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Black Marlin

A Novel by Ben R. Williams

Chapter XIX: A Penitent Man

The air in the Captain's Quarters was uncomfortably still, made almost stifling by the long cigar that Professor Darling smoked happily as he sat across from Bill. The two made an odd pair; Darling appeared the very picture of contentment, while the Captain appeared to be balancing a razor, studying the Professor as a small mouse might study a looming predatory hawk. I leaned against the back wall with Weems, whose hand never left the handle of his dagger. With his other hand, he wiped the condensation from the lenses of his wire-rim spectacles, his small eyes never leaving Darling. I myself saw little provocation for concern within Darling's broad, affable countenance, yet Weems' seemed possessed of a smouldering hateful fear of the man, and I'd be lying if I said his unaccountable dread didn't leech into my own mind through osmosis.

"Tell me, Professor," Bill said, rubbing his hook with his spared hand 'til the brass gleamed. "I'm looking for a ship. I know little about it save the name; she is called Black Marlin. She flies no nation's flag, nor answers to any authority but her own. Her Captain is a pirate, Savage

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Andy. He has stolen my wife, sir, sweet Mary, and I intend to find him, kill him, rescue my love, and then burn the God damned Black Marlin into the sea. Now tell me, tell me... have you heard of the ship?"

Darling rubbed a finger on his lip to remove a small tobacco flake his cigar had deposited there. He studied the brown speck on the tip of his index, and replied casually, almost distractedly:

"Yessir, I've heard of her."

Bill turned rigid, his eye burning with intensity, his body so tense that he would have maintained the same position even if his chair had been removed from under him.

"Tell me everything."

Darling drew deeply of his cigar and puffed out a milky blue cloud. He studied it as it swirled above his bald head, as though the information asked of him could be read in the smoke.

"I was in Eleuthera. Commonwealth of the Bahamas. Reckon it was five, six months ago now. I was walking along the beach—beautiful beaches in Eleuthera, pink sand—and I see this fellow coming towards me, only other fellow on the beach, just humping along dragging a sail. Now it was a dark out, and the first thing I noticed about the fellow that struck me as odd, other than the fact he was dragging

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a sail along the beach at night, was that he was dressed real nice. I make it a habit of dressing nice myself, but this fellow outshone me. Three piece suit, brass buttons, ascot, you name it. He looked more like a yachtsman than a pirate, but I suppose a great many things have changed in this modern age of ours. He came up to me and started in to talking—British accent, Londoner it sounded like to my ear—and he says his sail got ripped up in a storm, said he was looking to get it patched. We talked awhile, then I pointed him in the direction of town. And that was that."

The Captain ran a hand through his tangled gray hair, fighting back tears. "Did he mention Mary?" Bill asked in a small voice.

"Yessir, he did. Said she was waiting on the boat. Now I hate to tell you this next part, and I don't rightly think it's true, but what he said was that the woman with him... she was his wife."

Bill slammed his hook into his desk with thunderous force! Weems and I jumped a bit from the sudden explosion of rage, yet Professor Darling moved nary an inch, quietly smoking his cigar.

"The fucking liar!" Bill bellowed, struggling to prise the tip of his hook from the hardwood. "I'll jerk out his God damned innards when I find him! My God, man, how could

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you have helped the son of a bitch? What were you thinking?"

Darling tapped a curl of ash onto the floor. "I realize emotions are running high, but you must understand that at the time I didn't realize I was aiding and abetting the enemy. Thought I was doing a kindness. They're a precious rare commodity these days."

The hook jerked free of the desk with a snap, leaving a fresh divot in its surface. I noticed for the first time that there were many such divots upon the desk's battered plane, a frequent victim of the Captain's monomaniacal rage. Bill again rubbed the hook with his intact hand, and while he seemed outwardly calm—even if only momentarily—I saw a frightening gleam in his eye, the same look of hurt, sorrowful madness that I had detected upon my first sight of him in that long-ago aquarium. I pressed my back against the wall, fearful of what might come next.

"Did he tell you his destination?" Bill asked, his voice flat.

"Yessir," Darling said.

"And where was it, man? What is the course of the Black Marlin?"

Darling chuckled mirthlessly and clamped his cigar in his wide, white teeth. "What's it worth to you, Captain?"

There was a flurry of activity, and within an instant Bill was standing, his Navy Colt produced as if by magic, the grim black eye of the trembling barrel pointed at Darling's smooth, untroubled forehead. I felt Weems tense next to me, his joints cracking audibly.

"I take you aboard my ship," Bill said, voice dull with rage, "I save your life, offer you a berth. And now you extort me? If your life means so little to you, I'll take it gladly."

Darling smiled blandly, cigar held steadfast between his teeth. He removed it and wiped a speck of ash from his white linen suit.

"Put the shooting iron away, Captain. I think we've both been around the merry-go-around a few times. I know you wouldn't kill a man who holds the solution to your life's mission in his hand. Every great Captain is a businessman at heart, and I am too. A necessary evil when you're at sea. I'll tell you where the Black Marlin is going, or at least where your pirate Savage Andy told me it was going. And I'll make sure we get there. But along the way, I'd appreciate it if you and your crew would do a little something for me."

"What, man? What more would you have us do?"

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"I'd feel more comfortable telling you," Darling said, "If you'd put that gun down first."

Perhaps as little as five seconds passed, yet it felt like a decade. I tensed for the gunshot. But slowly, slowly, the Captain raised the revolver to the ceiling, gently lowered the hammer, and sat down, though his left hand never let go of the Colt's wood grip.

"There's a man," Darling said, unperturbed, "Rounding the horn as we speak. A former business partner of mine. It's been many years since I last dealt with him. I'm a penitent man now, and I regret ever offering succor to a fiend like him. He's a monster, Captain, a vicious reptile, and the very idea that I once dealt with such a creature has prevented me from having a sound night's sleep for many years now. I realize that there's only one course of action, only one way to ease my troubled mind."

"And what is that?" Bill said wearily.

"Killing, of course. It's all he deserves in this world, and it's the regrettable human condition that he can be killed only once. He's earned the right to be killed every day of his life."

Bill sighed softly, his skeletal frame seeming to deflate before our eyes, his body language bespeaking the bone-deep weariness of a centenarian. "You know we'll do

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it," he said. "I'll do it myself if I have to. I've damned myself so many times that my only hope of salvation is ending my life on a double-negatived sin. The only remaining question is whether or not I can take you at your word."

Darling leaned forward and extended a massive uncreased palm to the Captain. "My word is my bond," he said. "I tell you that for true. I understand your trepidation-I'd have a little myself in your shoes-but I swear to you that if you help me, I'll take you to your Black Marlin. I'll deliver you to her very doorstep. All you have to do is trust me. Do you trust me, Captain?"

Bill laid the gun down, his eye never leaving those of Darling. He extended his left towards Darling's right.

"Don't do it, Bill," Weems said. "For God's sake."

Bill paused. Darling swiveled in his chair and regarded Weems merrily.

"Do you know something I do not, Mr. Weems?" Bill asked.

"I don't think I do," Weems said, "And that is precisely what troubles me."

Bill cast his frightening gaze down at the table, unable to meet Weem's troubled stare.

"Please leave, Mr. Weems."

Weems spun on his heels and strode out the crimson door of the Captain's Quarters, slamming it shut as he exited. Darling turned back to the Captain.

"I think your man has me mistaken for someone else," he said.

"He has you in his eye, sir," Bill said. "And he may not be the only one. Do you understand?"

"I do," Darling said, and extended his broad palm to the Captain once more.

They shook.

Darling rose from his chair, so tall his bald head nearly rubbed the ceiling. He approached me, an awe-inspiring giant, and reached into his linen suit coat.

"Did you witness our contract?" he asked me.

"I did, sir."

"Good!" Darling said. He removed a cigar from his jacket and handed it to me. It was identical to his own, long and band-less, the maker a mystery.

"Need a light?" Darling asked.

"Sure," said I, tucking the cigar into my mouth.

Darling raised his right hand and snapped his middle finger across his thumb. A tiny blue flame crackled to life, emerging directly from Darling's thumb-nail. He lifted it to my cigar and I puffed. It takes several

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seconds to light a cigar well, yet Darling never so much as flinched as he maintained the strange flame fueled by sources unknown. The cigar lit, I thanked him and stepped outside.

Weems grabbed my elbow and pulled me into a darkened alcove. His face was all but invisible in the gloom, though his spectacles flashed eerily. He grabbed my hand and brusquely shoved a cold, heavy object into it. I rubbed my fingers along the mystery object; it did not take long to identify it as a small cartridge derringer.

"Wear that on your person at all times, even in sleep," Weems whispered harshly. "The Captain has shown a terrible lack of judgment. Darling means to ruin us all."

"What do you have against the Professor?" asked I. "He seems like a nice enough man."

"A man?" Weems barked. "He is no man. He is only something pretending."

With that, Weems scurried off above-decks, leaving me smoking my cigar in the dark. In spite of my confusion over Weems' strange concerns and the Professor's uncanny sleight of hand, I had to admit, it was a very good cigar.