

Black Marlin

A Novel by Ben R. Williams

Chapter XXII: A Deceiver of Men

The Bounty Maroon sagged listlessly forward, nose-down like an eider duck rooting for a particularly delicious mollusk. She was an old ship, sixty or seventy years at least, her sails tattered and ivory-yellowed, her boards warped and barnacled. The deck was free of the clutter that normally accumulates aboard a working ship, the ropes and barrels and gaffs. She looked raided, abandoned, perhaps even haunted. Somewhere inside her, the lapping waves caused a bell to dully and forlornly ring.

Pincus stood next to me, his hands resting on Ten's shoulders, and Darling stood on my other side, watching Shillingi scoot the tarred gangplank to the Bounty Maroon's faded rail. Mulligan and the Captain stood apart, having a somber discussion, no less intense for its quietude.

"You realize," Pincus said to Darling, "That if your man is not aboard yon ship, we will still expect you to share the whereabouts of the Black Marlin."

Darling smiled, nostrils flared like a predator on the hunt. "He is aboard. I can smell him."

Shillingi cinched the gangplank tight to our own railing, his broad brown back rippling. "Done," he said, and added, in the language of his island people, "Tre fortika."

Darling planted a foot aboard the plank and rose, taking a moment to steady himself. He slipped on a pair of gloves, kidskin, perhaps, or peccary, as white as his linen suit, and crossed quickly, dropping to the canted deck as sure-footed as a Himalayan goat. The rest of our exploratory team followed suit with varying degrees of success; Mr. Pincus nearly tumbled from the gangplank into the frigid ocean below, while I dropped to the sloped deck and nearly rolled its length to the sea, stopped fast only by Mulligan's tight hand gripping me surely by the hair. Once across, Mulligan asked the question on all of our minds:

"All right, Darling, where is the son of a bitch?"

It was then that the Professor performed a most curious act. Flaring his nostrils wide, he lolled his head back, his eyes rolling to the whites, and then brought his gloved hands together with a thunderous clap and spread them wide again, like a spirit-imbued preacher delivering a particularly important message to his flock. The fingers

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trembled, wiggled, and stopped. Darling rolled his head forward again with a sonorous chuckle.

"He is in the wheelhouse, gentlemen."

"I do not like any part of this," Pincus muttered at my side, but Mulligan was already striding across the steeply sloped deck to the wheelhouse's heavy oak door. He rattled the knob, and, finding it locked tight, reared back and kicked the knob's lock. The door swung open and banged against the interior wall as loud as a gunshot, and an unearthly shriek burst out from within the room's dank innards.

A most piteous sight greeted us within the wheelhouse. So steeply was the sinking ship canted that the final third of the wheelhouse was filled with water, a cesspool littered with empty tin cans, dead fish (which looked horribly chewed), and other bits of strange garbage and flotsam. The windows lining the wheelhouse's walls offered no illumination; they had been boarded up from the inside. The only light source was a hissing gas-jet lamp, its flame turned so low it glowed only a faint blue, and gripping its handle, an old man so withered and shrunken that he could have passed for a more harrowed iteration of our own Mr. Snuff. The old man shrieked endlessly, his ribbed chest gasping and hitching.

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"Dutch Stuyvesant!" Darling said joyfully, "You old knickerbockers! I reckon you never expected to cross paths with me again!"

"Oh God no!" the old man howled, "Nonononono-"

"QUIET," Darling barked, his voice so gravelly and menacing that it brought tears to my eyes and stopped the old man like a needle snatched from a phonograph.

"Christ," Pincus whispered, "How many sad old men must we brutalize before our journey reaches its end?"

The old man raised his lantern with a trembling hand. Seen clearly, his face was a mask of ragged horror, his age impossible to determine; perhaps he was a nonagenarian, but even so, he would have been a particularly poor example. A life at sea, and, perhaps, a life of being pursued, had warped him well beyond his years.

"My God," he said, "Darling... you haven't aged a day."

"That's right kind of you, Dutch," Darling said merrily.

"No," the old man wheezed, "Gentlemen, in forty-five years, this man has not aged!"

"Professor," Mulligan said, "Are you going to shoot this sad old man, or do I have to do it for you?"

"Stuyvesant," Darling said, ignoring Mulligan totally, "Do you have what is owed to me?"

"What's owed to you?" the old man said, shaking with either rage or fear. "What's owed to you? You took my livelihood! You took my loved ones! You took whatever joy once beat through my now-broken heart! What more do I owe, Darling? What more do I owe to you, you devil?"

Darling reached into his coat pocket and removed one of the bumpy ashen spheres I'd seen within his coffin earlier. He tossed it gently into the air and caught it as Honus Wagner might pass the time with a baseball.

"Twenty dollars," Darling said, "Confederate."

I will admit a certain confusion at this response.

"I don't have twenty dollars of any sort," Stuyvesant said. "Dear Christ, you've followed me to the ends of the earth for twenty dollars that will no longer even spend? Have you gone mad?"

"I am merely giving you the opportunity to set all to rights," Darling said, "No more, no less. If you don't have my money, I'll be forced to kill you. But first, I'll have to return your obligation."

"What is this shit?" Pincus whispered harshly beside me.

"As you may recollect," Darling said, still tossing his mock baseball, "I contracted you to capture some escaped slaves on behalf of a client of mine some forty-odd

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years ago. Quite a bunch they were; tall, powerful, frighteningly intelligent by any standard. Some said they were descendents of Nat Turner himself. They had escaped a plantation just outside of Southampton, Virginia, father, mother, three children. The youngest was just an infant. You captured them for me, of course. You used to be quite good at that detestable profession. But upon returning them to their rightful owner, he made quite the unpleasant discovery: the swaddled bundle that you, in your carelessness, had assumed was the infant, was in fact a bundle of rutabagas. The child was missing, handed off to one of those underground railroaders, no doubt. And I, Mr. Stuyvesant, was not paid the infant's worth: twenty dollars, Confederate.

"The reclamation of the infant was your burden, and you failed utterly. So now I return the missing property to you: though he was born Abraham Greene, he now goes by a different moniker: Papa Shillingi."

I gasped in a most dramatic fashion! Papa Shillingi, the mysterious islander, was in actuality a mysterious former slave! Shillingi stood impassive, an eyebrow cocked curiously, as if waiting to see how this new development would pan out.

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"Yes, gentlemen!" Darling bellowed, "The man you have taken in, the man you have entrusted to run up your sails and navigate your ship as you sleep, the man you call a compatriot, is no affable, happy-go-lucky islander! He is a wolf-in-sheep's-clothing, an interloper, a criminal, a Negro!"

An uneasy hush fell amongst us in that dank wheelhouse as we waited to see who would be the first to break the shackles of astonishment and speak. I was little surprised that it was Mulligan who broke the tension.

"Well," said he, "Who gives a shit?"

Darling paused. "I'm sorry?"

"Jesus, Darling, we're all fucking criminals. This doesn't really change anything."

"I agree," Pincus said. "Mr. Snuff is guilty of treason, war crimes, and God knows what else, and we don't treat him any differently."

Shillingi smiled. "Hey, thanks guys."

"Now," Mulligan said, drawing one of the fat Webley revolvers from his pea-coat and leveling it at Darling's head, "I'm tired of getting jerked around. I don't know what your plan is, and I don't know what the hell it is you're supposed to be, but I encourage you to either tell

us the location of the Black Marlin or prepare to have your teeth take a rapid journey through the back of your head."

For the very first time, Darling, a man of limitless confidence, appeared totally baffled. "Huh," he said, "Well, ah, you see, I--"

And then, within a flash, Darling's left hand jerked towards me, a two-shot derringer suddenly aimed at my own head!

"Gentlemen," said I, "A number of developments are transpiring rather quickly, and I think we should take a few moments to examine the situ--"

"Lower your gun, Professor," Mulligan said.

"Lower yours first," Darling said, "It's not time for bloodshed. We have much more to discuss."

"Really," said I, "I'm certain we can find the Black Marlin without the Professor's assistance. How many square miles of ocean can there possibly be?"

"What the hell is happening?" Dutch Stuyvesant said somewhere behind me. "Will you people please leave my boat?"

Though the wheelhouse had been quite dark before, it suddenly grew even dimmer. I turned to see a slight silhouette at the entryway. The man's identity I could not determine, for the light which framed him served only to

blot out his visage, and, additionally, I had a derringer aimed at my head, a situation which generally causes my observational skills to flit away in mild hysteria. Yet I did notice that as Mulligan and Darling continued their terse back-and-forth regarding their present impasse, the figure lowered his hand to his belt, removed an item, and cocked his hand back over his shoulder. As his wrist flicked forward, a small item, traveling so rapidly that it could not be identified in transit, sailed across the room, and, as its arc terminated, Professor Darling stopped speaking and merely let out a whistling gasp. I turned to him to see the cause of his sudden silence.

Darling's hand dropped and his derringer clattered to the floor and slid down the deck into the fetid pool. A small dagger, its blade seemingly made of glistening, serrated bone, jutted from his shoulder. His face was red as a Tahitian sunset and contorted in agony.

"Blag!" he said. "What... gah! What the... shit?"

"It is the barb," Weems said, entering the wheelhouse, "Of the oriental giant stingray, perhaps the largest of the hideous fish which fill that land's detestable watering holes. You'll find it is thoroughly coated in poisonous mucous and conjures the most painful sensation available to mankind. I should know, as I was stung while procuring it.

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You will soon be paralyzed in agony. Your heart may stop intermittently, so you should try your best to prevent that."

Darling pitched face-forward on the sloping floor, his legs in a tonic spasm, his right hand still clutching his nubbed sphere so tightly that the fingers appeared white as fresh linen.

"I should have known it was you," Weems said to Darling's quivering form, "The monster who massacred the South Pacific island-"

(This, as a side-note, I vaguely remembered from much earlier in our story, and found it to be quite the illuminating and revelatory call-back.)

"-you, the deceiver of men, the King of Lies, the foul warlock who sows ruination in the fertile soil of the human heart. Whatever it is you are, tell us, God damn you, tell us the location of the Black Marlin!"

Darling writhed pitifully on the filthy damp floor. "There... there was so much more... so much more to show you..."

Weems and Mulligan exchanged a knowing glance, the sort of wordless exchange that I had become quite familiar with during my tenure aboard the *Temperance*. They set upon pummeling the Professor, Weems driving his scuffed patent-

leathers into Darling's ribs, Mulligan bashing the butt of his Webley into Darling's nose.

"All right!" the professor howled! "Crockerland! Go... go to Crockerland!"

Crockerland! The name seemed vaguely familiar, though I couldn't place where I'd heard of it. Mulligan nodded, apparently satisfied, and re-holstered his Webley, and Weems jerked his gleaming poison dagger from Darling's shoulder and replaced it in his rubberized scabbard. Our business was seemingly concluded. As our band turned to exit the awful wheelhouse, Darling spoke again.

"I had so much more to tell you," he said, his lips pulled taut in a terrible grimace. "So many more revelations to share... but I will leave you with one last wonder."

Darling's right hand let loose the rough grey sphere. It fell from his fingers, bumping and rolling down the deck, and touched the lapping pool.

It should be abundantly clear that I am no coward, yet what happened next filled me with a sort of holy terror I have seldom experienced, the utter disconnect that occurs when a man bears witness to a sight that does not line up with his understanding of conventional reality. When the sphere touched water, it exploded with a clap more violent

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than a cannon blast and ignited with a shine more brilliant than burning magnesium. It resembled the sun in miniature, or, perhaps more accurately, a meteorite, for it did not hang stationary as sol does, but rather rocketed across the pool's surface, exploding and disintegrating as it went, shedding flaming gobbets and bouncing from wall to wall as fast as a bullet. And, beneath all of that chaos, two sounds still rang clear; Professor Darling's maniacal laughter, and the gibbering screams of a young girl, though I still cannot pinpoint the cause of the latter noise.

I felt a rough hand grip my shoulder and drag me from the wheelhouse and back onto the deck, though I could not remove my eyes from the glowing doorway, its embrasures framing a scene which surely resembled the ebon plains of Hell itself. Yet still the rough hands dragged, hauling me across the deck, across the gangplank, and back on to the deck of the Temperance. I glanced behind me to see my cool-headed savior; though I expected Mulligan's bearded visage, I saw instead the kind eyes of Papa Shillingi, or, perhaps more accurately, Mr. Abraham Greene.

"Are you all right, Isaac?" he asked, his voice no longer clipped and foreign, but now carrying the stately drawl of the Southern United States.

"Whuh," said I.

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Mulligan, Weems, and Pincus scurried across the gangplank like rats leaving a sinking ship. And this old cliché was more accurate than ever, for the violent corpusant Darling had unleashed in the wheelhouse had quite the deleterious effect on the Bounty Maroon's structural integrity, and it now began to sink more rapidly than ever, the cacophonous explosions still echoing from the horrid wheelhouse.

"Sodium metal," Pincus said, gasping for air. "In college, we used to pitch flakes of it into the pond behind the chemistry building. But God, never in that quantity! That must have been two pounds, at least."

"Thank you!" came a ragged old voice from the gangplank. Dutch Stuyvesant, that withered rachitic slave catcher, crawled across the tarred board like an infant. "Oh, thank you, gentlemen, for saving me from that monster! I owe you fellows my life! You, big fella, could you give me a hand? My old bones aren't what they used to be."

"Sure," Mulligan said. He stepped forward to the gangplank and gripped Stuyvesant by the back of his shirt, lifting him from the gangplank as easily as you might lift a bundle of twigs.

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"Thank you, oh thank you!" Dutch said, dandling in the air from Mulligan's mighty paw. "Surely, you boys are avenging angels sent by God Himsel-"

Mulligan heaved the old man into the frigid ocean.

"Well, I'm glad that business is put to rest," Mulligan said. "We must speak to the Captain forthwith and set a course to Crockerland."

Mulligan paused.

"Where the hell is Ten?"

"I thought you were watching him," Pincus said.

Behind us, the Bounty Maroon sank into the freezing waves.