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Black Marlin

A Novel by Ben R. Williams

Chapter V- The Temperance

I recall an intriguing observation made several years prior to the events of this narrative. Having found a bit of coin lying in the gutter, I decided to treat my sweet tooth by visiting a small artisanal bakery of some local renown and purchasing a box of sugared pastries. I took the pastries to a park, settled upon a bench, and supped upon those toothsome confections with child-like glee. In my gustatory zeal, I unknowingly dropped one of the pastries to the ground, not realizing my clumsiness until nearly half an hour had passed. Once I discovered my error, I reached below the bench to retrieve the fallen soldier, only to discover that the pastry was swarming with ants. My cause was lost; however, having no pressing business to attend to (as is my usual state) I resolved to observe those industrious insects in their labors, perhaps gaining a better understanding of our natural world in the process. It proved fascinating entertainment; the ants moved with frenzied speed, yet with a sense of purpose not often seen even in the more highly evolved animals. They dismantled

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the pastry piece by piece, ferrying the chunks to their lair one after the other until not even a crumb remained.

When Mulligan and I emerged from the Manteo woods and found ourselves on the beach of Shallowbag Bay, just a hundred yards from the small pier where the Temperance was berthed, I was instantly reminded of the ants and the pastry. The Temperance, of course, stood in place of the pastry, and the ants were the industrious dock-workers frantically loading the ship, and obviously they were adding to the ship rather than dismantling it, and also the ship and dock-workers were proportionally much larger in relation to myself than were the pastry and ants, for otherwise I would be some sort of frightening giant. Upon further reflection, this is not the finest analogy I have ever crafted, but I believe that if nothing else I have effectively conveyed the sense of small things tending to a large thing with speedy purpose, which is close enough.

And what a large thing the Temperance was! That enormous whaler's hull, painted a fading dull red, with a pronounced steel-reinforced prow like a menacing Roman snout! Those towering mast-poles, the mizzen burnt a sinister black by either lighting-strike or deck-fire! The accusatory bowsprit, supported by the most unspeakably vulgar figurehead I've ever laid eyes upon! At her stern,

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the name "Temperance" was painted in black calligraphy; below that, "Ego non baptize te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli"; and below that, "Fuck You." Why, a ship like this was as eye-catching as it was intimidating, and any who sailed on it would surely be treated with respect, and, perhaps, a bit of healthy fear! These were two emotions I had never before felt directed towards myself, and I relished the opportunity to experience them.

As we approached the ship, Mulligan paused and cupped an ear, surveying some distant sound beyond my range of hearing. I watched as his eyes widened; "Oh God," said he, "Hurry, Isaac, up the gangplank, now. Tour the ship while we settle our matters on the pier."

"Aye aye, friend Mulligan!" I cheerfully replied, setting off in that direction. The pier was simply a-swarm now with frenetic dock-men, heaving crates of supplies to one another while Pincus stood at the larboard gunwale barking orders and banging his cane rhythmically to set a brisk pace:

"Faster, you apes! Pour on some speed! Food to the lower main, water and whiskey to the blubber room! Leave those chickens on deck! Limes, limes, where are our limes? Would you have us set sail without anti-scorbutics? Ah, there they are; give 'em to Shillingi. Nine, take that

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patched spanker to the forehold; Weems, make yourself useful and assist the lad! Where's Snuff? Asleep!? Well someone wake him, you fools! We're in a God damned hurry!"

I scurried up the gangplank and set foot on the gnarled oak deck of that Frankensteinian titan called Temperance. I paused, tilted back my head, and took a deep breath, allowing those peculiar scents of the working-ship to filter deep into my being: the salt, the smoke, the musty planks, the heady aroma of seagull droppings. I was, in that moment, a Man Transformed, no longer a mere "land-lubber," but a hard-edged Seaman.

My moment of transformation was marred somewhat by the burly dock-worker who shouldered me out of the way, sending me tumbling head-first into a crate of apples as his string of abominable expletives met my ear. Such pranksters, these sailors! Chuckling, I lifted myself from the apple-crate and joined Pincus at the gunwale.

"Ahoy there, Pincus!" I merrily exclaimed, "Pleasant weather, eh? How do you do this afternoon? Such a busy day we've had! But my, how fine it is to stand on the gently rocking deck of this exemplary—"

"Yes, yes, good to see you, friend Isaac." Pincus did not turn his head to speak to me; following his gaze, I realized he was squinting inscrutably at the cobbled road

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which wound from the mercantile district and terminated at our very pier. At the base of the gangplank, to the side of the busy path of the dock-men, Mulligan stood staring in a similar fashion.

"What do you squint at, Pincus? Awaiting another delivery of drygoods?"

"Yes, yes, something like that."

Here Pincus reached into a barrel bolted to the gunwale between two scuppers. At first I took it for a rustic umbrella stand, though as Pincus removed an item from it, I realized it actually contained a series of large-calibre cartridge rifles. As Pincus settled the rifle across the rail and pointed its black eye toward the roadway, I noticed Mulligan remove two enormous revolvers from within his pea-coat and aim them in that same direction.

"Halloo there, Mulligan!" I crowed, "What fine large pistolas you carry!"

"Get inside the fucking boat!" Mulligan shouted back.
What jokers, these old salts!

"What Mr. Mulligan means to say, Isaac, is that you would do us a fine favor if you were to descend yon stairs into the engine room and parlay a message on our behalf. Inside the room, you will see an old gentleman, a bit

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resembling a slender Grandfather Christmas. This is Mr. Snuff. I suspect he's dropped anchor at Blanket Bay, but if you'd wake him and kindly ask him to pour coal on the steam-engines, we'd be ever so grateful."

I offered Pincus a sharp salute. "I shan't let you down, sir."

"Good, good." Pincus hunched over to peer down his rifle's iron sights, looking for all the world like a champion snooker-man lining up a difficult bank-shot towards a ball in-baulk. "Please be speedy," Pincus added.

I spun on my heels and strode determinedly toward the stairs which Pincus had indicated, and it was here that I learned one of my first important lessons of the sailor's life. It is a little-known fact (or, at least, little-known to me at that time) that while the deck of a working ship will be sun-dried during calm weather, the lower regions, being constantly enclosed, are not conducive to the process of evaporation. Further, the sea, being an environment both bursting with life yet also cruel to the extreme, breeds some of the most opportunistic creatures known to man, many of them microscopic, able to pass osmotically through even the tightest hull. The result of these two conditions is that the inner portions of the ship are able to support a vast menagerie of tiny animals, individually invisible to

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the unassisted eye, yet forming themselves into vast, million-strong collectives capable of coating surfaces with a layer of lubricating slime. Which is why, upon planting my loafer upon the first lowered step leading towards the engine-room, my foot lost all traction as it crushed an algal commune built upon the wood's surface, sending me tumbling down the entire flight of stairs. The observations I would have liked to record concerning my first glance at the interior of that resplendent ship took the form of a whirlwind of brief images accompanied by intense pain. Here an oil lantern rocking gently to and fro! There a scrimshawed walrus tusk serving as a hook for slickers! Here my own leg bending over my shoulder at an unsightly and disturbing angle! The overall effect was one of both wonder and horror, which, I believe, is a fairly accurate reflection of the sailor's life.

At the conclusion of my interminable tumble, I found myself in a vast section of the ship's lowest level. On a standard whaler, the room would have served as an afterhold, containing additional room for supplies and equipment, yet in the case of the Temperance, it had been converted into a massive hall for the twin steam engines. The long cylindrical beasts sat side-by-side, married to each other by an esoteric conglomeration of pipe-work,

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valves, and gauges. A great furnace also sat between them, the glowing embers behind its closed grate resembling a demonic maw.

As I attempted to rise from my crumpled heap and begin the process of dislodging my nose from the junction of my arm and torso, I made my second observation: the chamber was heavy with one of the foulest scents I have ever laid nostril upon. It was a terrible stench, and any attempt to accurately describe it would result in a sentence so foul that you'd slap this tome shut and heave it across the room in disgust, though I will say, in a very general sort of way, that the overall effect reminded this observer of human musk, decomposition, and an animal fat rendering plant.

It was not long before I found the presumable cause of the foul odor. In a darkened corner of the engine room, atop a pile of potatoes so old and forgotten that they were less potatoes than masses of albino sprouts and offshoots, I found Mr. Snuff, toothless mouth slack, arms akimbo, and tragically deceased. And not lately deceased, either; it appeared the reaper had done his work months ago, leaving behind only a desiccated mummy with bare sunken chest, hollow eye-sockets, and a wispy white beard thatched to a flaking skull.

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"Woe!" I shouted to the heavens, "Our engine-man dead when he's needed most! Oh, but that I could have met you, Mr. Snuff, before the grave robbed you of your humanity, when your eyes still sparkled and your cheeks still glowed with the joie de vivre! Gone now, all gone, and to a better place, no doubt. May flights of angels sing thee to thy rest, sweet prince!"

Here I lowered myself, resting a knee on the potato-pile, and extended a hand to close the dead man's eyes. As the tip of my index missed the eyelid entirely and instead pressed against the slimy orb itself, I was startled that the effect was not one of bringing peace to my fallen comrade, but instead awakening him from what turned out to be a very powerful slumber.

"GAH!" he yelled, rubbing his deflected eye with one knobby fist, and then turned from me and vomited into a small bucket next to the potato pile which appeared to have been installed there for that express purpose. My heart racing, I patiently waited for Mr. Snuff to complete his violent and prolonged expectoration. At its conclusion, 30-45 seconds later, he wiped clean his mouth with one bony arm, produced a bottle of spirits which he drank from deeply (no doubt to replenish his spent fluids), then fixed me with a menacing squint.

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"The hell?" he mumbled, or so I assume, as it was difficult to understand him on account of the linguistic difficulties which arise when one is possessed of both a toothless mouth and a severely inebriated language center.

"Hello, Mr. Snuff!" I said, bowing slightly to him, throned as he was atop his tuber-pile. "My apologies regarding the condition of your eye. Forgive me, I assumed you to be dead. I am Isaac, newest crewman of the Temperance. I have been sent by Mr. Pincus to parlay a message; namely, we prepare to leave port, and, if it is no imposition upon you, we would be ever so grateful if you would stoke the fires of your mighty dynamos, and, in doing so, propel us to sea forthwith, leaving behind only the tint of our smoke, the curl of our wake, and gentle memories in the minds of those fine souls we met a-shore!"

Mr. Snuff stared at me in seeming incomprehension.

"You queer?" he said.

I chuckled. "Why, Mr. Snuff, I'm just as God made me! Do I intend to be queer? No, I intend to be only Isaac. Yet do others view me as queer in thought and action? Perhaps, and perhaps with good reason! Yet it is the plight of every individual to be incapable of seeing himself as the world does, and who is to say who is right: the outside observer,

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or the man himself? And so, Mr. Snuff, if you think me queer, I cannot argue; I'm queer as they come."

Snuff gazed on in bovine confusion, and I began to suspect that he (poor soul) was a member of that noble set of imbeciles who, though incapable of holding up one end of a conversation or practicing good hygiene, are nonetheless able to excel at a particular skill, such as shining shoes, selling newspapers, or, in this case, stoking a furnace. My theory appeared confirmed when, having given up contributing to our discussion on queerness, Mr. Snuff rose from his potato-pile, plucked a battered shovel from the floor, and ambled toward the furnace with a torpidity normally reserved for hibernating reptiles. He adjusted a series of arcane valves and dials, then opened the furnace's grill. His work illuminated only by the faint ochre glow of the smoldering coke and residues remaining in the furnace, Snuff scooped up a shovel-full of fresh bituminous coal and heaved it into the furnace's yawning mouth. The glow winked out; then, slowly, returned and began to intensify, and as Snuff added scoop after scoop, and the fire grew brighter and brighter, I could hear water boil to steam, squeal through pipes, turn turbines, push pistons, and produce that characteristic "chuff-chuff" sound known so well by the locomotive set. What a wonder

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these modern contrivances are! The room, once damp and chilly, became uncomfortably warm in a matter of seconds. I felt my legs wobble beneath me as the Temperance began to pull from the pier. Atop all this commotion, another noise, a series of loud pops and sharp cracks, coupled by a sound almost like men screaming.

"My!" I said, clapping Snuff on the back, "Old King Coal does not go quietly, does he?"

"Ain't the coal," Snuff said, slinging yet more rock on the fire, "Them's gunshots, dumbass."

Gunshots! Suddenly the full picture came into view. I gripped Snuff by the shoulders and shook him like a marionette, his shovel-full of anthracite flying hither and thither.

"Gunshots, you say!? My God man, are we under siege?"

Snuff pulled back his shovel and gave me a brisk whack to the shin. "Keep your panties on! Ain't nothing."

I loosed Snuff from my grip and allowed the simpleton to recommence his slow shoveling. He would be no help to me, this much was certain; I alone would have to prepare a plan to rescue the crew from this dark turn of events. I paced the floorboards, rubbing my chin between thumb and forefinger to lubricate my lucubrations, and pondered aloud to no one in particular.

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"A siege, a siege! But who would set upon us? The Arabs! No, no, Mulligan left them in no state for retaliation; he stripped them of their arms, and their clothes also. That Englishman? No, he does not strike me as a man of gun-play, and further, he is likely in police custody. Who then? My God, it sounds like the Ming musketeers have loosed their hand-cannons! I must take action... though, it has been remarked that a man should not bring a knife to a gun-fight, yet I have no gun, nor knife for that matter, nor even a pointed stick. Yet it has also been remarked that the pen is mightier than the sword, and the pen symbolizes not a tool of quill and ink, but rather the ideas recorded with said implement! Therefore, combining these two maxims, a reasonably sound idea lies somewhere on the strength bell-curve between knife and gun; with the right amount of ingenuity, I may yet stand a fighting chance!"

Here I paused a moment and observed my surroundings. In a loose pile beside the right dynamo, I spied several planks of scrap-wood, a few cinder-blocks, and a spool of baling twine.

"Ha ha!" I ejaculated, "Within moments, those planks could be assembled into a mighty catapult with cinder-block counterweight! But what would be launched at our

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assailants? Potatoes? No, no, that's giving aid to the enemy. Ah ha! A mass of lignite coal, tied up in a croker sack, placed in a bucket! We'll light the coal and, once launched, the sack will burn through, and flaming coal-stones will rain on our antagonists! They'll tremble with fear at the sight of such hell-fire and brimstone! Worry not, my new brothers of the Temperance, Isaac-as-Prometheus will bring fire to the people!"

As I knelt in the scrap pile to begin assembling the death-engine, I heard the sound of a clearing throat, and rotated to see Mulligan standing at the foot of the stairs, his pipe clenched in his teeth, casually reloading one of his large revolvers.

"That was the police," said he, "They had some issues with the whole 'taking ten thousand dollars from a stranger then accusing him of being a paedophile' thing. But we got away."

"Ah," said I. "Tell me, Mulligan, were any of our crew hurt?"

"No, there were no casualties."

"Were any of the constables hurt?"

"We got away," Mulligan said. "You're a Temperance Man now, Isaac, for better or worse. I hope you had no unfinished business on land."

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I considered this briefly. "I believe, Mr. Mulligan, that I left my bicycle at the aquarium. If it's not an imposition to—"

"Fuck your bicycle," Mulligan said, and snapped shut the cylinder of his pistol. "Now follow me to the deck. Captain Bill wants to meet you."