

Black Marlin

A Novel by Ben R. Williams

Chapter X: Land Ho!

We joined Captain Bill at the forecastle, the roaring tempest having thankfully diminished to but a mild drizzle. I was surprised to find that several more hours had passed than I had previously thought (perhaps a side-effect of the insulo tabako, and a glorious one at that for men with many hours to while away at sea), and that the storm's fierce winds had pushed us so far afield that the eastern seaboard was no longer visible at the horizon. What was most surprising, however, was the sight that greeted us a mere half-mile from the Temperance's prow: had I not known it to be a fiction, I would have sworn that we had come across Cipher Island itself.

The island was tiny, a few acres at most, its shore lined with a thick perimeter of gangly pines, made bent and rachitic by many seasons of howling storms. And in the center, just visible through the pines, a manor house, custom-built in some strange style roughly approximating an English Colonial, with one great exception: while most houses are constructed around a chimney, this house seemed to be built as an afterthought to its chimney, a great

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smoke-stack that bobbed its gray head just above the tree-line.

"What the fuck?" said Mulligan.

Captain Bill grabbed Shillingi's mighty wrist. "Drop anchor, Shillingi, and Mulligan, ready the long-boat. Weems, rouse Pincus from his office. We must needs pay this home a visit."

"But why, Captain?" asked I.

Captain Bill reached into an inner pocket of his battered pea-coat and removed a cylinder of brass and wood inlay, which, with the flick of a wrist, was revealed to be an ornate and quite elderly spyglass which he positioned before his good eye.

"Quite simple, young Isaac. Should the Black Marlin have passed within a fifty mile radius of this oasis, this hermit will know it. He is isolated, but he is also unguarded; a man in such a position must make it his business to know who passes through his vicinity. I am certain he knew we had arrived at his island before we did."

"Yet Captain, I cannot imagine the man who would make his home so far at sea; I find little evidence that anyone lives here at all."

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Captain Bill wordlessly passed me his spyglass; I held it to my eye and observed. At first glance, the view seemed to only re-confirm my suspicions of the home's abandonment: the white paint which once covered its bricks had turned gray and flaked, and the wood trim and shakes appeared worm-eaten and petrified. Yet, as I lifted the old scope a bit higher, I saw what the Captain had intended to indicate to me: from the chimney, a curl of smoke, not much larger than those which exit the chimney of old Mulligan's briar.

The long-boat cut through the mild green waves, Mulligan and Pincus pumping the oars, and it seemed to me that while most sailors lacking a compass will find their direction by the sun, the sun seemed now to be following direction from our crew, taking our long-boat ride as a cue to burn off the remaining traces of the storm and gleam brightly upon our salty backs, its glare transforming the water into a hoard of rarest jade.

"I can't see a God damn thing," Mulligan grumbled, squinting mole-ily.

The Exploratory Crew consisted of Captain Bill, Mulligan, Pincus, Weems, Nine, and myself; Shillingi had been entrusted to keep watch over the Temperance, and it seemed clear that good Mr. Snuff made it a policy to never

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leave his engine room, much as a blind cave fish makes it a policy to never leave its ebon grotto. In spite of our strong numbers, I detected a bit of somber trepidation among the crew, principally me.

"Any man who would move this far from civilization," Mulligan said, voice straining from exertion as he pulled back the oars, "Is a man who does not like visitors. I feel we should brace for gun-play."

Nine grinned Britishly. "A foine bit a' sport that'd be, oy! Ol' Molligan poppin' off bulletos loike Billy Hickok in his Woild Wester show, see-"

"Shut up," Mulligan said. "Anyway, Bill, I don't intend to shoot anyone, but if the parley turns sour, I won't hesitate, whether you've gleaned any information or not."

"Nor will I," Weems muttered, touching the rubber sheath of his mysterious dagger.

"There will be no need for violence," the Captain said, clapping a hand on Pincus' shoulder. "Not with Baron Silver-Tongue among us."

The waves grew in stature as we approached the island, finally reaching such a height that they could propel us faster than our oar-ings. Mulligan worked his oar as a rudder, steering us to the rocky beach straight and true.

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We disembarked and dragged the longboat above the tide-line.

The shore offered little evidence of civilization, save for a barnacle-crusting wooden pole which jutted out from between the seaweed-choked rocks. Mulligan gave it a kick; it snapped lazily in half, sending a family of woodlice a-scatter.

"There's what's left of the dock," Mulligan said. "Unless he has a charter, I doubt this hermit has left the island in quite some time."

It was at this point I felt the oddest sensation, a prickling of the downy hairs on the back of my neck and back of my back. It was as though a third party unknown to us, positioned at a considerable remove, were watching our every motion, perhaps with curiosity, perhaps with some emotion considerably more malignant. As I turned to glance about the pine thicket which lined the island, I felt Mulligan's hot breath fill my ear canal.

"Be casual," he said softly, "We're being watched, and we'll lose the upper hand if we telegraph our awareness of it."

Wise words, indeed. I began to whistle casually, hands stuffed into my pockets, like any other gentleman might whilst taking a pleasant stroll around a mystery island.

Mulligan removed one of his great Webley pistols from its skeleton holster and held it at ease by his side, and Captain Bill followed suit, hefting a great antique Navy revolver of the black-powder variety. "Gentlemen," the Captain said, "Though the path be dark and frightening, we must plunge ever onward. Keep your eyes wide, your ears pricked, and your nostrils boldly flared."

The Captain took the lead, disappearing into the pine thicket. Mulligan took the rear, and I walked before him, my feet crunching through a layer of pine needles and small shells. The thicket, though not deep, was profoundly dense, cultivated into a protective ring around the island, much like the massive Moai heads which keep watch around Easter Island's periphery. The sensation of being watched never left me, though I quickly realized the futility of searching out the watcher. The tangled nature of the pines and brambles would have allowed any scout to hide in plain sight. I might have passed within twenty yards of our observer, or perhaps so close that he could have reached out his hand and given my cheek a heart-stopping caress. Had I known our watcher's intent, even if it were malicious, I would have been assured in knowing; it is in not-knowing that we are only truly frightened. Why else do we fear ghosts but that we cannot know the intentions of

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those who have passed beyond the limits of human knowledge? Furthermore, who was to say that the island was not also home to ghosts? Any terror seemed possible while stomping through that horrid thicket.

I was greatly relieved when we emerged into a small clearing, the grass chopped raggedly and unevenly as if set upon by a scythe that had not seen a whetstone since leaving the hardware. Beyond the clearing, the pines rose once more, leaving us totally exposed to any who may have been watching. Yet we were not alone; in the center of the clearing stood a squat wooden building, itself concentrically encircled by a low stone wall.

"What is it?" Pincus said, "A chicken coop?"

Captain Bill approached the building warily and peered over the wall. "Nay, 'tis but a rabbit hutch, and—ah ye Gods!"

He staggered backwards, setting the rest of us in motion. We raced to his side, and, driven by the same principles which compel a man warned of a noxious odor to respond with a hearty sniff of the air, we peered over the wall to gaze deeply at what had so startled the good Captain.

They were rabbits, I suppose, though not of any variety I was familiar with, and certainly not of the

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handsome sort I had so often cuddled and dandled as a tow-headed young college student. These rabbits were enormous, larger even than the dreaded Himalayan Lop, with savage yellow incisors and great shiny black eyes. Some had four legs, though these were the exceptions; the majority had seven or eight, the extraneous limbs dangling hither and thither as though two of the rabbits had collided into each other at high speed and combined at an elemental level. As we stared in disgust, the largest of clan, lacking any limbs at all, barrel-rolled towards us, bumped into the stone wall with such force to shudder it, and belched out a bobcat's shriek. Whether it wanted a carrot or human blood was impossible to determine.

"Good God," Weems said, "They're as inbred as the House of Habsburg."

Pincus prodded one of the rabbits with his cane, grimacing at the wretched insectile buzz this action elicited. "How many generations would it take to produce genetic deformities such as these, Mr. Weems?"

"Generations? Impossible to say. But I can tell you we are not speaking of mere years; we are dealing in decades."

It was then that I noticed something which had not caught my eye previously, something more unnerving than even the freakish rabbits, something which was, in and of



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itself, not particularly jarring (though perhaps out of place), but, when coupled with an earlier observation, seemed suddenly marked with an inexplicably ominous significance, though it eventually became explicably significant, but for the sake of the narrative, I will stay my hand from writing out the explanation and, instead, merely tell you what I saw, which I will do now:

In the center of the rabbit-hutch's roof, a chimney.