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Mutiny on the Bounty

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Published by Black Swan

Black Swan edition Published 2009, a division of Transworld Publishers

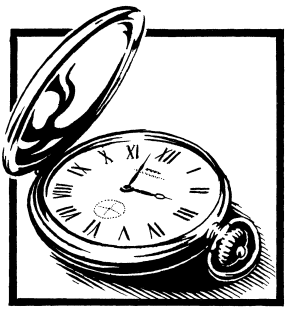
Extract

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Part I

The Offer



PORTSMOUTH, 23 DECEMBER 1787

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THERE WAS ONCE A GENTLEMAN, a tall fellow with an air of superiority about him, who made it his business to come down to the marketplace in Portsmouth on the first Sunday of every month in order to replenish his library.

I knew him first on account of the carriage that his man drove him in. The darkest black you ever saw, it was, but speckled at the top with a row of silver stars, as if he had an interest in a world outside our own. He always spent the best part of a morning browsing through the bookstalls that were laid out in front of the shops or running his fingers along the spines of those on the shelves indoors, pulling some out to take a look at the words inside, passing others from hand to hand as he examined the binding. I swear he came close to sniffing the ink off the pages, he got so close to some of them. Some days he'd come away with boxes of books that had to be fitted on to the top of his carriage with a length of hemp-rope so they wouldn't fall off. Other times he'd be lucky if he found a single volume that interested him. But while he was finding a way to lighten his wallet through his purchases, I was looking for a way to lighten his pockets of his belongings, as was my trade back then. Or one of them anyway. I had some handkerchiefs off him from time to time and a girl I knew, Floss Mackey, would pick out the stitching in the monogram – MZ – for a farthing so that I might sell them on to a laundress for a penny, and she in turn would find a buyer for each one at a tidy profit that would keep her in gin and

pickles. Another time, he placed his hat on a cart outside a haberdashery shop and I had it too and sold it on for a bag of marbles and a feather from a crow. I tried for his wallet on occasion but he kept it close, like gentlemen do, and when I saw it emerge to pay the bookseller I could tell he was a man who liked to keep his money about him and determined that one day it would be mine.

I mention him now, right here at the start of this narrative, in order to relate a piece of business that took place on one such Sunday market morning, when the air was uncommonly warm for a Christmas week and the streets were uncommonly quiet. It was to my disappointment that there were not more gentlemen and ladies making their purchases at that time as I had my eye on a special luncheon in two days' time to mark the Saviour's birth and was in need of the shillings to pay for it. But there he was, my particular gentleman, dressed in his finery and with a whiff of cologne about him, and me hovering in the background, waiting for the moment I might make my move. Usually it would have taken a charge of elephants through the market to distract him from his perusals, but on this December morning he took a notion to look in my direction and for a moment I thought he was on to me and I was done for, even though I had yet to commit the act of felony.

'Good morning, my boy,' said he, taking his spectaculars off and peering across at me, smiling a little too, acting the hoity-toit. 'It's a fine morning, isn't it?'

'If you like sun at Christmas time, which I don't,' said I, all bluff.

The gentleman thought about this for a moment and narrowed his eyes, cocking his head a little to the side as he looked me up and down. 'Well, there's an answer,' he said, sounding as if he was unsure whether he approved of it or

not. 'You'd rather it was snowing, I expect? Boys generally do.'

'Boys maybe,' I replied, pulling myself up to my full height, which was nowhere near as tall as the gent but taller than some. 'Men don't.'

He smiled a little and examined me further. 'I do apologize,' said he, and I thought I heard a trace of an accent in there somewhere. French, maybe, although he disguised it well as was only right and proper. 'I didn't mean to insult you. You are clearly of a venerable age.'

'It's perfectly all right,' said I, offering him a small bow. I'd turned fourteen two days earlier, on the night of the Solstice, and had determined that I wasn't going to be spoken down to by anyone from then on.

'I've seen you here before, haven't I?' he asked me then, and I thought about walking away without an answer as I had neither the time nor the inclination for a conversation, but I held my position for now. If he was a Frenchie as I believed, then this was my place, not his. What with me being an Englishman, I mean.

'Like as not,' said I. 'I don't live so very far away.'

'And might I enquire as to whether I've discovered a fellow connoisseur of the arts?' he continued, and I frowned as I thought about it, picking at his words like the meat on a bone and shoving my tongue into the corner of my mouth to make it bulge out in the way that makes Jenny Dunston call me deformed and bound for the knackers' yard. There's a thing about gentlemen: they never use five words where fifty will do. 'A love of literature brings you here, I assume?' he asked then, and I thought to hell with this and was about to issue a curse on his head and turn on my heel in order to go to find another squirrel, when he let this enormous laugh out of him as if I was some sort of simpleton and raised the volume he was

holding in my direction. 'You like books?' he said finally, bringing it down to brass tacks. 'You enjoy reading?'

'I do,' I admitted, thinking about it. 'Although I don't often have any books to read.'

'No, I'd imagine not,' he said quietly, taking a look at my clothes, up and down, and I suppose he could tell from the motley garments I was sporting that I was not blessed with an abundance of funds at that precise moment. 'But a young boy like you should always have access to books. They enrich the mind, you see. They ask questions of the universe and help us to understand our place in it a little better.'

I nodded and looked away. It wasn't my particular habit to get into conversations with gentlemen and I was damned if I was going to start on a morning like that.

'I only ask . . .' he continued as if he was the Archbishop of Canterbury and was in the process of delivering a sermon to an audience of one but wasn't about to be put off by the lack of numbers in attendance. 'I only ask because I feel sure that I've seen you around here before. At the marketplace, I mean. And by the bookstalls in particular. And I happen to hold young readers in high regard. My own nephew, why, I can't get him to open a book to so much as the frontispiece.'

It was true that the bookstalls were my regular places of business, but only because that was a good location to trap a squirrel, that was all, for who else can afford to buy books, only them as have money? But his question, although not an accusation, gave me the resentments, so I thought I'd play along for a little while and see what a farce I could make of him.

'Well, I do love a good read,' said I then, rubbing my hands together and sounding for all the world like the well-schooled son of the Duke of Devonshire, all dickied up in his Sunday best, clean ears and polished dentals. 'Oh, yes,

I do indeed. In fact, I have a mind to visit China myself one day, if I can afford the time away from my present responsibilities.'

'China?' asked the gentleman then, staring at me as if I had twenty heads. 'I beg your pardon, did you say China?'

'I most certainly did,' I replied, offering him a slight bow, imagining for a moment that maybe he would take me on as his lad and keep me in finery if he thought me educated; a change in circumstances, of course, but perhaps not a disagreeable one.

He continued to stare and I fancied that I might have got this wrong somehow, for he appeared to be entirely confused by what I had said. Truth to tell, Mr Lewis – him as took care of me in those early years and in whose establishment I had lodged for as long as I could recall – had only given me two books to read in my life and they both happened to have their stories set in that distant land. The first concerned a man who had sailed there on a rusty old tub, only to be set a multitude of tasks by the emperor himself before being allowed to marry his daughter. The second was a saucy tale with pictures in it and Mr Lewis would show it to me from time to time and ask me whether it gave me the motions.

'In fact, sir,' said I then, stepping towards him and glancing at his pockets to see whether there might be a stray handkerchief or two springing out, seeking liberation and a new owner. 'If I may be so bold as to say so, I have a fancy to become a book-writer myself when I'm of age.'

'A book-writer,' he said, laughing, and I stopped where I was, my face like granite. Gentlemen like him, that's how they all behave. They might seem friendly when they talk to you but just you try to express a desire to make something better of yourself, maybe to be a gentleman yourself one day, and they take you for a fool.

'I apologize,' he said then, observing the disapproving look on my face. 'I wasn't making jest, I assure you. If anything, I applaud your ambition. You took me by surprise, that's all. A book-writer,' he repeated now when I said nothing, neither accepting nor rejecting his apology. 'Well, I wish you well with it, Master—?'

'Turnstile, sir,' said I, bowing a little again out of habit – and one that I was trying to break, I might add, for my back didn't need the exercise any more than gentlemen needed the adulation. 'John Jacob Turnstile.'

'Then, I wish you well with it, Master John Jacob Turnstile,' said he in what I suppose was something approaching a pleasant voice. 'For the arts are an admirable pursuit for any young man intent on bettering himself. In fact, I devote my own life to their study and support. I don't mind admitting that I've been a bibliophile from the cradle and it has enriched my life and provided my evenings with the most glorious companionship. The world needs good story-tellers and perhaps you will be one if you pursue your aims. You are familiar with your letters?' he asked me, turning his head to the side a little like a schoolteacher awaiting response.

'A, B, C,' said I in as posh a voice as I could muster. 'Followed by their compatriots D through to Z.'

'And you write with a fair hand?'

'Him as looks after me said my lettering recalls his own mother's and *she* were a wet-nurse.'

'Then, I suggest you acquire as much paper and ink as you can afford, young man,' said the gentleman. 'And take to it at once, for it is a slow art and requires much concentration and revision. You hope to make your fortune from it, of course?'

'I do, sir,' said I . . . and then the strangest thing! I found that in my head I was no longer making a farce of him at

all but was thinking what a fine thing that would indeed be. For I *had* enjoyed the stories I had read of China and I *did* spend most of my time by the bookstalls in the marketplace when everyone knew that the squirrels ran wilder around the fabric shops and the public houses.

The gentleman looked to be finished with me now and replaced his spectaculars on his nose, but before he turned away I made bold enough to ask him a question.

'Sir,' said I, the nerves coming out in my voice now, which I tried to control by deepening it. 'Sir, if I may?'

'Yes?' he asked.

'If I *were* to be a book-writer,' said I, choosing my words carefully because I wanted a sensible answer from him, 'if I *were* to try such a thing, and knowing that my letters are learned and my hand is fair, where would I begin exactly?'

The gentleman laughed a little and shrugged his shoulders. 'Well, I've never had the creative touch myself, I admit it,' he replied finally. 'I'm more of a patron than an artist. But if I was to tell a story, I suppose I should try to locate the very first instance, that singular point in my tale, that set the whole business in motion. I would find that moment and begin my narrative from there.'

He nodded then, dismissing me at last, and turned back to his perusals, leaving me to my cogitations.

The very first instance. The moment *that set the whole business in motion*.

I mention this now and here because the moment that set *my* business in motion was that very meeting two mornings before Christmas Day with the French gentleman, without which I might never have known either the bright or dark days that were to follow. Indeed, had he not been there that morning in Portsmouth, and had he not allowed his pocket-watch to rest off its fob and peep too temptingly from his greatcoat, then I might never have stepped

forward and transferred it from the luxurious warmth of his lining to the cold comfort of my own. And it is unlikely that I would have walked carefully away from him in the manner in which I had been trained, whistling a simple melody to illustrate the casual air of a fellow without a care in the world going about his honest business. And I most certainly would never have made my way to the entrance of the marketplace, satisfied with the knowledge that a morning's money had already been earned, Mr Lewis would be paid, and a Christmas dinner would surely be mine two days hence.

And had I never done *that*, I would have absolutely been denied the pleasure of hearing the piercing sound of a blue's whistle and seeing the sight of a crowd turning towards me with angry eyes and ready limbs, nor felt the grinding of my head as it met the cobbles beneath when some great lummox of a do-gooder jumped atop me and set me off my pins and on to the flat of the ground.

None of this might have happened and I might never had a story to tell.

But it did. And I do. And here it is.

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WHISKED AWAY, I WAS! Whisked like an egg and beaten just as soundly. These are the moments when your life's not your own, when others grab you and take you and force you to go where you've no business going. And I should know, having suffered more than my fair share of such moments in fourteen years. But once that whistle is