

Ben R. Williams 2011

Black Marlin

A Novel by Ben R. Williams

Chapter XIII: Burial at Sea

We stood at the prow of the *Temperance* in a semi-circle, staring boldly at the ocean ahead. (You may find it strange that I have uncharacteristically omitted our return to the *Temperance*. I omit it merely because it was quite uneventful. We simply left the island house, returned to our long-boat, and rowed back to our ship. We did consider setting free the deformed rabbits, yet none of us were particularly inclined to handle the loathsome beasts, so we left them to their hutch, though I will admit feeling rather poorly about it. The only other action of any consequence occurred shortly prior to leaving the house. After the Captain doused the roaring flame inside the chimney/tower to Moloch, we found a small foot, quite unburned, clearly belonging to Nine. The Captain gathered it up in a croker sack with the intention of burying it at sea, that foot being the only remaining intact piece of young Nine. In retrospect, that is a rather important detail, particularly considering that the bulk of this chapter concerns that burial, so I hope you will forgive me

Ben R. Williams 2011

for omitting it. I assure you I will strive to be more detailed in the future.)

We stood at the prow of the *Temperance* in a semi-circle, staring boldly at the ocean ahead. The sun slid towards the west with illusory speed, as though it were exhausted from a full day's work and ready to retire to bed. It was a lovely, idyllic scene: the unearthly glow of the sunlight on the ocean; the seagulls and terns wheeling lazily overhead; even the strange island seemed a comforting oasis when framed by that ochre sunset. It was, in my estimation, the finest possible setting for laying Nine's severed foot to rest.

The foot-bearing croker sack dangled from the Captain's belt; he jerked it free and offered it to Pincus.

"Mr. Pincus," said he, "You are the only man among us who can claim to be ordained as a minister, priest, and rabbi. Would you care to lead the service?"

Pincus morosely ran a hand across the top of his head, slicking back the thinning hair that still found purchase there. "I will make an attempt."

Pincus squared his shoulders and assumed the most grand and clerical stance his height would allow, hands resting on the silver head of his cane. He cleared the cobwebs from his throat with a mighty harrumph and began:

Ben R. Williams 2011

"Friends, we gather at the prow today to commit to the ocean the mortal remains of Master Nine, our valiant cabin boy. It is a pity that his loving parents could not be here today, though, upon further consideration, I suppose that they may not have been the finest parents, allowing that their son young son found his way into our company. Nonetheless, barring immaculate conception, I assume that these parents exist, and that they bestowed upon Nine his Christian name (which escapes me at the moment) and I am certain they would feel emotions of some variety if they were to learn of his untimely demise. His true family, of course, was aboard the Temperance. I still recall the first time I met Nine. It was almost two years ago. Or perhaps one year ago. Between one and two years ago. We were in England. I cannot recall where precisely, nor why we were there, but I do recall that our Captain had procured a bottle of absinthe imported from Paris, and that we drank it in the customary fashion involving sugar cubes suspended over the glass by a perforated spoon. I believe we drank it in a brothel of some sort. I recall red lights filtered through lace shades. Perhaps we met Nine there. Perhaps he was the child of one of the whores and helped with janitorial duties at the brothel. That seems plausible."

Ben R. Williams 2011

"That was Seven," said Weems. "We picked up Nine at a pier. He was selling clamshells with eyes painted on them to passing sailors."

"No, you're thinking of Four," Mulligan added.

"At any rate," said Pincus, "One thing is for certain: however Nine initially entered our lives, he quickly proved himself irreplaceable, and his replacement, Ten, will certainly have some large shoes to fill."

The Captain lifted Nine's tiny foot to the sky; the sack swayed gently from his bright brass hook.

'I have no name;

I am but two days old,'

What shall I call thee?

'I happy am,

Joy is my name.'

Sweet joy befall thee!

William Blake wrote those words in a volume called 'Songs of Innocence.' It strikes me as apropos to recite it as we remember Nine, for what was the boy but a joyous innocent? I have never cleaved to the notion of elevating the deceased to sainthood, and I will not do so with Nine. He was simple, often frustratingly so, yet what is mental simplicity but the ultimate expression of innocence? Nine, by his nature, was unable to carry the taint of Experience,

Ben R. Williams 2011

that gruesome snail's shell that clings to our own backs and weighs down our spirits 'til no joy be buoyant enough to lift them. Even as death bore down upon him, he greeted the reaper's calcified cheek with a smile. He saw only the best in people. Now he is dead. It is a dark lesson learned today, yet one worth keeping. And now we commit his remains to the sea.

"Oh King Neptune, I beseech thee! We are still far from the equator, yet we hope you'll lend an ear and accept our posthumous initiation of young Nine into the brotherhood of sailors! He was a good lad, and those of us pure enough for the voyage will meet him again on the golden shore. Amen."

His benediction complete, the Captain whipped his hook and sent the croker sack sailing through the air. It splashed gently into the orange sea, an irretrievable speck on the glassy surface of that incalculable vastness. How many more crewmen might be sent to that impassive watery grave before the *Temperance* laid a plank to the Black Marlin's deck? It was the sort of thought that made one feel quite small, and also like having a drink. It quickly became clear that I was not alone in these ruminations.

"Shillingi, unfurl the sails," the Captain said, rubbing his hand against his temple. "Mulligan, set our

Ben R. Williams 2011

course. We will reconvene in the galley. Tonight we shall drink and be merry, or, at the very least, drink. We do this in honor of Nine. You are all dismissed."

With that, the Captain trudged away, looking somehow more ruffled and set-upon than ever before, a trend which, were it to continue, would surely end with the Captain transforming into an animate shadow. I tugged at Pincus' sleeve as Bill left earshot.

"Say Pincus," said I, "The Captain seems quite bereaved. Do you think he requires comfort?"

"Nay," Pincus said, "Bill will be fine. He becomes grief-stricken every time we lose a crewmember, but he always pulls himself together after a few hours. Even now, I suspect he's analyzing his maps and charting our course. This is the very nature of his monomania; he may be momentarily distracted, but his sights always return to his Mary."

As Pincus strolled towards the galley, I stared out at the sea beyond the prow. Above me, the sails rolled and snapped open, guided by Shillingi's knots and rope-tugs, filling with the breath of Aeolus and pushing us South, South toward the horn, South toward the sailor's graveyard, and ultimately, hopefully, South towards the Black Marlin.