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Black Marlin

A Novel by Ben R. Williams

Chapter XVIII: The Wreck of the Lang Verhaal

I was gently awakened by the sensation of Papa Shillingi laying his coconut crab-sized hand across my face and softly shaking my head awake. I opened my eyes and peered between his fingers to see his avuncular brown face staring down at me.

"Wake up, Pugo Ebriulo," said he, "We are nearing the Land of Thunder."

The Land of Thunder! I was initially certain that Shillingi was quite mistaken, as the sky above was blue as lapis lazuli and lacking even the faintest puff of cloud, yet as the fog of sleep dissipated from my mind, it was replaced by memories of the odd events of the night previous, the low thudding explosions on the horizon, the flashes of unearthly white light dancing across the clouds! Troubling portents, thought I; perhaps we were entering the Land of Thunder after all. I shuddered to think what we might find there.

I rose from my hammock and walked along the deck toward the ship's wheel, the crew milling about around me. To my left, Mr. Pincus sat on a barrel, scribbling some

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obscure financial reportage into a leather-bound ledger, pausing occasionally to fidget with his fountain pen and curse softly. To my right, Weems stood at the railing, casting his fishing-line into the sea, a small pile of fish laid next to him on the deck. And up above, Shillingi took to swinging about the masts and tightening ropes, as nimble as a monkey.

(I would like to take this opportunity to point out that I do not intend to compare Shillingi, our sole Negro, to the monkey for any reason beyond his dexterous capabilities when climbing in the mast-works. I have heard many compare the Negro race to the apes in a derogatory way, and I find the implications quite offensive. I am grateful that I was born a full fifteen years after the whole dreadful business of slavery had been abolished, and it is my sincerest hope that one day all men are viewed as equal regardless of their skin color, as in my experience, this is the only reasonable point of view. Again, my analogy only means to illustrate that Shillingi is as sure-handed among the high masts as a monkey is within his jungle canopy. Upon further reflection, however, I have begun to regret that my image may still be misinterpreted even with this explanation, and I regret the creation of

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the simile in the first place. Consider it retracted, dear reader.)

As Shillingi swung about the masts like some sort of bird with arms and legs, I approached the ship's wheel. Mulligan stood behind it, gripping the spokes, guiding the *Temperance* straight and true. The Captain stood next to him, his brass spyglass held to his eye, scrutinizing the calm sea ahead. At his feet, young Ten sat cross-legged, poking at a dead fish in an adorable child-like fashion. Mulligan turned and nodded in my direction.

"We're getting close," said he.

"Good Captain," said I, "Have you ever seen one of these mysterious explosions at sea before?"

"Nay," Bill said. "I have seen many strange sights, make no mistake. The green flash. The Aurora Borealis. Ghost ships flying upside down, masts pointing to the sea. But this explosion... it is ominous business, deeply troubling."

"Perhaps," I suggested, "We could sail around the site of the ghostly explosions, rather than directly into it."

Mulligan chuckled and shook his head. Bill grinned.

"Ah, young Isaac," he said, "You have much to learn about the sailor's life. Wait... wait, I see something."

"What is it?" said Mulligan.

"Hard to say. Flotsam, maybe. Adjust the course five degrees starboard."

Mulligan pulled the wheel minutely. Ten poked his finger at the bland eyeball of his dead fish.

"Yes, yes," Bill muttered. "It looks like a ship was battered apart, or perhaps exploded" Bill telescoped his spyglass and jammed it back into his ragged coat. He scratched his hook through his tangled beard. "Stay the course, bos'un. We'll see it soon enough."

Mulligan pulled a plug of jerky from his pocket (the meat's original owner indistinguishable) and jerked a strip free with his teeth. He chewed laboriously, spitting meat flecks hither and yon. "I heard a strange tale once of a horrific explosion at sea," he said casually, choking down a meat-chunk. "The ship was filled with dozens of barrels of high-proof alcohol, much like this one. Whenever the men needed a drink, they'd summon this odd fellow who stayed below-decks. A bit like Mr. Snuff, actually. He had a series of buckets which he'd fill from the barrels and carry up to the galley. The problem was, he didn't have any taps. The other men didn't realize it, but whenever their man went to fill a bucket, he'd pry the lid off a barrel and dip the bucket inside. Depending upon how many varieties of liquor they requested, he might have as many

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as seven or eight barrels open at a time. The method was crude, and I wouldn't want my liquor handled that way as the open air would surely affect the taste, but the central problem was more insidious. The hold was seldom opened, you see, and the ship so well-built that its walls were nearly air-tight. Over time, alcohol vapor from the open barrels filled that hold until the very air would get a man drunk. One night, the old bar-tender went down to fill a bucket with rum, and to see his way better he lit a small candle. The resulting explosion blew the ship to pieces."

Mulligan tore free another hunk of jerky and chewed it as a cow masticates her cud. "Odd thing was, there was no fire damage to what remained of the ship, not an ash or cinder. The fuel expended itself too quickly. Perhaps that is what has happened here, or perhaps not. I only mention it because I enjoy tales of explosions."

"As do we all," the Captain added. "Look here, what's this!"

Entranced as I was by Mulligan's tale of doom, I had barely noticed that the Temperance had entered the outskirts of the destroyed mystery ship. Bill's analysis had proved all too accurate; it appeared that the ship had been battered with Thor's hammer. Scraps of mast floated gently on the water; planks of wood bobbed about; clothing,

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books, and maps floated just beneath the surface, too sodden to breach, useless now. I at first thought there were no survivors; what man could survive the calamity that had occurred here? But then...!

He was sitting, much like Ten, cross-legged on a piece of wood. It was difficult to tell what the oddest thing was about the gentleman, though initially I believed it to be his wardrobe. He was wearing a white linen suit, a black string tie, and a white Panama hat. These articles were spotless, dry, perfectly pressed, as if he'd just left the tailor's shop mere moments before our arrival. He lifted his hat from his bald head and waved it at us, a broad smile on his amiable face.

"Hello there, gentlemen!" he bellowed, his voice booming across the smacking of the waves and the flap of the masts. "Permission to come aboard?"

That baritone bore the unmistakable accent of a genteel Southern gentleman. It struck me as odd, too, that he seemed in no way distressed by the turn of events that had led him there, the sole survivor of a shipwreck a hundred miles from the nearest coast. It almost seemed as if he had been waiting for us, as if our arrival were a foregone conclusion. And it was then that I noticed something stranger still.

The man was not held afloat by any mere piece of wood; he was sitting on a coffin.

Bill leaned into Mulligan and whispered. I could make out only snatches of his whisperings, but I believe he asked Mulligan to drop anchor while he talked to the gentleman. The rest was lost. Mulligan nodded and hurried off, leaving Bill and myself to converse with the stranger as he floated untroubled beside us.

"What's your name, friend?" Bill shouted to him.

"My name," the man said, "Is Professor Francis Darling, but you can just call me Frank. Most everybody does. And might I add that I certainly am glad you fellows came by. I was in a tight spot, as you can no doubt see."

"What happened here, Professor?"

"I sure would like to tell you once I get on board your ship there, sir."

Bill cleared his throat and smiled, though I couldn't name the emotion behind it. "It will take a moment to get the ladder. Why don't you tell me what happened right now? I'm curious to hear."

The Professor smiled back tightly. "Dreadful display," he said. "Just dreadful. I'd taken a berth with a ship out of Suriname. The Lang Verhaal. Dutch ship. Don't speak a lick of Dutch, never did understand what those fellows were

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saying, all I know is that they spoke the international language, that being money, you understand. I was going to sail with them around the horn, maybe see the Polynesias. Well, last night, we're bobbing along, when we see about the strangest thing this old boy has ever been witness to. Fleet of long boats, coming right at us, moving quick, faster than any man can pump an oar. When they get close, I see something that gives me pause: the men in those long boats, they ain't paddling at all, on account of they're deader than a tent peg. Well, about the time those boats get within shouting distance (and you'd best believe we were shouting) we feel something hit the ship like a locomotive. You won't believe what it was."

"It was a whale," Bill said, a vicious gleam in his eye. "Old Charon, they call him. The Creation Whale."

The Professor chuckled mirthlessly. "Reckon you've been acquainted. God Almighty, what a whale. I don't know what we'd done to insult the old fellow, but he sure didn't take a liking to us. Started pounding into the ship. He'd break the surface, heave himself on deck, try to drag us into the ocean. First time he landed, I saw an old Dutchman go flying into the air, landed right in that whale's mouth. Whale snapped down on him the second he hit its tongue. I've seen a crocodile do that, spring its jaw like a trap.



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Much more impressive when a sperm whale does it. He chewed that fellow up. Like he enjoyed it. Like that was what he was trying to do. I've never seen a damn thing like it, just terrible. Over about a half an hour, that whale beat the ship to pieces. And that's that."

Bill's brow furrowed. He tapped his brass hook upon the railing. "And how did you survive?"

The Professor shook his head and ran his tongue across a set of perfect white teeth that any man would be proud to lay claim to. "Don't rightly know. It's a blur, to tell you true."

Mulligan appeared behind Bill holding the rope ladder. Though his countenance always bore a certain troubled cast, it now appeared more pronounced than ever, as though his face were carved as one of those unsightly shriveled apple-dolls.

"My men spoke of a strange sight last night," Bill said to the stranger. "They spoke of a mysterious explosion, strange lights playing out against the clouds. It is what led us here."

The Professor shook his head. "Why, I can't rightly say what was the cause of that. To the best of my recollection, I didn't see any lights at all."

Mulligan cut me a troubled glance. He did not need to speak aloud; his expression said plainly that he felt the stranger was a liar.

"I've been looking for that whale," Bill said, his good hand transformed into a bloodless white fist. "Did you see which way he was headed?"

The stranger unfolded his legs and rose, and for the first time I realized he was a giant, well over six feet, closer to seven, broad as a barn door. He stood sure-footed upon the rolling coffin, a linen-clad piece of statuary. "I certainly did. And I'll be happy to tell you if you'll invite me aboard. Wouldn't be surprised if the old bastard looped back around to finish me off. Your friend Charon, he doesn't seem particularly fond of me."

Bill turned to his brother and nodded. "Lower the ladder, bos'un."

Mulligan leaned in close to Bill, his voice barely audible. "I've never disrespected a Captain's orders," he said, "But I will say, Bill, that this strikes me as a very bad idea."

"Then lower the ladder with one hand on your pistol," Bill said. "I must speak to this man. He has seen a rare sight and lived to tell. Perhaps he has also seen the Black Marlin."

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Mulligan nodded and reached into his coat. I heard the snap of a button, the holster strap popping free from the hammer of his Webley. He strode to the railing and busied himself with the ladder.

While I was intrigued by the odd display of subtext that had passed between Captain and Bo'sun, I felt that the only proper way to process these recent odd events was to retire to the galley and mull them over with the aid of a fine distilled liquor. Yet as I turned, I saw one final oddity, a sight that chilled me for reasons I could not quite pinpoint. Mr. Weems had set aside his rod and reel and stood at a remove, presumably listening in on the prior proceedings, one hand fingering the bone-handled dagger he wore constantly in its rubber sheath.

His face was as white as the Professor's linen suit.