit by his perceptions.

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He made his way through the rudely built little town by the road white with coral dust, so white under the blazing sun that a man's eyes ached to behold it and sought instinctively the dark patches made by the shadows of the limp exiguous palms by which it was bordered.

He went so purposefully that he disregarded the hails greeting him from the doorway of the tavern of The King of France, nor paused to crush a cup with the gaudy buccaneers who filled the place with their noisy mirth. The captain's business that morning was with Monsieur d'Ogeron, the courtly middle-aged Governor of Tortuga, who in representing the French West India Company seemed to represent France herself, and who, with the airs of a minister of state, conducted affairs of questionable probity but of unquestionable profit to his company.

In the fair, white, green-shuttered house, pleasantly set amid fragrant pimento trees and other aromatic shrubs, Captain Easterling was received with dignified friendliness by the slight, elegant Frenchman who brought to the wilds of Tortuga a faint perfume of the elegancies of Versailles. Coming from the white glare outside into the cool spacious room to which was admitted only such light as filtered between the slats of the closed shutters; the Captain found himself almost in darkness until his eyes had adjusted themselves.

The Governor offered him a chair, and gave him his attention.

In the matter of the cacao there was no difficulty. Monsieur d'Ogeron cared not whence it came. That he had no illusions on the subject was shown by the price per quintal at which he announced himself prepared to purchase. It was a price representing rather less than half the value of the merchandise. Monsieur d'Ogeron was a diligent servant of the French West India Company.

Easterling haggled vainly, grumbled, accepted, and passed to the major matter. He desired to acquire the Spanish ship in the bay. Would Monsieur d'Ogeron undertake the purchase for him from the fugitive convicts who, he understood, were in possession of her.

Monsieur d'Ogeron took time to reply. "It is possible," he said at last, "that they may not wish to sell."

"Not sell? A God's name what use is the ship to those poor ragamuffins?"

"I mention only a possibility," said Monsieur d'Ogeron. "Come to me again this evening, and you shall have your answer."

When Easterling returned as bidden, Monsieur d'Ogeron was not alone. As the Governor rose to receive his visitor, there rose with him a tall, spare man in the early thirties from whose shaven face, swarthy as a gipsy's, a pair of eyes looked out that were startlingly blue, level, and penetrating. If Monsieur d'Ogeron in dress and air suggested Versailles, his companion as markedly suggested the Alameda. He was very richly dressed in black in the Spanish fashion, with an abundance of silver lace and a foam of fine point at throat and wrists, and he wore a heavy black periwig whose curls descended to his shoulders.

Monsieur d'Ogeron presented him: "Here, Captain, is Mr. Peter Blood to answer you in person."

Easterling was almost disconcerted, so different was the man's appearance from anything that he could have imagined. And now this singular escaped convict was bowing with the grace of a courtier, and the buccaneer was reflecting that these fine Spanish clothes would have been filched from the locker of the commander of the Cinco Llagas. He remembered something else.

"Ah, yes. To be sure. The physician," he said, and laughed for no apparent reason.

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Mr. Blood began to speak. He had a pleasant voice whose metallic quality was softened by a drawling Irish accent. But what he said made Captain Easterling impatient. It was not his intention to sell the Cinco Llagas.

Aggressively before the elegant Mr. Blood stood now the buccaneer, a huge, hairy, dangerous-looking man, in coarse shirt and leather breeches, his cropped head swathed in a red-and-yellow kerchief. Aggressively he demanded Blood's reasons for retaining a ship that could be of no use to him and his fellow convicts.

Blood's voice was softly courteous in reply, which but increased Easterling's contempt of him. Captain Easterling heard himself assured that he was mistaken in his assumptions. It was probable that the fugitives from Barbadoes would employ the vessel to return to Europe, so as to make their way to France or Holland.

"Maybe we're not quite as ye're supposing us, Captain. One of my companions is a shipmaster, and three others have served in various ways, in the King's Navy."

"Bah!" Easterling's contempt exploded loudly. "The notion's crazy. What of the perils of the sea, man? Perils of capture? How will ye face those with your paltry crew? Have ye considered that?"

Still Captain Blood preserved his pleasant temper. "What we lack in men we make up in weight of metal. Whilst I may not be able to navigate a ship across the ocean, I certainly know how to fight a ship at need. I learnt it under de Ruyter."

The famous name gave pause to Easterling's scorn. "Under de Ruyter?"

"I held a commission with him some years ago."

Easterling was plainly dumbfounded. "I thought it's a doctor ye was."

"I am that, too," said the Irishman simply.

The buccaneer expressed disgusted amazement in a speech liberally festooned with oaths. And then Monsieur d'Ogeron made an end of the interview. "So that you see, Captain Easterling, there is no more to be said in the matter."

Since, apparently, there was not, Captain Easterling sourly took his leave. But on his disgruntled way back to the mole he thought that, although there was no more to be said, there was a good deal to be done. Having already looked upon the majestic Cinco Llagas as his own, he was by no means disposed to forgo the prospect of possession.

Monsieur d'Ogeron also appeared to think that there was still at least a word to be added, and he added it after Easterling's departure. "That," he said quietly, "is a nasty and a dangerous man. You will do well to bear it in mind, Monsieur Blood."

Blood treated the matter lightly. "The warning was hardly necessary. The fellow's person would have announced the blackguard to me even if I had not known him for a pirate."

A shadow that was almost suggestive of annoyance flitted across the delicate features of the Governor of Tortuga.

"Oh, but a filibuster is not of necessity a blackguard, nor is the career of a filibuster one for your contempt, Monsieur Blood. There are those among the buccaneers who do good service to your country and to mine by setting a restraint upon the rapacity of Spain, a rapacity which is responsible for their existence. But for the buccaneers, in these waters where neither France nor England can maintain a fleet, the Spanish dominion would

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be as absolute as it is inhuman. You will remember that your country honoured Henry Morgan with a knighthood and the deputy-governorship of Jamaica. And he was an even worse pirate, if it is possible, than your Sir Francis Drake, or Hawkins or Frobisher, or several others I could name, whose memory your country also honours."

Followed upon this from Monsieur d'Ogeron, who derived considerable revenues from the percentages he levied by way of harbour dues on all prizes brought into Tortuga, solemn counsels that Mr. Blood should follow in the footsteps of those heroes. Being outlawed as he was, in possession of a fine ship and the nucleus of an able following, and being, as he had proved, a man of unusual resource, Monsieur d'Ogeron did not doubt that he would prosper finely as a filibuster.

Mr. Blood didn't doubt it himself. He never doubted himself. But he did not on that account incline to the notion. Nor, probably, but for that which ensued, would he ever have so inclined, however much the majority of his followers might have sought to persuade him."

Among these, Hagthorpe, Pitt, and the giant Wolverstone, who had lost an eye at Sedgemoor, were perhaps the most persistent. It was all very well for Blood, they told him, to plan a return to Europe. He was master of a peaceful art in the pursuit of which he might earn a livelihood in France or Flanders. But they were men of the sea, and knew no other trade. Dyke, who had been a petty officer in the Navy before he embarked on politics and rebellion, held similar views, and Ogle, the gunner, demanded to know of Heaven and Hell and Mr. Blood what guns they thought the British Admiralty would entrust to a man who had been out with Monmouth.

Things were reaching a stage in which Peter Blood could see no alternative to that of parting from these men whom a common misfortune had endeared to him. It was in this pass that Fate employed the tool she had forged in Captain Easterling.

One morning, three days after his interview with Mr. Blood at the Governor's house, the Captain came alongside the Cinco Llagas in the cockboat from his sloop. As he heaved his massive bulk into the waist of the ship, his bold dark eyes were everywhere at once. The Cinco Llagas was not only well-found, but irreproachably kept. Her decks were scoured, her cordage stowed, and everything in place. The muskets were ranged in the rack about the mainmast, and the brasswork on the scuttle-butts shone like gold, in the bright sunshine. Not such lubberly fellows, after all, these escaped rebels-convict who composed Mr. Blood's crew.

And there was Mr. Blood himself in his black and silver, looking like a Grande of Spain, doffing a black hat with a sweep of claret ostrich plume about it, and bowing until the wings of his periwig met across his face like the pendulous ears of a spaniel. With him stood Nathaniel Hagthorpe, a pleasant gentleman of Mr. Blood's own age, whose steady eye and clear-cut face announced the man of breeding; Jeremy Pitt, the flaxen-haired young Somerset shipmaster; the short, sturdy Nicholas Dyke who had been a petty officer and had served under King James when he was Duke of York. There was nothing of the ragamuffin about these, as Easterling had so readily imagined. Even the burly, rough-voiced Wolverstone had crowded his muscular bulk into Spanish fripperies for the occasion.

Having presented them, Mr. Blood invited the captain of the Bonaventure to the great cabin in the stern, which for spaciousness and richness of furniture surpassed any cabin Captain Easterling had ever entered.

A Negro servant in a white jacket—a lad hired here in Tortuga—brought, besides the usual rum and sugar and fresh limes, a bottle of golden Canary which had been in the ship's original equipment and which Mr. Blood recommended with solicitude to his unbidden guest.

Remembering Monsieur d'Ogeron's warning that Captain Easterling was dangerous, Mr. Blood deemed it wise to use him with all civility, if only so that being at his ease he should disclose in what he might be dangerous now.

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They occupied the elegantly cushioned seats about the table of black oak, and Captain Easterling praised the Canary liberally so as to justify the liberality with which he consumed it. Thereafter he came to business by asking if Mr. Blood, upon reflection, had not perhaps changed his mind about selling the ship.

"If so be that you have," he added, with a glance at Blood's four companions, "considering among how many the purchase money will be divided, you'll find me generous."

If by this he had hoped to make an impression upon those four, their stolid countenances disappointed him.

Mr. Blood shook his head. "It's wasting your time, ye are, Captain. Whatever else we decide, we keep the Cinco Llagas."

"Whatever you decide?" The great black brows went up on that shallow brow. "Ye're none so decided then as ye was, about this voyage to Europe? Why, then, I'll come at once to the business I'd propose if ye wouldn't sell. It is that with this ship ye join the Bonaventure in a venture a bonaventure." And he laughed noisily at his own jest with a flash of white teeth behind the great black beard.

"You honour us. But we haven't a mind to piracy."

Easterling gave no sign of offence. He waved a great ham of a hand as if to dismiss the notion.

"It ain't piracy I'm proposing."

"What, then?"

"I can trust you?" Easterling asked, and his eyes included the four of them.

"Ye're not obliged to. And it's odds ye'll waste your time in any case."

It was not encouraging. Nevertheless, Easterling proceeded. It might be known to them that he had sailed with Morgan. He had been with Morgan in the great march across the Isthmus of Panama. Now it was notorious that when the spoil came to be divided after the sack of that Spanish city, it was found to be far below the reasonable expectations of the buccaneers. There were murmurs that Morgan had not dealt fairly with his men; that he had abstracted before the division a substantial portion of the treasure taken. Those murmurs, Easterling could tell them, were well-founded. There were pearls and jewels from San Felipe of fabulous value, which Morgan had secretly appropriated for himself. But as the rumours grew and reached his ears, he became afraid of a search that should convict him. And so, midway on the journey across the Isthmus, he one night buried the treasure he had filched.

"Only one man knew this," said Captain Easterling to his attentive listeners for the tale was of a quality that at all times commands attention. "The man who helped him in a labour he couldn't ha' done alone. I be that man."

He paused a moment to let the impressive fact sink home, and then resumed.

The business he proposed was that the fugitives on the Cinco Llagas should join him in an expedition to Darien to recover the treasure, sharing equally in it with his own men and on the scale usual among the Brethren of the Coast.

"If I put the value of what Morgan buried at five hundred thousand pieces of eight, I am being modest."

It was a sum to set his audience staring. Even Blood stared, but not quite with the expression of the others.

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"Sure, now, it's very odd," said he thoughtfully.

"What is odd, Mr. Blood?"

Mr. Blood's answer took the form of another question. "How many do you number aboard the Bonaventure?"

"Something less than two hundred men."

"And the twenty men who are with me make such a difference that you deem it worth while to bring us this proposal?"

Easterling laughed outright, a deep, guttural laugh. "I see that ye don't understand at all." His voice bore a familiar echo of Mr. Blood's Irish intonation. "It's not the men I lack so much as a stout ship in which to guard the treasure when we have it. In a bottom such as this we'd be as snug as in a fort, and I'd snap my fingers at any Spanish galleon that attempted to molest me."

"Faith, now I understand," said Wolverstone, and Pitt and Dyke and Hagthorpe nodded with him. But the glittering blue eye of Peter Blood continued to stare unwinkingly upon the bulky pirate.

"As Wolverstone says, it's understandable. But a tenth of the prize which, by heads, is all that would come to the Cinco Llagas, is far from adequate in the circumstances."

Easterling blew out his cheeks and waved his great hand in a gesture of bonhomie. "What share would you propose?"

"That's to be considered. But it would not be less than one fifth."

The buccaneer's face remained impassive. He bowed his gaudily swathed head. "Bring these friends of yours to dine to-morrow aboard the Bonaventure, and we'll draw up the articles."

For a moment Blood seemed to hesitate. Then in courteous terms he accepted the invitation.

But when the buccaneer had departed, he checked the satisfaction of his followers.

"I was warned that Captain Easterling is a dangerous man. That's to flatter him. For to be dangerous a man must be clever, and Captain Easterling is not clever."

"What maggot's burrowing under your periwig, Peter?" wondered Wolverstone.

"I'm thinking of the reason he gave for desiring our association. It was the best he could do when bluntly asked the question."

"It could not have been more reasonable," said Hagthorpe emphatically. He was finding Blood unnecessarily difficult.

"Reasonable!" Blood laughed. "Specious, if you will. Specious until you come to examine it. Faith, now, it glitters, to be sure. But it isn't gold. A ship as strong as a fort in which to stow a half-million pieces of eight, and this fortress ship in the hands of ourselves. A trusting fellow this Easterling for a scoundrel."

They thought it out, and their eyes grew round. Pitt, however, was not yet persuaded. "In his need he'll trust our honour."

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Blood looked at him with scorn. "I never knew a man with eyes like Easterling's to trust to anything but possession. If he means to stow that treasure aboard this ship, and I could well believe that part of it, it is because he means to be in possession of this ship by the time he does so. Honour! Bah! Could such a man believe that honour would prevent us from giving him the slip one night once we had the treasure aboard, or even of bringing our weight of metal to bear upon his sloop and sinking her? It's fatuous you are, Jeremy, with your talk of honour."

Still the thing was not quite clear to Hagthorpe. "What, then, do you suppose to be his reason for inviting us to join him?"

"The reason that he gave. He wants our ship, be it for the conveyance of his treasure, if it exists, be it for other reasons. Didn't he first seek to buy the Cinco Llagas? Oh, he wants her, naturally enough; but he wants not us, nor would he keep us long, be sure of that."

And yet, perhaps because the prospect of a share in Morgan's treasure was, as Blood said, a glittering one, his associates were reluctant to abandon it. To gain alluring objects men are always ready to take chances, ready to believe what they hope. So now Hagthorpe, Pitt, and Dyke. They came to the opinion that Blood was leaping to conclusions from a prejudice sown in him by Monsieur d'Ogeron, who may have had reasons of his own to serve. Let them at least dine tomorrow with Easterling, and hear what articles he proposed.

"Can you be sure that we shall not be poisoned?" wondered Blood.

But this was pushing prejudice too far. They mocked him freely. How could they be poisoned by meat and drink that Easterling must share with them? And what end would thus be served? How would that give Easterling possession of the Cinco Llagas?

"By swarming aboard her with a couple of score of his ruffians and taking the men here unawares at a time when there would be none to lead them."

"What?" cried Hagthorpe. "Here in Tortuga? In this haven of the buccaneers? Come, come, Peter! I must suppose there is some honour among thieves."

"You may suppose it. I prefer to suppose nothing of the kind. I hope no man will call me timorous; and yet I'd as soon be called that as rash."

The weight of opinion, however, was against him. Every man of the rebels—convict crew was as eager for the enterprise when it came to be disclosed as were the three leaders.

And so, despite himself, at eight bells on the morrow, Captain Blood went over with Hagthorpe, Pitt, and Dyke, to dine aboard the Bonaventure. Wolverstone was left behind in charge of the Cinco Llagas.

Easterling welcomed them boisterously, supported by his entire crew of ruffians. Some eight score of them swarmed in the waist, on the forecastle, and even on the poop, and all were armed. It was not necessary that Mr. Blood should point out to his companions how odd it was that all these fellows should have been summoned for the occasion from the taverns ashore which they usually frequented. Their presence and the leering mockery stamped upon their villainous countenances made Blood's three followers ask themselves at last if Blood had not been justified of his misgivings, and made them suspect with him that they had walked into a trap.

It was too late to retreat. By the break of the poop, at the entrance of the gangway leading to the cabin, stood Captain Easterling waiting to conduct them.

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Blood paused there a moment to look up into the pellucid sky above the rigging about which the gulls were circling. He glanced round and up at the grey fort perched on its rocky eminence, all bathed in ardent sunshine. He looked towards the mole, forsaken now in the noontide heat, and then across the crystalline sparkling waters towards the great red Cinco Llagas where she rode in majesty and strength. To his uneasy companions it seemed as if he were wondering from what quarter help might come if it were needed. Then, responding to Easterling's inviting gesture, he passed into the gloom of the gangway, followed by the others.

Like the rest of the ship, which the first glance had revealed for dishevelled and unclean, the cabin was in no way comparable with that of the stately Cinco Llagas. It was so low that there was barely headroom for tall men like Blood and Hagthorpe. It was ill-furnished, containing little more than the cushioned lockers set about a deal table that was stained and hacked. Also, for all that the horn windows astern were open, the atmosphere of the place was heavy with an acrid blend of vile smells in which spun-yarn and bilge predominated.

The dinner proved to be much as the surroundings promised. The fresh pork and fresh vegetables had been befouled in cooking, so that, in forcing himself to eat, the fastidious stomach of Mr. Blood was almost turned.

The company provided by Easterling matched the rest. A half-dozen of his fellows served him as a guard of honour. They had been elected, he announced, by the men, so that they might agree the articles on behalf of all. To these had been added a young Frenchman named Joinville, who was secretary to Monsieur d'Ogeron and stood there to represent the Governor and to lend, as it were, a legal sanction to what was to be done. If the presence of this rather vacuous, pale-eyed gentleman served to reassure Mr. Blood a little, it served to intrigue him more.

Amongst them they crowded the narrow confines of the cabin, and Easterling's fellows were so placed along the two sides of the table that no two of the men from the Cinco Llagas sat together. Blood and the Captain of the Bonaventure immediately faced each other across the board.

Business was left until dinner was over and the Negro who waited on them had withdrawn. Until then the men of the Bonaventure kept things gay with the heavily salted talk that passed for wit amongst them. At last, the table cleared of all save bottles, and pens and ink being furnished together with a sheet of paper each to Easterling and Blood, the Captain of the Bonaventure opened the matter of the terms, and Peter Blood heard himself for the first time addressed as Captain. Easterling's first words were to inform him shortly that the one-fifth share he had demanded was by the men of the Bonaventure accounted excessive.

Momentarily Peter Blood's hopes rose.

"Shall we deal in plain terms now, Captain? Do you mean that they'll not be consenting to them?"

"What else should I mean?"

"In that case, Captain, it only remains for us to take our leave, in your debt for this liberal entertainment and the richer for the improvement in our acquaintance."

The elaborate courtesy of those grossly inaccurate terms did not seem to touch the ponderous Easterling. His bold, craftily set eyes stared blankly from his great red face. He mopped the sweat from his brow before replying.

"You'll take your leave?" There was a sneering undertone to his guttural voice. "I'll trouble you in turn to be plain with me. I likes plain men, and plain words. D'ye mean that ye'll quit from the business?"

Two or three of his followers made a rumbling challenging echo to his question.

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Captain Blood to give him now the title Easterling had bestowed upon him had the air of being intimidated. He hesitated, looking as if for guidance to his companions, who returned him only uneasy glances.

"If," he said at length, "you find our terms unreasonable, I must assume ye'll not be wishing to go further, and it only remains for us to withdraw."

He spoke with a diffidence which amazed his own followers, who had never known him other than bold in the face of any odds. It provoked a sneer from Easterling, who found no more than he had been expecting from a leech turned adventurer by circumstances.

"Faith, Doctor," said he, "ye were best to get back to your cupping and bleeding, and leave ships to men as can handle them."

There was a lightning flash from those blue eyes, as vivid as it was transient. But the swarthy countenance never lost its faint air of diffidence. Meanwhile Easterling had swung to the Governor's representative, who sat on his immediate right.

"What d'ye think of that, Mossoo Joinville?"

The fair, flabby young Frenchman smiled amiably upon Blood's diffidence. "Would it not be wise and proper, sir, to hear what terms Captain Easterling now proposes?"

"I'll hear them. But . . . "

"Leave the buts till after, Doctor," Easterling cut in. "The terms we'll grant are the terms I told ye. Your men share equally with mine."

"But that means no more than a tenth for the Cinco Llagas." And Blood, too, now appealed to Monsieur Joinville. "Do you, sir, account that fair? I have explained to Captain Easterling that for what we lack in men we more than make up in weight of metal, and our guns are handled by a gunner such as I dare swear has no compeer in the Caribbean. A fellow named Ogle Ned Ogle. A remarkable gunner is Ned Ogle. The very devil of a gunner, as you'd believe if you'd seen him pick those Spanish boats off the water in Bridgetown Harbour."

He would have continued upon the subject of Ned Ogle had not Easterling interrupted him. "Hell, man! What's a gunner more or less."

"Oh, an ordinary gunner, maybe. But this is no ordinary gunner. An eye he has. Gunners like Ogle are like poets; they are born, so they are. He'll put you a shot between wind and water, will Ogle, as neatly as you might pick your teeth."

Easterling banged the table. "What's all this to the point?"

"It may be something. And meanwhile it shows you the valuable ally ye're acquiring." And he was off again on the subject of his gunner. "He was trained in the King's Navy, was Ned Ogle, and a bad day for the King's Navy it was when Ogle took to politics and followed the Protestant Champion to Sedgemoor."

"Leave that," growled one of the officers of the Bonaventure, a ruffian who answered to the name of Chard. "Leave it, I say, or we'll waste the day in talk."

Easterling confirmed this with a coarse oath. Captain Blood observed that they did not mean to spare offensiveness, and his speculations on their aims starting from this took a fresh turn.

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Joinville intervened. "Could you not compromise with Captain Blood? After all, there is some reason on his side. He might reasonably claim to put a hundred men aboard his ship, and in that case he would naturally take a heavier share."

"In that case he might be worth it," was the truculent answer.

"I am worth it as it is," Blood insisted.

"Ah, bah!" he was answered, with a flick of finger and thumb under his very nose.

He began to suspect that Easterling sought to entice him into an act of rashness, in reply to which he and his followers would probably be butchered where they sat, and Monsieur Joinville would afterwards be constrained to bear witness to the Governor that the provocation had proceeded from the guests. He perceived at last the probable reason for the Frenchman's presence.

But at the moment Joinville was remonstrating. "Come, come, Captain Easterling! Thus you will never reach agreement. Captain Blood's ship is of advantage to you, and we have to pay for what is advantageous. Could you not offer him an eighth or even a seventh share?"

Easterling silenced the growl of disagreement from Chard, and became almost suave. "What would Captain Blood say to that?"

Captain Blood considered for a long moment. Then he shrugged. "I say what you know I must say; that I can say nothing until I have taken the wishes of my followers. We'll resume the discussion when I have done so another day."

"Oh, s'death!" roared Easterling. "Do you play with us? Haven't you brought your officers with you; and ain't they empowered to speak for your men same as mine? Whatever we settles here, my men abides by. That's the custom of the Brethren of the Coast. And I expect the same from you. And I've the right to expect it, as you can tell him, Mossoo Joinville."

The Frenchman nodded gloomily, and Easterling roared on.

"We are not children, by God! And we're not here to play, but to agree terms. And, by God, we'll agree them before you leave."

"Or not, as the case maybe," said Blood quietly. It was to be remarked that he had lost his diffidence by now.

"Or not? What the devil do you mean with your 'or not'?" Easterling came to his feet in a vehemence that Peter Blood believed assumed, as the proper note at this stage of the comedy he was playing.

"I mean or not, quite simply." He accounted that the time had come to compel the buccaneers to show their hand. "If we fail to agree terms, why, that's the end of the matter."

"Oho! The end of the matter, eh? Stab me, but it may prove the beginning of it."

Blood smiled up into his face, and cool as ice he commented: "That's what I was supposing. But the beginning of what, if you please, Captain Easterling?"

"Indeed, indeed, Captain!" cried Joinville. "What can you mean?"

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"Mean?" Captain Easterling glared at the Frenchman. He appeared to be extremely angry. "Mean?" he repeated. "Look you, Mossoo, this fellow here, this Blood, this doctor, this escaped convict, made believe that he would enter into articles with us so as to get from me the secret of Morgan's treasure. Now that he's got it, he makes difficulties about the articles. He no longer wants to join us, it seems. He proposes to withdraw. It'll be plain to you why he proposes to withdraw, Mossoo Joinville; just as it'll be plain to you why I can't permit it."

"Why, here's paltry invention!" sneered Blood. "What do I know of his secret beyond his tale of a treasure buried somewhere."

"Not somewhere. You know where. For I've been fool enough to tell you."

Blood actually laughed, and by his laughter scared his companions, to whom the danger of their situation was now clear enough.

"Somewhere on the Isthmus of Darien. There's precision, on my soul! With that information, I can go straight to the spot, and set my hand on it. As for the rest, Monsieur Joinville, I invite you to observe it's not myself is making difficulties about the articles. On the one-fifth share which I asked from the outset, I might have been prepared to join Captain Easterling. But now that I'm confirmed in all that I suspected of him and more, why, I wouldn't join him for a half-share in this treasure, supposing it to exist at all, which I do not."

That brought every man of the Bonaventure to his feet as if it had been a signal, and they were clamorous too, until Easterling waved them into silence. Upon that silence cut the tenor voice of Monsieur Joinville.

"You are a singularly rash man, Captain Blood."

"Maybe, maybe," said Blood, light and airily. "Time will show. The last word's not yet been said."

"Then here's to say it," quoth Easterling, quietly sinister on a sudden. "I was about to warn you that ye'll not be allowed to leave this ship with the information ye possess until the articles is signed. But since ye so clearly show your intentions, why, things have gone beyond warnings."

From his seat at the table, which he retained, Captain Blood looked up at the sinister bulk of the Captain of the Bonaventure, and the three men from the Cinco Llagas observed with mingled amazement and dismay that he was smiling. At first so unusually diffident and timid; now so deliberately and recklessly provoking. He was beyond understanding. It was Hagthorpe who spoke for them.

"What do you mean, Captain? What do you intend by us?"

"Why, to clap you into irons, and stow you under hatches, where you can do no harm."

"My God, sir . . ." Hagthorpe was beginning, when Captain Blood's crisp, pleasant voice cut across his speech.

"And you, Monsieur Joinville, will permit this without protest?"

Joinville spread his hands, thrust out a nether lip, and shrugged. "You have brought it on yourself, Captain Blood."

"So that is what you are here to report to Monsieur d'Ogeron! Well, well!" He laughed with a touch of bitterness.

And then, abruptly, on the noontide stillness outside came the thunder of a gun to shake them all. Followed the screaming of startled gulls, a pause in which men eyed one another, and then, a shade uneasily, came the question

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from Easterling, addressed to no one in particular:

"What the devil's that?"

It was Blood who answered him pleasantly. "Now, don't let it alarm ye, Captain, darling. It's just a salute fired in your honour by Ogle, the gunner the highly skilful gunner of the Cinco Llagas. Have I told you about him yet?" His eyes embraced the company in the question.

"A salute?" quoth Easterling. "By Hell, what do you mean? A salute?"

"Why, just a courtesy, as a reminder to us and a warning to you. It's a reminder to us that we've taken up an hour of your time, and that we must put no further strain upon your hospitality." He got to his feet, and stood, easy and elegant in his Spanish suit of black and silver. "It's a very good day we'll be wishing you, Captain."

Inflamed of countenance, Easterling plucked a pistol from his belt. "You play-acting buffoon! Ye don't leave this ship."

But Captain Blood continued to smile. "Faith, that will be very bad for the ship, and for all aboard her, including this ingenuous Monsieur Joinville, who really believes you'll pay him the promised share of your phantom treasure for bearing false witness against me, so as to justify you in the eyes of the Governor for seizing the Cinco Llagas. Ye see, I am under no delusions, concerning you, my dear captain. For a rogue ye're a thought too transparent."

Easterling loosed a volley of minatory obscenity, waving his pistol. He was restrained from using it only by an indefinable uneasiness aroused by his guest's bantering manner.

"We are wasting time," Blood interrupted him, "and the moments, believe me, are growing singularly precious. You'd best know where you stand. My orders to Ogle were that if within ten minutes of his firing that salute I and my friends here were not over the side of the Bonaventure, he was to put a round shot into your forecastle along the water-line, and as many more after that as may be necessary to sink you by the head. I do not think that many will be necessary. Ogle is a singularly skilful marksman. He served with distinction as a gunner in the King's Navy. I think I've told you about him."

It was Joinville who broke the moment's silence that followed. "God of my life!" he bleated, bounding to his feet. "Let me out of this."

"Oh, stow your squealing, you French rat," snarled the infuriated Easterling. Then he turned his fury upon Blood, balancing the pistol ominously. "You sneaking leech, you college offal! You'd ha' done better to ha' stuck to your cuppings and bleedings, as I told you."

His murderous intention was plain. But Blood was too swift for him. Before any could so much as guess his purpose, he had snatched up by its neck the flagon of Canary that stood before him, and crashed it across Captain Easterling's left temple.

As the captain of the Bonaventure reeled back against the cabin bulkhead, Peter Blood bowed slightly to him.

"I regret," said he, "that I have no cup; but, as you see, I can practise phlebotomy with a bottle."

Easterling sagged down in a limp, unconscious mass at the foot of the bulkhead. The spectacle stirred his officers. There was a movement towards Captain Blood, and a din of raucous voices, and someone laid hands upon him. But above the uproar rang his vibrant voice.

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"Be warned! The moments are speeding. The ten minutes have all but fled, and either I and my friends depart, or we all sink together in this bottom."

"In God's name, bethink you of it!" cried Joinville, and started for the door.

A buccaneer, who did bethink him of it and who was of a practical turn of mind, seized him about the body, and flung him back.

"You there!" he shouted to Captain Blood. "You and your men go first. And bestir yourselves! We've no mind to drown like rats."

They went as they were bidden, curses pursuing them and threats of a reckoning to follow.

Either the ruffians aswarm on the deck above were not in the secret of Easterling's intentions, or else a voice of authority forbade them to hinder the departure of Captain Blood and his companions.

In the cock-boat, midway between the two vessels, Hagthorpe found his voice at last.

"On my soul's salvation, Peter, there was a moment when I thought our sands were run."

"Ay, ay," said Pitt, with fervour. "And even as it was they might have been." He swung to Peter Blood, where he sat in the sternsheets. "Suppose that for one reason or another we had not got out in those ten minutes, and Ogle had opened fire in earnest? What, then?"

"Ah!" said Blood. "Our real danger lay in that he wasn't like to do it."

"But if you so ordered him?"

"Nay, that's just what I forgot to do. All I told him was to loose a blank shot when we had been gone an hour. I thought that however things went it might prove useful. And on my soul, I believe it did. Lord!" He took off his hat, and mopped his brow under the staring eyes of his companions.

"I wonder now if it's the heat that's making me sweat like this."