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Black Marlin

A Novel by Ben R. Williams

Chapter XVI: Gaming Aboard the Temperance

If an experienced sailor were to read the previous fifteen chapters of this sea-faring narrative, he would likely be struck by the sheer amount of action that has transpired in a relatively brief period of time. The average reader would not be surprised; he likely views the sea as a place of great adventure and excitement. But the weathered salt knows that the sailor's greatest enemy is not the weather, nor the shark-fish, nor the scurvy; no, his most merciless foe is Tedium. It is Tedium that stalks him as he labors in the ship's hot belly, Tedium that whips him on the blistering deck, Tedium that alternately exhausts him and robs him of his precious sleep. And yes, in spite of our best efforts, Tedium was always the ninth man aboard the Temperance, and though we tried our best to stave off his apathetic attacks through spirits and insulo tabako (two amazing palliatives both possessing the unique ability to make the doing of nothing seem remarkably thrilling), Tedium would, on occasion, best even our bold crew.

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I have, in previous chapters, attempted to limit my discussion of those moments aboard the ship which do not bear discussing, the hours spent lying in my hammock watching Shillingi and the rest of the crew toil so ceaselessly that I would become exhausted just watching, or the idle days spent observing the sun's tireless march from one horizon to the next, watching the placid ocean glisten beautifully beneath its beatific glow, and pausing my observations only long enough to occasionally relieve myself into it. And so, if the time-frame seems somewhat truncated and perhaps unrealistic, I assure the veteran sea-man that this is due solely to one of two causes: either my respect for the reader's time, or my inability to recall precise sequences of events due to the influence of the aforementioned spirits and insulo tabako.

Nonetheless, it occurs to me that the reader may be curious as to how our crew whiled away the hours during the many days of long sailing, days when we might travel a fifty miles without ever seeing a shore-line or even the slightest disturbance in the ocean's orphic face. The reader might be surprised to learn that it was during those times when we would, quite frequently, busy ourselves with the playing of games. These games are worth cataloguing, I feel, for just as Darwin teaches us that an island species

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will, through isolation, evolve along a different line than its mainland brethren, so too did our games mutate inside the great echo chamber called Temperance into unique variations or entirely new species which should likely be catalogued for the benefit of future generations. A brief list follows:

Mulligan's Draw: A unique variant of five card draw invented by bos'un Gus Mulligan. Initially, the rules seem identical to those of the parent game; no less than two players are dealt five cards each, a round of betting takes place, up to four cards are discarded and redrawn, a second round of betting takes place, cards are shown, and the best hand wins. But it is during this second round of betting that the rules differ under certain circumstances. If one of the bettors places a bet which is deemed reckless (for example, any bet which includes more than fifty percent of the bettor's total bank) then any other player may suggest that the bettor is a damnable liar and bluffsman. A round of escalating accusations then takes place ("Do you say so?" "I certainly do." "Then God damn prove it." "Mayhap I will!"). All betting then ceases and a sub-round known as "The Proving" is initiated. Three empty bottles are placed on a flat, elevated surface. The Accuser is then given a revolver, preferably a flat-shooting weapon with accurate

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iron sights, generally a .44 special, and three bullets. The accuser then stands twenty-five feet away (no more and no less) and is allowed to take three shots. For each accurate shot that breaks a bottle, the Accuser may look at one of the Bettor's cards. For each miss, the Bettor may look at one of the Accuser's cards. Whichever party is allowed to examine one or more cards can not share his knowledge with the rest of the table, nor, generally, would he be so inclined. If the Accuser or Bettor attempt to cheat by shooting the flat, elevated surface, causing it to spill the bottles into the floor and thereby shatter them on impact, the cheater must fold his hand for that round. Once the Proving has been completed and the proper cards have been examined, a third and final round of betting takes place. Only one round of Proving may take place per hand, and generally speaking, very few rounds of Proving take place per game, though most tend to occur near the end of the game when spirits are high and losing players become desperate. All other rules remain the same.

Albatross Rodeo: To my knowledge, an entirely original game, invented by our biologist Mr. Weems. Due to its nature, Albatross Rodeo can only be played in the southern hemisphere or North Pacific, as live albatrosses are required. First, one or more albatrosses must be spotted

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wheeling above (though occasionally frigate-birds are substituted, and in one case the Captain claims he played the game with a bioluminescent ropen off the coast of Papua, New Guinea). Then, a long length of twine is taken, and at the end is affixed a fish or large squid. A weight of some kind, often a ring of keys, is attached to the twine about one foot from the bait (this is to make it easier to cast the line, similar to the function a sinker provides when fishing). The player then casts the bait-line into an agreeable open spot and waits for the bird to take notice. During this portion of the game, the player and other crewmen may place bets on any of three elements of the game, though often, the game is played simply to enjoy it on its own merits. The first element of the game is the question of whether or not the bird will be enticed to land on the boat and examine the bait. If the albatross does land to sniff its potential meal, the player then begins to draw the bait closer to himself, thereby causing the distracted bird to follow. Therefore, the second element of the game is the question of whether or not the player can draw the bird close enough to touch it. Finally, if the player does draw the albatross within touching distance, the third and final portion of the game takes place: the player grabs the albatross and attempts to hold it fast. If

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the player can hold onto the agitated albatross for no less than ten seconds, he wins the game, and in addition, a not inconsiderable increase in respect from his peers. This is a difficult game, rarely played, but always quite entertaining to observe.

Gentleman Caller: Invented by our own Mr. Pincus during a period of near-destitution while he was living in New York City, Gentleman Caller was originally designed to be an entertaining past-time for pubescent girls studying at unisex boarding schools or sent away to live with eccentric elderly relatives. It is a "board-game," though bears only a cursory resemblance to the more well-known examples, such as Senet or Chuapar. Two to four players may partake, rolling dice to advance their representative tokens around the board. The goal is to land on different articles of clothing in order to assemble the perfect ensemble to woo one of four potential gentlemen callers. These are The Landed Baron, The Franklin, The Rake, and The Cuckold. The Landed Baron is obviously the most desirable choice, due to his vast holdings and respect within any community. The Franklin is also desirable, as he also has impressive coffers to his name, though he is not of noble birth. The Rake is a decent choice, as he can offer any young lady profound sexual gratification, though his

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tendency towards infidelity may be a mark against him among the more discerning. Finally, the Cuckold is the poorest choice, as his former spouse's constant manipulation and adultery has left him destitute and riddled with crippling venereal diseases. Gentleman Caller may be an enjoyable distraction when played with the proper group of self-assured wits, though aboard the Temperance, it has occasionally taken a dark turn, due to Mulligan's frequent suggestions that it is a game for homosexuals and Captain Bill's grim insistence on always wooing the Cuckold.

This is but a sampling of the games often played at sea to help our crew pass the time. There are others that offer varying degrees of entertainment which will perhaps be discussed in future chapters.