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The Pirates!

In an Adventure with Whaling

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One

I BATTLED A TON OF TURTLE!



'That one looks almost exactly like a whale!'

'No it doesn't. It looks like a pile of rags with an ant stood on them. But for some reason the ant only has five legs.'

'It's more like a cutlass. Or a beautiful mermaid lady.'

'It's a big seagull!'

'It's a skull!'

The pirates were busy lying on their backs on the deck of the pirate boat trying to decide what clouds looked like. Most days this enterprise would end up with the pirates having a brawl about whether a cloud would taste more like a marshmallow or a meringue if you could eat one, but today, before the pirates even had the chance to get their cutlasses out or pull angry faces at

each other, there was a sudden crack, a shower of dust and splinters, and with a tremendous crash the boat's mast fell down on top of them.

The mast completely flattened the pirate who liked to show off how much he knew about wine, whilst the pirate with a hook for a hand found himself engulfed in a billowing white sail, and he was soon chasing the other pirates about, pretending to be a ghost. There was such a commotion none of the pirates even noticed the galley doors swing open and the Pirate Captain himself step out onto the deck. The Pirate Captain had taken to wearing a dashing maroon smoking jacket and a blousy white shirt that had most of the buttons undone to reveal the glossy hairs on his chest. His chest hairs were almost as well-conditioned as the hairs in his luxuriant beard, which many of the crew felt to be one of the seven wonders of the oceanic world. If the pirate crew had been asked to list the seven wonders of the oceanic world in full they would have confidently said, in ascending order: 1) the Lighthouse at Pharos; 2) the Colossus of Rhodes; 3) Lulworth Cove; 4) those jellyfish that light up; 5) Lobsters; 6) Girls In Bikinis; 7) the Pirate Captain's fantastic beard.

'What in blazes is going on, you oily wretches?!' the Pirate Captain bellowed.

The pirates all dusted themselves down, and the pirate with a hook for a hand sheepishly took off the sail and stopped doing ghost noises.

'Sorry, Captain,' said the pirate in green. 'We were just discussing what the clouds looked like when the mast fell down again.'

The Pirate Captain stepped over the bits of broken mast and tangled rigging and squinted up at the cloud that the pirates were looking at.[1] He clicked his tongue thoughtfully.

'It looks,' he said, after a little deliberation, 'like my stentorian nose with a bottle of grog next to it.'

The pirates all nodded, and slapped their foreheads, because that was *exactly* what the cloud most looked like, and they could all see it now the Pirate Captain had pointed it out.

'Listen, lads. Looking at clouds is all well and good,' said the Captain sternly, 'but some of us have important piratical work to do. So try and keep the noise down. Maybe tie a few knots, or something quiet like that.'

And with a waggle of his eyebrows and a wave of his cutlass, the Pirate Captain swept back through the big oak doors to his office. As the doors slammed shut, one of them fell off its hinges, which slightly diminished the imperious effect he had been going for.



1 Clouds that look like things tend to be fair-weather cumulus clouds, which have a lifetime of just 5–40 minutes.

Back in his office the Pirate Captain sat at his desk and tried to get on with some work. As usual he spent a few minutes arranging his quills and paperweights. After that he tapped a pencil against his teeth. Then he tried balancing an inkpot on his nose. Finally he got up and walked around the room a little bit, hoping he might get some inspiration from the various portraits of himself that he had hung up about the place. He'd had some new ones done since their last adventure. There was a black-and-white painting that showed him with his shirt off tenderly cradling a baby. There was one of him emerging from an old boot alongside a giant kitten. And next to that was an actual 'Wanted' poster[2], which had a grainy picture of the Pirate Captain on it, and a bounty of ten thousand doubloons. The Pirate Captain stopped in front of a mirror and practised pulling the same face that he was doing in the Wanted poster, until a tentative knock at the door sent him diving back behind his desk. He scratched his forehead to show how deep in thought he was and said, 'Come in!' in his best working voice. The pirate with a scarf poked his head around the door.

'Hello Number Two,' said the Pirate Captain.

'Hello Pirate Captain,' said the pirate with a scarf, who for some reason was carrying the boat's steering

2 In 1718 the Governor of Virginia offered a reward of £100 for the capture of the notorious Blackbeard. That's about £10,769 in nowadays money, so it probably wouldn't have been worth the bother.

wheel. 'I was hoping I could have a word?'

'Of course!' The Pirate Captain waved for him to take a seat. 'Actually, I'm glad you're here – you can help me with this work I'm doing.' He looked at his second-in-command seriously. 'I'm making a list of when it's acceptable for a pirate to cry.'

'That sounds very important, Captain,' said the pirate with a scarf, fiddling anxiously with his eye-patch. He had a delicate topic he wanted to broach, and you never could tell with the Captain if he might not fly into one of his terrible rages, because he prided himself on being unpredictable, like the ocean.

'So far I've got: one – when holding a seagull covered in oil. Two – when singing a shanty that reminds him of orphans. Three – when confronted by the unremitting loneliness of the human condition. Four – chops. I've just written the word "chops". Not really sure where I was going with that one. Any ideas?'

'It's a very good list, Captain,' said the pirate with a scarf, wondering why the last few zeros on the Captain's Wanted poster were in a different colour ink from the others. 'But there's something a few of the other pirates wanted me to ask you about.'

'Oh dear,' said the Pirate Captain, noticing the worried look on the scarf-wearing pirate's otherwise rugged face. 'Nothing relationship-based, I hope? You know how I'm not very good with emotional issues.' The Captain paused and looked out of the porthole. 'I think

the problem is I'm just not very interested in them.'

'No, Captain. Nothing like that.'

'Well then. Fire away!'

'It's the boat, Captain. I don't know if you've noticed, and it would be fair enough if you hadn't, what with you being so busy making lists and all, but . . . well . . .' The scarf-wearing pirate tried to think of the most tactful way to put it. 'She's in a bit of a state.'

The Pirate Captain looked thoughtfully at the fraying wooden beams and the big patches of mould on the ceiling. 'Oh, I think "state" is a bit harsh. "Full of character" is probably the phrase you're after.'

'That's the third time this week the mast has fallen down, Captain.'

'Good thing too. Keeps the lads on their toes!'

'It's not just the mast, Captain,' the scarf-wearing pirate persisted. 'The cannons don't work properly. Several of the pirates have been getting nasty splinters, from the deck being so rotten. There's tar all over the place. And this,' he held up the boat's wheel and waggled it about, 'just came clean off in my hands.'[3]

'Arrrr.' The Pirate Captain stroked his beard. 'I suppose we need that for the . . . the uh . . .'

'Steering, sir. It moves the rudder.'

'Of course, the rudder. I knew that. The rudder's the one with the portholes, isn't it?'

3 The ship's wheel first replaced the tiller in 1705.

'That's the forecastle, Captain.'

'Yes, the forecastle. Anyhow, pass it over here.' The Captain took the wheel, gave his trusty number two a reassuring wink, strode over to the back of his office and hung it on a spare nail that was sticking out from the wall. 'Paint a few numbers round the edge, it's got the makings of a nice dartboard, don't you think? Problem solved.'

Before the Pirate Captain had time to congratulate himself on this clever idea, the steering wheel thudded onto the carpet, taking the nail and a piece of the boat's wall with it. A spray of seawater jetted into the Captain's office and knocked an astrolabe off his mantelpiece. The Pirate Captain frowned.

'Look at that. It's made a little hole,' he said. But without missing a beat he picked up one of his portraits – the one of him smiling standing next to a lady-boy on the beach in Thailand – and propped it up over the leak.

'I don't think you can really just cover up holes with pictures, Captain,' said the pirate with a scarf sadly, as a steady stream of water went on dribbling down onto the carpet.

'Nonsense,' snorted the Pirate Captain, briefly pulling aside another painting to reveal a second nasty-looking gash in the wall. 'See. That's much worse, and it's been there for ages!'

The Pirate Captain grinned, but the pirate with a scarf just gave him a reproachful look.

'The boat's really not safe, Captain. What if there was a storm? She wouldn't hold together for a minute.'

'I suppose a few of the lads might get washed out to sea,' agreed the Captain with a shrug. 'But, like my wise old Aunt Joan always says, it's a harsh life out on the ocean.'

'It's not just the pirates I'm thinking of,' said the scarf-wearing pirate. He paused meaningfully. 'What about your Prize Ham?'

He pointed at the big glass-fronted display case in the corner of the room. Inside the case hung the Pirate Captain's pride and joy – a huge glistening honey-roast ham.[4] It was about as close as you could get to the platonic ideal of a ham, if Plato had spent more time discussing hams and less time mucking about with triangles. It gleamed like a lumpy pink jewel where the sunlight from the porthole caught its honey glaze. There was even a little silk bow tied around the thin end.

'Oh goodness,' said the Pirate Captain, looking lovingly at the ham. 'You're right. I don't think I could bear the thought of anything happening to her. And you know I can't say no when you do those big sad eyes at me.' He slumped back into his chair. 'What were you thinking?'

4 The most expensive ham in the world is *pata negra iberico* ham, which costs around £13 per 100 grams. Each pig spends its brief life feasting on 8kg per day of the sweet, oily holm oak acorns found in the Mediterranean woodlands where they are raised.

'We're not far from Nantucket, Captain,' said the pirate with a scarf, pointing at the nautical chart that the Captain had been using as a blotter.

'I know a limerick about Nantucket,' said the Pirate Captain brightly.

'It's where Cutlass Liz has her pirate boatyard,' said the pirate with a scarf, trying his best to keep the conversation on topic, which could be difficult with the Pirate Captain. 'I thought we might stop off and get the boat fixed up properly. Then after that we could have an adventure, maybe with spies or something.'

'Hell's bells,' exclaimed the Pirate Captain. 'Cutlass Liz! The Butcher of Barbados. I don't think they hand out those sort of nicknames for no good reason.'

The pirate with a scarf nodded ruefully. 'It's pretty hard to find reputable boatyards that are prepared to deal with us pirates,' he pointed out.

'Yes, I suppose you're right. Sometimes I wonder if I should have taken up a more respectable line of work. Did I tell you how my mother was hoping I would be an architect?'

'I'm sure you'd have made a brilliant architect, Pirate Captain.'

'I'd have liked building those little models best. With the cut-out people.'

The Pirate Captain drifted off for a moment, thinking about his career choices.



In the boat's dining room the rest of the pirates were already tucking into their lunch. On board a pirate boat it wasn't considered rude to start before everybody was present, and you could even put your elbows on the table. Those were just two of the perks that attracted people to the piratical life. The Pirate Captain strode in followed by the pirate with a scarf to tell the crew the news. He picked up his 'Number One Boss' mug that the pirates had given him for his last birthday and downed it in one gulp. Then he banged the mug on the table.

'Listen up lads – and lady,' said the Pirate Captain with a nod to Jennifer, who had joined them on their last exciting adventure. 'What's the single most important thing in the life of a pirate?'

The crew all looked deep in thought. There were a few whispered discussions. Then the pirate in green put his hand up.

'Is it love?' he asked.

The Pirate Captain rubbed the back of his neck. 'Yes, all right. That's probably true. But after that, what's the next most important thing?'

'Respecting his or her mother?' suggested the pirate with gout.

'Fair enough,' conceded the Pirate Captain. 'You'd be nowhere without your mothers. But then what? What's the third most important thing?'

The crew looked stumped.

'His pirate boat!' roared the Captain. 'It's come to my attention that the old girl's a little past her best. And I can hardly maintain my reputation as a debonair terror of the High Seas with bits falling off the boat all the time, can I? So you'll be pleased to know that we're paying a visit to Cutlass Liz's boatyard.'

The pirates didn't look very pleased at all. Most of them look petrified.

'Cutlass Liz!' exclaimed the sassy pirate.

'They say she's as deadly as she is beautiful!' said the pirate in green.

'I heard she ate twenty babies, just to show her crew how ruthless she was!' said the albino pirate.

'Twenty whole babies all in one sitting!'

'You tried that once, didn't you, Pirate Captain? To terrify that admiral?'

'But there weren't any babies around at the time.'

'I remember that. We drew faces on a load of hams instead. Ham babies!' A few of the pirates laughed as they remembered their adventure with the ham babies. Then they remembered about Cutlass Liz and looked worried again.

'Oh, I'm sure her reputation has been exaggerated,' said the Pirate Captain, helping himself to another mug

of grog. 'You know how us pirates get. She's probably just a bit stroppy now and again. And besides – who *hasn't* slit a man's belly open for looking at them cock-eyed?'