

Ben R. Williams 2012

Black Marlin
A Novel by Ben R. Williams

Chapter XX: The Ageless Mayfly

If one were to plot the chain of command aboard the *Temperance*, it would likely go as such: Captain Bill, of course, is the chief commander of the boat, as should go without saying. His brother, Mr. Gus Mulligan, is second in command. Third would easily fall to Mr. Pincus, due to the respectability of his position as accountant, legal advisor, and well-traveled scholar. I suspect fourth would fall to Papa Shillingi (though, due to his quiet physicality, I doubt a man aboard the ship would stand against him), followed by Weems, Mr. Snuff, myself, and Ten. It was for this reason, then, that Mr. Weems called an emergency meeting in Snuff's engine-room to discuss his concerns regarding the enigmatic Professor Darling, as he had to defer to a higher authority about his dark suspicions concerning the man.

Weems paced the warped floor-boards furtively, rubbing his chin and jerking his head this way and that, the fat that slicked his hair beginning to melt in the warm presence of the steam-turbines and drip down his moon-like face. Mulligan and Pincus stood abaft of him, while I leaned against the wall, pleasantly puffing my cigar. Mr.

Ben R. Williams 2012

Snuff reclined in his foul potato-pile in his customary funereal state, mouth agape, sunken chest barely hitching.

"We must get rid of him," Weems said, licking his lips. "We must drop the man as soon as possible."

"Drop him where?" Mulligan said, scratching at his spaded beard. "We're a hundred miles from land and approaching Antarctic waters."

"Then we drop him straight into the foaming sea! I'd wager all I had that he'd survive it! Have you heard the latest? He claims to know the Black Marlin's course, yet he'll only spill his guts if we first aid him in killing some privateer he has a beef with!"

"Then he is a businessman," Pincus said, "Or perhaps a shyster. In either case, we're in no position to argue."

"My God!" Weems bellowed, "Don't you all see? Are you blind to it? Must I come right out and state the obvious? The Professor is uncanny; he is 'off,' gentlemen, perhaps inhuman. And if the Captain makes good on this sinister collusion, I fear he dooms us all!"

"Stand down, Mr. Weems," Mulligan said, and the quiet force of the statement, coupled with the darkness in Mulligan's flinty eyes, caused each man in that engine-hold to take notice. It was a grim moment that I have borne witness to only a handful of times; the uncomfortable

Ben R. Williams 2012

tension which occurs when a riled man unwittingly crosses an imperceptible social boundary. Mulligan sighed throatily, a sound like two burlap sacks engaging in coitus.

"There are few things I find more distasteful," Mulligan said, "Than being forced to tell a story, particularly a personal story involving emotions and feelings and shit. But you've forced my hand, Weems, so now I'm going to have to tell you all a goddamn parable.

"The Captain is not the only man aboard the ship to have taken a wife. I myself was once a married man. This was some years ago, when I was a rakish bon vivant. I shudder to think how outlandish you fellows would have found me if you'd seen me then. I would sing quietly at church. If a small child approached me, I would talk to it as though it were a person. Sometimes I'd even wear a jaunty hat. What a clown I was! My actions, of course, were largely influenced by my wife, whose sweetness mollified my natural inclinations to some degree. Perhaps you're familiar with the premise of the 'yin' and 'yang' that the Orientals sometimes speak of; our marriage was similar. Though we were wildly different in our actions and outlooks, we struck a balance when combined.

"The marriage was not to last. While the Captain's wife was stolen by that detestable pirate Black Andy, my wife was stolen by something less tangible. One day she treated me as her knight, her other half. The next, she treated me as a menacing stranger. Whatever it was about me that had once held her fascination now repulsed and horrified her. I was not terribly surprised. Good things are seldom found in this world, and they are never built to last. You'd more easily find an ageless mayfly."

"This is a rather depressing parable," I offered.

"Shut up, Isaac. As I was saying, the marriage dissolved and we went our separate ways. My wife moved back to her father and mother. I rambled about our empty house in a state of perpetual drunkenness, destroying things. I soon ran out of things to destroy, so I'd have to destroy the shattered remains of things I'd destroyed previous. I refused to leave the house to purchase food or dry-goods, and I further refused to busy myself in the kitchen that my lost wife had once filled with joy, so I took to eating whatever animals I could find in the woods behind the house and cooking them in a fire-pit I'd devised in the living room. It was a dark time. A man can only eat so much skunk-meat before his mind turns to frightening places.

Ben R. Williams 2012

"One day, perhaps six months after my wife left, perhaps a full year, I received a telegram. An invitation to an impending marriage between my former wife and a local banker. I immediately destroyed it, and then punched the Western Union man square in the jaw. I re-doubled my efforts to remain perpetually drunken. The telegrams still came, however. The Western Union man would no longer deliver them in person, of course, instead wrapping them around stones and pitching them through the empty spaces where my windows were before I destroyed them, but they still arrived, one per week. At first they merely invited me to the wedding, but after that date passed, I was invited to garden parties and teas at my ex-wife's new home. The messages became increasingly plaintive. My ex-wife, it seemed, felt poorly about how our divorce had played out, and she wanted me to remain in her life as a friend and confidant. She insisted that I would get along quite well with her new husband, as we apparently shared many common interests. Her most fervent hope was simply that the three of us, myself, my ex-wife, and the usurper, could all become friends.

"Even as a young fool I doubted that this was possible, but out of respect for her wishes, I decided I would try. And so one fine spring afternoon I dressed in

Ben R. Williams 2012

what remaining finery I had, left my house for the first time in many months, and walked ten miles to attend a garden party.

"Upon my arrival, I did not make the finest impression. The guests, mostly friends and family of the banker, were dressed in white, playing croquet among the azaleas, shaded by the banker's recently-completed sprawling Queen Anne. I, on the other hand, was wearing funeral black and stank of sweat, bourbon, and wild game. Nonetheless, my ex-wife raced toward me when she spotted me on the yard's periphery and embraced me. I hugged her back, loosely, unsure of how to comport myself in the odd situation. I thought then that the wisest course of action would have been to simply turn around and walk the ten miles back home, and had I done it, I cannot even imagine what my life would be today.

"The banker approached next and offered me a handshake. It took a moment to accept his hand because I was startled by his appearance, I'll admit. Have you ever had a fine meal, asked the cook for the recipe, and then, when you attempted to recreate it at home, it emerged from the oven a pale imitation? So it was with myself and the banker. He resembled me superficially, the stocky build, the beard, even the salt-and-peppered hair, yet it took

Ben R. Williams 2012

only a handshake to know that this man was no Gus Mulligan. It was a limp shake, squishy even, like rummaging in your crawlspace and grasping a putrescent rat. He told me that it was a pleasure to meet me, that he had heard many fine tales about me. Perhaps it was true. I told him I'd heard he was an upstanding man as well. This was a lie, for I knew nothing of the man. We struck an uneasy peace and the three of us retired to the porch.

"We sat in the shade drinking tea and talking for hours, seemingly. It was tedious to the extreme. I realized, very quickly, that it had been months, possibly over a year since I had last opened my mouth to speak. My words came in a rusty croak. I sounded non-sensical, like a victim of a debilitating brain-storm. My ex-wife and her husband took the lion's share of the conversation, spoke of their lives together, the bland adventures of the contented. I had a difficult time paying attention as I did not particularly care. I offered my own comments infrequently and immediately regretted them. The banker mentioned at one point that he was considering taking up hunting as he had inherited a fine Italian shotgun from his uncle. He said he had always wanted to try venison. I explained to him the proper method for using a buck knife to jerk out a deer's asshole so that the meat would not

Ben R. Williams 2012

become tainted with its shit. It was only after extolling the virtues of the procedure that I realized the topic might be slightly distasteful. It was an awkward experience.

“After a time, the banker asked me if I’d walk the property line with him. He had a question that needed my unique expertise. I obliged, and we walked for a spell, gradually approaching a mouldering wood pile at the edge of the forest. The banker began explaining his problem to me, and I remember thinking at the time how odd it was that he spoke to me so comfortably, so assured that we had reached, if not a friendship, a truce of sorts. Perhaps it is a growing trend among the well-heeled to befriend the former husbands of their current wives. It is not a custom I’m familiar with, and I can’t say I’m in favor of it. At any rate, the banker explained that his recently-completed home would need a great deal of firewood to keep it sufficiently heated come winter. He had a Negro in his employ to cut firewood and help around the house, he said, and there was certainly no shortage of timber on the property, but he doubted the man’s ability to chop the volume of wood necessary. He explained that he was considering buying a wood-splitting machine, a sort of steam-fired piston with a bladed end. He asked me what I thought of the plan, if I

Ben R. Williams 2012

was familiar with such machines. It was the sort of conversation any two men might have when rambling a property.

"I told him I'd never heard of such a device, but it seemed like a waste of good money to me. I told him the obvious solution was to hire another Negro, for then he would have enough men around to put together a good Friday night poker game. As I explained the plan (a plan which he turned his nose at, it should go without saying), I began nudging at the woodpile with my shoe, keeping an eye peeled for copperheads that I could kill for my amusement. It was then that I found an axe-handle, very old but still stout, whittled from hickory. The axe-head had long since fallen off. I grabbed the axe-handle and propped it on my shoulder. You see, I had long since destroyed my own axe-handle, and I figured I would take this one to replace it, seeing as how it was never to be used by the banker anyway. Believe me when I tell you this was my only intention at the time.

"It was then, gentlemen, that I made my fatal error. I asked the banker a question. It was the first question I'd asked of him, the only question I would ask, and it was an attempt, a genuine attempt, to establish some sort of camaraderie with the man. I asked him if he had eaten a

Ben R. Williams 2012

good steak recently. As you all know, I enjoy a good steak, and I enjoy hearing tales of fine steaks that others have eaten. It is a hobby of mine."

"Of course," Pincus said.

"The question hung in there a moment, and then the banker chuckled. I will never forget his words. 'Well, Mr. Mulligan,' he said, 'I mean no disrespect, but it's been some time since I've had a fine steak. My Sally cooks them too rare. I like a steak well-done, with plenty of sauce.'"

I gasped at Mulligan's words. He nodded somberly.

"I don't need to tell you fellows that I was horrified. A well-done steak is an abomination. What man, no, what monster would ruin a good cut by insisting it be cooked to a cinder? And why would such a creature then slather the meat with sauces, probably tomato-based, the sickening fruit of the deadly nightshade? The reason that my wife cooked them rare was because I had explained all of this to her. She was still preparing steaks as I had taught her. They were my steaks. The man was ruining, and then eating, my steaks. My fucking steaks.

"I think that what I intended to do was take the axe-handle and gently, playfully even, bat the banker in the arm a single time. But instead, I batted him in the head, and rather than doing so gently, I did so with tremendous

Ben R. Williams 2012

force, and instead of a single time, I did it tens of times. It all happened very quickly. I believe I only stopped because the axe-handle broke in half. I looked down at what I had done to the banker. It was a grim sight. I considered taking his pulse to see if he was still among the living, but once I realized I couldn't find anything that was recognizably a wrist, I decided that it was probably too late for such measures. And so I turned and walked into the woods and began my slow journey. But I did not go home, friends. I went to the telegraph office. There was only one man I wished to contact; Mr. Bill Mulligan, new Captain of the good ship *Temperance*. Through a protracted telegraphed conversation, I relayed to my brother that I was in dire straits. I had killed an innocent man. The police would no doubt be closing in on me soon. I had not a dime to my name, no clothes but those on my back, a home I could never return to. Could he find it in his heart to afford me a berth? And you know what he said, gentlemen?

"He said I would always have a home aboard the *Temperance*."

Gus Mulligan gazed from one man to the next, fixing us each to our spot.

Ben R. Williams 2012

"There is not an innocent man aboard this ship. All of us have blood on our hands. We have killed and fought and swindled our way around the globe. We are aboard this ship not merely because we want to be, but because we have nowhere else to go. God may one day judge us for our sins, but our Captain never will. And that is why, even if he is wrong, even if he is misguided, even if he threatens to doom us all, we must support him. We owe it to him, and we have no other options besides. If Professor Darling wants to kill some privateer, then I'll take up arms and help him if it puts us even one step closer to the Black Marlin."

Weems nodded, and I could see from his sagged shoulders that Mulligan's heartfelt speech had sapped the fight from his spirit. We had no choice but to help the strange Professor, even if it cost us our souls.