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Tales of Terror From The Black Ship

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Extract

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For three long days the coast had been savaged by a wild and rabid storm. The waves threw themselves at the ancient cliffs with a rage few had ever witnessed, and certainly nothing I could remember seeing in my thirteen years of life – and I had lived nowhere else.

The Old Inn, my home, squatted on the clifftop, holding on for dear life like a limpet clinging to a rock at high tide. It stood on a gnarled promontory that had been gnawed relentlessly over the centuries so that only a thin trackway connected it to the rest of Cornwall. It was eaten away on either

side like the core of an apple, undermined to form a bridge and in danger of being bitten clean through and making an island of the inn and islanders of me and my family.

The storm was a killing storm and had raced across the Atlantic without warning, like some wild, ravenous beast. Fishermen all along the coast were caught in its claws and their wan-faced widows haunted the quays and harbour mouths.

On the first day, a clipper that had tried to outrun the storm had been broken up on the teeth of the rocks a mile or so offshore and gone down with all hands, the sea too mountainous for the lifeboat men to reach them.

The day after, another ship, an ancient-looking vessel, had been sighted in the bay, only just visible amid the low clouds and sea spray, and the folk along the shore prayed that it had found some way to outwit the winds and escape the fate of the drowned brig. I did likewise as I stood in the wind-wrecked garden, looking out to sea.

Despite its isolated and precarious location, the Old Inn had always been a popular and friendly place, and much of this was due to my father, who was never too busy to listen to another man's woes or share a joke or dispense some of the wisdom that

comes with a vocation such as innkeeper.

Though some may feel an inn to be a less than perfect place for a child to grow up, Cathy and I would not have traded places with any other children in England.

The seafaring men who came to the inn were like our own family. There were those who could be bad-tempered or gruff, it is true, but we could always find someone who would be willing to tell us tales of their adventures and travels. We would sit, spellbound, until our mother shooed us away to bed, deaf to our pleas to stay for just a few more minutes.

No children ever had more love than we did; the memory of it is like a bright light, so intense I can hardly bear to look. But it was not to last.

After our mother died during childbirth, taking our little brother (as would have been) to heaven with her, our father, who had always been the very best of fathers and the noblest of men, slowly slid into a trough of despair, medicating himself liberally with brandy and port and whatever open bottle was at hand.

He had no call for jokes and no man's woes were equal to his own. The wisdom he had gifted others seemed spent. He was sullen and

ill-tempered, even to the friends who tried in vain to encourage him to see that he should take comfort in the lives of his children.

But Cathy and I were no comfort at all; far from it. We were reminders of the love he had lost. Cathy was a perfect miniature of our mother and it often seemed to pain him to look at her. Yet no matter how he spurned us, he was still our father and we loved him dearly. He was my model for manhood; I had grown up wanting nothing but to be like him in every way.

Our customers were not so forgiving, however. Gradually the inn began to empty. Long-standing patrons and family friends who had once thought nothing of trudging up the cliff path now stayed in the village, and any passing travellers rode on, forewarned of my father's inhospitable nature.

His mental state grew worse and worse. He flew into uncontrollable rages from which Cathy and I would hide, cowering in our rooms until we felt it safe to come out, invariably finding our poor father drunkenly sobbing to himself in front of the fire. It began to seem as if whatever ties had bound us to him, our father was drifting away from us day by day, staring past us, unwilling or unable to hold our gaze, pushing us away, crying out for a quietude

that seemed forever lost to him, and therefore lost to us too.

The storm seemed to be an especially malevolent influence on him. It was as if three days of gales had shaken my father's wits, uprooting and splintering them. He had become oddly invigorated by the wildness of the weather and his actions became more and more excitable and intense.

I observed him from my bedroom window in the cottage garden my mother had lovingly kept but which now was overgrown with thistles and weeds, beaten almost flat by the gales. He was leaning into the wind, harvesting tall blue flowers manically yet methodically, gathering up a sad bouquet. I was shocked to see that he was crying profusely as he did so. It pained my heart to see it.

Then, on the third night of the storm, Cathy and I were struck down by a terrible illness. It hit Cathy first, but only by about an hour. It came on with frightful speed, with strange numbness about the face and throat, followed by the most terrible sickness and vomiting. We were both sure we would die and we called out as we would have done as tiny children, calls that would have brought our mother running up the stairs.

With this crisis my father seemed to come to his

senses. He was like a changed man. He comforted us as dearly as any parent could and said that all would soon be well: he would go to fetch the doctor and we were to stay in the house and on no account leave or let anyone enter. I had never seen him so distraught. He seemed half crazed with worry and we loved him for it.

We promised and he left, assuring us that he would be back before we knew it. My father had placed Cathy and I in his own bed, and we lay there together in the dark. I could hear Cathy's breathing – which, like my own, had become so very fast – gradually slow and calm. Then I fell asleep.

I cannot say how long I slept. The wind around the house was like a dragon's mighty roaring and, understandably I suppose, my sleep was troubled, for I woke into the darkness gasping for breath, like a sailor breaking the surface of a black ocean whose depths had swallowed his ship. But to my great relief, the pains had gone.

'Cathy,' I whispered, 'are you awake?'

'Yes,' she said after a pause. 'But I feel strange.'

I knew what she meant. The symptoms of the illness seemed to have passed, but they had been replaced by an odd light-headedness. I said that perhaps we should get up and wait for Father

downstairs by the fire, and Cathy agreed.

We got dressed and made our way down to the main room of the inn, which until recent times would have been filled with the talk of men and the clink of glasses and clatter of pewter pots, but was now empty, the only movement being the jittery, nervous shadows of chairs, flickering in the firelight.

I asked Cathy if she would like me to read to her and she said she would, so we settled down by the fire as we often did. I had intended to read her some childish works of fancy, some frivolous entertainments to calm her in Father's absence. But I should have known better.

Ever since I could remember, Cathy and I had both had the most insatiable taste for stories of a macabre persuasion, particularly those whose plots sailed upon storm-tossed oceans or hauled up on strange deserted shores. It was a taste acquired from listening to the seafaring tales of the regulars at the inn, tales that made little concession to our tender years and would have caused our mother to send us to bed even earlier had she known.

These stories, though gruesome, were as much a comfort to us in their familiarity as a nursery rhyme might be to another child, and it was to



these tales we turned in the hope of being transported from our present woes and worries. They took us back to that happy time when all was well at the inn, a time when death and sorrow were confined to stories and the lives of others.

The wind was so loud about the house and made such moans and mournful howls in the chimney that I had to raise my voice to a most unnatural level to ensure that Cathy could hear me, but she made no complaint and merely sat in rapt attentiveness, hanging on my every word.

'A *scene of the most horrible butchery ensued,*' I read. '*The bound seamen were dragged to the gangway. Here the cook stood with an axe, striking each victim on the head as he was forced over the side of the vessel by the other mutineers . . .*'

The fearsome gale had been tugging at the barn door and slamming it shut repeatedly for an hour or more, and so it was a little while before we registered that the booming we were now hearing was not that sound, but someone pounding at the front door.

I ran to have a look, assuming it to be my returning father. The main door to the inn stood at the end of a small and gloomy stone-flagged hallway and had a round window of thick glass, like that at

the end of a bottle. Even in outline I could see it was not Father.

'Hallo there!' said the man outside. 'Will you let a poor sailor bide out the storm?'

'We're closed,' was all I could think to say, mindful of Father's warning to let no one in and to stay in the house until he returned.

'Have pity, lad,' the stranger shouted above the storm's din, clearly divining my adolescence from my nervous voice. 'All I ask is safe harbour for a while and then I'll be gone. You would not leave a man to die in this foul weather now, would you?'

At these words the roar of the tempest rose to another level of wildness. It did seem cruel to let even a stranger spend another minute in that storm. The wind was so strong it had lifted a barrow and hurled it into the sea only moments before he'd arrived. It could do the same with a man, of that I was in no doubt. Whatever Father had said before he left, I was sure he would let the man in himself were he here.

When I lifted the latch it was all I could do to prevent myself being pinned to the wall by the violence of the opening door, and the roar of the storm and the sea crashing at the cliffs was such an assault on my senses that it took me a while to fully

register the figure standing in the doorway, a flash of lightning throwing him into inky silhouette and almost seeming to shine through him in its intensity.

I could not detect any features – he remained a shadow in the doorway – but something in his face twinkled like a tiny star.

'I'll be no trouble nor harm to you or your kin, you have my word.'

Another crack of thunder exploded overhead and I could not in all conscience have closed that door on anyone on such a night.

'Aye,' I said reluctantly. 'Come in, come in.'

'You're a good lad,' said the stranger with a smile. 'Jonah Thackeray doesn't forget a good turn. Pleased to meet you.'

'Ethan Matthews,' I said, taking the hand he had offered and finding it as cold and wet as a fishmonger's. He was comprehensively soaked, water dripping from him as readily as though he had just climbed from the sea.

'Come in,' I said. 'You'll catch your death out there.'

'I thank you kindly,' he said, stepping over the threshold, and I put my shoulder to the door and, after a struggle on the stone flags, managed to get it

closed and bolted against the storm. The relative peace once the door was shut was marvellous to behold and our little house seemed more comforting as a shelter than it had before.

When I turned to face the stranger I was surprised to discover that he could not have been very much older than I was – seventeen or eighteen at most. He was dressed in the uniform of a midshipman (though hatless and in a somewhat old-fashioned style), with a black topcoat with brass buttons and a white waistcoat and white shirt beneath. A sword hung from his hip.

There was a black silk neckerchief around his throat and the face above was handsome: dark eyes, like those of a seabird, set in a pale face and framed all about by jet-black hair that snaked downward in shining wet locks. A gold tooth glinted in his broad white smile. Catherine came and stood by me, peering round at him.

'And who might this rare beauty be?' he said. Cathy blushed and hid her face.

'This is my sister, sir,' I said a little stiffly, not overly keen to hear her spoken to in such a forward manner. 'Catherine is her name.'

'Though everyone calls me Cathy,' said my sister.

'I'm very pleased to meet you, Miss Cathy,' said

the sailor, as he gave her a shallow bow.

'Pleased to meet you too, sir,' said Cathy with what I took to be a curtsey.

'But are you all alone here?' asked Thackeray, looking past us.

I felt my hand clench into a fist, suspicious of this line of questioning. Thackeray noted it and smiled.

'Come now, friend,' he said. 'Stand down. I was only asking. Is your mother here perhaps?'

'Our mother is long dead, sir,' said Cathy. 'Ethan and I have been awful sick and Father has gone to fetch the doctor.'

'Cathy!' I hissed, annoyed that she should be so free with a total stranger.

'Well,' she sniffed, 'Father told you not to let anyone in and you have. So there!'

I could hardly argue with this accusation and felt my cheeks burn. The wind roared like an angry beast and seemed to hammer at the door as if trying to gain entrance. The visitor looked at us both with such a strange expression.

'It's a rough night out there,' said Thackeray. 'Has your father been long?'

'Yes,' said Cathy. 'He's been an awful long time, hasn't he, Ethan?'

Again I glared at Cathy for her infuriating habit of saying more than was strictly necessary.

'He will be back in no time, sir,' I said, 'rest assured. We are expecting him at any moment.'

'Are you?' he said in a tone I did not care for.

'Yes, indeed,' I replied.

'I am mighty pleased to hear it, young fellow,' said Thackeray. 'In the meantime perhaps I might have a sip of rum and share your company.'

He took a purse out of his pocket, shook some coins into his hand and emptied them noisily on to the counter.

'I am sure my father would not want us to send you out until the storm eases, sir,' I said, looking at the coins. 'You may help yourself to rum. There is a bottle on the counter. Cathy shall fetch you a glass.'

We all three sat down at a table near the fire, Cathy and me at one side, Thackeray at the other. There was a pile of books on the table and our visitor picked them up, reading the titles out loud with a wry smile.

'*Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship* Essex, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, *Tales of the Grotesque and the Arabesque* – these are deep waters for ones so young.'

'Do you not like Mr Poe?' said Cathy.

'I like him well enough,' he replied, 'though he can be a mite elaborate for my tastes.' He grinned. 'I found *The Tell-Tale Heart* very amusing – wonderfully gruesome.'

Cathy smiled at this unusual pairing of words, clearly seeing a kindred spirit in Thackeray. I was more wary.

'You are a reader, then, Mr Thackeray?' I asked with a marked tone of surprise. He smiled.

'When I have the opportunity,' he replied. 'But we sailors are more likely to tell a tale than read one. It is part of the life of a ship, even a ship such as mine.'

He looked into the fire for a moment, seemingly lost in his own thoughts. I wondered what he had meant by that.

'You have not yet told us how you come to be out on a night like this,' I asked.

'I used to live not far from here,' he said. 'But that was long ago . . .'

Once again Thackeray seemed to drift off into his own world, and I looked at Cathy, regretting my soft-heartedness at letting this stranger in through the door. We knew most people hereabouts and I knew of no Thackerays. But Cathy seemed

spellbound as our visitor turned to face her.

'I was sweet on a girl and would have wed her.' He smiled weakly at Cathy. 'But she married another. I married the sea instead.' He took a swig of rum and looked into the fire again. I rolled my eyes at Cathy and she slapped me on the arm.

'Perhaps,' he said, looking back at us, 'and I only say perhaps – perhaps I might while away some time, as I drink my drink and wait for the storm to quieten, by sharing with you a few tales I've gathered on my travels. How might that be?'

Cathy readily and excitedly agreed that that would be an excellent notion, providing that our guest would not find it too tiring. I mumbled something to the effect that whatever Cathy wanted was fine by me, though in truth I did not want to give this stranger any excuse to tarry.

'My only concern,' said Thackeray, 'is that my tales are too shocking for your tastes. I am used to the company of seafaring folk and our stories have a tendency to be – how shall I say? – of a more bloodthirsty nature than those you may have heard before.'

Cathy and I exchanged glances and I knew that she felt the same as I.

'I assure you, sir, that my sister and I are quite

equipped to deal with anything you tell us. We are not babes. We have been brought up in an inn and we are well used to the ways of seafarers like yourself.'

Thackeray rubbed his hands together and they creaked like old leather. He grinned and his gold tooth twinkled like the evening star in the twilight at the edge of the fireglow.

'Very well, then, young listeners,' he said, 'I shall have to think . . . Ah yes. I think I have one you might find diverting. It is a romance of sorts.'

'A romance?' said Cathy with a curl of her lip. She had a spirited aversion to romances of any kind. I smiled at how swiftly Thackeray seemed to have lost my sister's interest.

'Yes,' he said, '*of sorts* . . .'