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Black Marlin

A Novel by Ben R. Williams

Chapter III- The Cipher Island Routine

Within a matter of moments, our trio of merry perambulators found ourselves trodding through that narrow strip of commerce which signified the beating heart of Manteo, a dirt road lined with a handful of mercantiles, a few small roadside diners, and a post office little larger than a Johnny-house. I was unfamiliar with the town, being of a rather transient nature at that point in time and having only arrived recently, yet Mulligan navigated with certainty, leading us through the modest downtown region and then breaking off for a small winding path which led through a stand of old-growth hemlocks and terminated at a sizeable tavern and restaurant. The pine boards, still dripping a bit of sap, indicated that the building had been erected only recently, yet the style was of some anachronistic Deutschlandic origin, with a high peaked roof and iron cross-work upon the window panes. A freshly painted sign proudly proclaimed: The Mournful Turnip (stemming from a Germanic tradition of etching eyes into a turnip and then salting them to draw moisture from the root to give the appearance of tears, a fine past-time if a man

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finds himself with nothing to do and a lot of time to do it).

"Here it is," Mulligan said, lighting his briar, "The Kaiser's Whorehouse. We ought to find a Mark here."

"A Mark?" said I.

Pincus smiled and wrapped an arm about my shoulders. "Mr. Mulligan," he said, "Occasionally employs the terminology of the Confidence Man for comedic effect. But the bit of performance we are about to indulge ourselves in is no flim-flam. Rather, we are simply three honest businessmen preparing to sell another concept, one quite different from the aforementioned red mercury. In doing so, we will obtain the funding necessary for our noble mission, which will be explained to you in full very soon. The business at hand requires your full concentration, Isaac. Are you ready?"

And how was I to refuse? These two kind gentlemen had taken me beneath their spacious wings, offered up fascinating conversation and nuggets of wisdom, and now wished me to join them in a business plan of some mysterious sort! Furthermore, I seemed to recall a promise of supper and ale paid from their purse. My answer could only be affirmative.

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"Aye, Pincus, tell me what you'd have me do and I'll do it to the best of my capabilities!"

"There's a good sport! Now the first rule, dear Isaac, is that you follow my lead; we are to be engaged in a waltz, one of words rather than trots and shuffles, but no less beautiful, I assure you. The remaining rules are as follows—"

Here I will omit the remaining rules shared with me, as they will become clear through my actions as the story continues, and their omission will likely heighten the drama of the forthcoming narrative.

"—and thus conclude the rules. And that is the Cipher Island routine. Do you follow, Isaac?"

"Lead on," said I.

While Mulligan lingered outside, Pincus and I entered The Mournful Turnip to find that the Germanic origins suggested by the exterior were wholly confirmed by the interior. It appeared to be nothing less than a great beer hall, dark and pleasantly smoky, lit by candles and the sunlight dappled through the cross-hatched stained-glass windows. The waitresses (beautiful young ladies!) wore the traditional beer-maid attire of the sort that accentuates the bust in a startling and (it must be said) distracting

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fashion. Gaily did they flit about, ferrying trays overladen with steins of lager and steaming plates of kielbasa and bratwurst. Gleeful bachelors lined the long tables, clinking mugs and puffing pipes and cigars; what paradise! Yet seeing this merry fest-haus, I could not help but draw some dark comparison to that old tale of Grendel sneaking into Hrothgar's mead-hall and laying waste to the Danes. I pushed the thought from my mind; should that old roust-about Grendel appear, friend Mulligan without would surely fill the role of Beowulf and make short work of him!

I felt the nudge of Pincus' cane in my side, followed by a whisper. "Yon John Bull is the man with which to hold our palaver."

I scanned the hall and located the man quickly, as he stood out from the crowd due to his decision to sequester himself from the rest of the congregation at a small corner table rather than enjoy the fellowship of his brothers. He was of a gangly sort, awkward and knobby, with wispy hair, sallow cheeks, and a rather gruesome face composed primarily of bumps, angles, and bumpy angles. Had he been dressed shabbily, he could have easily been mistaken for the town drunkard or perhaps a member of some isolated tribe of Appalachian hill-folk, but his fine three-piece suit and silk Union Jack handkerchief made it clear he was

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instead a wealthy cosmopolite from the refined British Isles.

Pincus ambled towards the man's table, being careful to avoid the appearance of direct approach, but rather coming from a crab-wise angle, and I emulated his gait. After a time, we arrived at John Bull's table. Pincus spoke:

"Say, friend, might we join you? The space appears rather crowded!"

It was unfortunate timing that we arrived at the table as Man England was in the process of taking a rather large bite of sausage, presenting him with a dilemma: spit out the chunk, or speak with a mouth-full? He clearly considered both options to be of unfathomable rudeness, and instead opted to choke down the sausage as rapidly as possible, making his complexion and bearing appear even more apoplectic. After a moment, the grim work was done, and he croaked a reply in the handsome dialect of his people:

"I'd love a spot of company, that's for true! By all means, friends!"

As we seated ourselves, a barmaid appeared to record our order. She stood close by my side as she wrote Pincus' words on her pad, and I blush to admit it, but I little

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remember precisely what Pincus said, as I was transfixed by the presence of that vast and unconcealed bosom cleft mere inches from my left shoulder. Upon her departure, I was brought swiftly back to the here-and-now by the stamp of Pincus' leather sole upon the top of my loafer. It became apparent that he had ordered food and drink for us and an additional stein for our new friend.

"I appreciate your kindness," England said, "But another pint is liable to put me 'neath the table!"

Pincus laughed heartily. "Then my associate and I shall join you so you shan't be alone! Have no fear, sir, you're among friends, and what better way to celebrate such a beautiful day than with ale and good company? My name, sir, is Mr. Forrester Cash, and this young man to my left is my business partner, Mr. Peyton Full."

"Harry Featheringstonehaugh," he replied (inexplicably pronouncing this monstrous surname as "Fanshaw").

"Mr. Featheringstonehaugh—"

"Harry, please," he said, cramming another pale hunk of sausage into his maw.

"Harry," Pincus said, "I hate to start our new friendship by speaking of business, but I find myself in a tight spot, and I must ask: are you as intelligent as you are strikingly handsome?"

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Harry offered up a beaming grin, a bit toothy in spite of his attempt to wrap his lips around all seven of the teeth that poked from his gums in a non-Euclidean fashion.

"Why, I like to think so!"

"Marvelous," Pincus said, "I had an inkling. Well, friend Harry, I must relate a rather sad tale, though I hope that you'll perhaps find it of interest. Tell me, have you ever heard the name Carlton Cash?"

"It rings a distant bell," Harry said, prodigious brow furrowed in concentration.

"Poor Carlton Cash was my father, a famous man of industry, deceased two weeks today. He lived on a small island right off the coast of this state; Cipher Island, perhaps you've heard of it?"

"Indeed, I believe I have."

"Ah, pater! We were never close, but his passing nonetheless weighs heavy upon me. He was the one who taught me of the love of God and the sacrifice of Jesus, and in that sense, I suppose he taught me all I needed to know. He told me, too, of the tale of the prodigal son, a story that lives close to my heart. For you see, Harry, I *am* the prodigal son. My older brother stayed close to father and took up the mantle of his booming cotton business, while I struck out, desperate to make my own way outside the

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penumbra of my father's looming shadow. What a fool I was! Loneliness; destitution; hunger; these were my friends for many a cold, dark year. Eventually, I learned to make a decent living in the door-to-door selling of Bibles; Mr. Full here is my sole employee in this business. We survive, sir, but we are not men of wealth, nor do we necessarily wish to be.

"As I said, Father passed two weeks ago. One week later, I received word that I was listed in his will. This surprised me at first, our relationship having grown so distant, but then I recalled that tale of the prodigal son, and... oh!"

Here Pincus removed a handkerchief from his breast pocket and daubed at his glistening eyes. Harry observed with rapt concern.

"Ah, Harry, forgive me, I grow old and sentimental."

As Harry began to voice his understanding of the situation, our steins and sausages arrived, carried not by the overflowing lass we had seen previously, but instead by an older, matronly hausfrau who glowered at me with an evil eye. She departed quickly, and to blot her from my mind I quaffed the cool, delicious ale, my rapturous facial expression apparently stirring Harry to follow suit with some guzzling of his own.

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"My father was a stingy man," Pincus said, somberly poking his fork at a sausage link, looking for all the world like the titular Mournful Turnip. "He spent little of his vast wealth. It was no secret that he had accumulated a treasure. He believed the dollar would inevitably collapse, so he converted his paper to silver and gold. I can't say where he put that fortune; the secret died with him, and I doubt those millions will ever be found. But he did leave me a treasure of sorts: the deed to his beloved Cipher Island, and the house built upon it."

"How wonderful!" Harry said.

"Aye, or so I thought. But Mr. Full and I just returned from Cipher Island, and were horrified to discover the house is unlivable! You see, it's sinking into the earth like a stone in mud."

"Sinking?"

"Why, it's almost as if the walls were weighted down somehow. As if the entire structure were insulated with some species of dense metal."

Harry's eyes bugged, even more so than they had previously. "I see," he said.

"And so, Harry, I find myself in quite the predicament. Had my father left me his treasure, I'd have made good use of it, donating the largesse to various

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churches. But I have no personal use for an island and a mysteriously heavy house upon it. Therefore, I intend to sell the island and use the profits to fund the ministries. I ask you, Harry, have you use for such an island and the—I must admit—untenable house atop it?"

The Englishman slowly nodded his head, eyes still bulging from the intensity of the thoughts within his skull, or possibly from an iodine deficiency. "To help a new friend, I'd consider the proposition, if the price were right."

"Twenty thousand," Pincus said, sawing off a small piece of sausage and daintily forking it into his mouth.

"Twenty--! Sir, I have but ten thousand in the bank!"

"Ten thousand it is. Shall I produce the deed and sign it over?"

Here Harry began to waver, lips a-tremble as he mulled the situation. "Mate, I wish to help, but I feel justifiable trepidation towards signing over to you the entirety of my life savings."

At this moment, Mr. Gus Mulligan appeared between Pincus and myself, hand extended to Pincus.

"Hello," he said, shaking Pincus' hand as though the men were strangers, "I am a neutral third party, and I

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overheard your conversation. I'll buy your island, but I'll only pay 9,999 dollars, and not a penny more."

Pincus sighed dramatically. "I suppose, stranger. Simply allow me to find a pen—"

"No!" Harry barked, spitting sausage flecks across the table. "Wait! I'll... I'll... you!"

Harry pointed a crooked finger in my direction.

"Tell me, friend," he said imploringly, "Do you vouchsafe that all parts of your associate's story are accurate?"

"Yes," I said, "Yes I do."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. "Well then, to business. You, sir,"—here he pointed to Pincus—"I am a bit ashamed that I've forgotten your name already. What would you have me write upon the cheque?"

Pincus cut another slice of bratwurst. "My name is Forrester Cash, though I go by the nickname 'For.' Simply make the check out to 'For Cash.'"

Harry scribbled his mark upon the check and handed it to Pincus. Such a sum of money! I'd never before seen so many zeros in one location, lined up like sentinels in Harry's cramped scrawl! Pincus folded the check once and tucked it into the pocket of his shirt. "And now," Pincus said, "It is a simple matter of producing the deed, and—"

I felt a tap upon my shoulder. I turned, assuming it to be Mulligan, but he had vanished, only to be replaced by a badge-carrying member of the constabulary, rapping upon my shoulder with his night-stick!

"What's all this then? A game of Confidence?"

Pincus chuckled, placing a hand over his heart. "Oh no, constable, not at all. If you'll permit me to speak in private with you for just a moment, I'll explain everything."

"Very well," the police-man mumbled, and he and Pincus repaired to a darkened corner. Harry and I watched as Pincus explained the situation, flapping his hands expressively and occasionally pointing to Harry while the officer nodded and twirled his cudgel. I turned my attention back to my plate of food and mug of ale.

"Pleasant weather, eh?" I said, before sipping again from my stein.

"Indeed," Harry said, adjusting his Union Jack, "One can almost feel spring coming on the—"

"You criminal pervert!" the constable howled, hustling to our table, his face crimson with rage. I lifted my palms, assuming he was talking to me, but was relieved to find that his ire was directed at Harry. "Did you just

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offer this man ten thousand dollars for a prepubescent boy to fornicate with?"

Harry broke into a hysteria-induced coughing fit and knocked over his mug. "What!? No! I... what? I say! How... what!?"

"Tell it to the judge!" the officer bellowed, and began beating Harry about the head with his police-issue cudgel. I felt a hand upon my shoulder, followed by a hoarse whisper:

"Quickly, quickly!"

I grabbed my mug and a bratwurst and bolted from the table, following Pincus past the rows of agape bachelors and back through the front door of The Mournful Turnip. Mulligan waited outside drinking a beer, his periphery surrounded by the bones of some sort of pheasant he'd recently skeletonized.

"What the fuck happened?" said he.

Pincus waggled the check. "A dark turn, though no less fruitful. We must take our immediate leave."

Mulligan guzzled the remainder of his beer and pitched the stein over his shoulder. "You go to the bank, then visit one of these mercantiles and restock our supplies. We'll meet up in an hour."

Pincus tipped an imaginary cap and bustled away, vanishing into the tree-line. Mulligan, meanwhile, took a different lead, seemingly retracing our steps back to the aquarium. We walked in silence for a time before Mulligan piped up with his equivalent of a vociferous shower of praise:

"You did all right," he said, "So I guess you've passed the test. We don't need another mouth to feed, but I suppose you can be useful. We'll give you a berth, if you'd like to join us."

"A berth?" said I. "Have you a ship?"

"The finest there is. The Temperance."

Mulligan added something else, but I could not make it out over the sounds of breaking glass and the shrieking Englishman somewhere behind us.