

TREASURE ISLAND



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BOOK FIVE – MY SEA ADVENTURE

CHAPTER 27.

PIECES OF EIGHT

Due to the lean of the ship, the masts hung far out over the water, and from my place on the cross-trees there was nothing below me except the water of the bay. Israel Hands, was not as far up as I was. He was nearer to the ship and fell, between me and the deck. He rose once in the water in a lather of foam and blood, then sank again for good. As the water settled, I could see him lying huddled up on the clean, bright sand. Sometimes, the ripples of the water, made it look like he moved a bit, as though he was trying to get up, but he was dead having been both shot and drowned. He was now food for the fish in the exact place where he had planned my slaughter.

I began to feel sick, faint, and terrified. The hot blood was running over my back and chest. Where the knife had pinned my shoulder to the mast, it felt like a hot iron burning.

But it was not so much the pain that distressed me, it was the terrifying thought of falling from the cross-trees into the still green water, beside the body of Hands.

I clung with both hands until my fingers ached, and I shut my eyes, as if it would hide the danger. Soon my mind came back again, and my pulse started to slow down to a more natural beat. I had to think what to do. My first thought was to pull the knife out. But either, it was stuck too hard or I could not bring myself to do it. The thought made me shake. But that shake did the trick! The knife, in fact, had almost missed me and it was only holding me by a mere pinch of skin. The skin came away and even though the blood ran down faster, I was free again and was only stuck to the mast by my shirt. I pulled hard with a sudden jerk, then climbed back to the deck.

I went below and did what I could for my wound. But it still hurt a fair bit and was still bleeding, but it was not deep and didn't stop me from using my arm. I looked around me now the ship was, sort of, my own. I started to think of clearing its last passenger... the dead man, O'Brien.

He lay like some horrible, sort of life-size puppet, but different in colour. I took him by the waist as if he was a sack of potatoes and with one good heave, tumbled him overboard. He went in with a huge splash.

The red scarf came off and floated on the surface and once the splash had gone, I could see him and Israel lying side by side. Now I was alone on the ship and the evening breeze had sprung up. Although it was well protected, the idle sails started to rattle back and forth. I began to see a danger to the ship too. I was able to bring the smaller jib sails tumbling on to the deck, but the main-sail was a lot harder.

The top of it and a foot or two of sail hung in the water and the strain was so heavy that I could not pull it up. At last I got my knife and



cut the ropes. The peak dropped instantly, and a big belly of loose canvas floated on the water. But pull as hard as I could, I couldn't bring it in. The HISPANIOLA now needed luck, like me.

By now, the whole anchorage had fallen into shadow and it began to get cold. The tide was rapidly running toward the sea and the ship had settled in more on the sandy bottom. I scrambled forward and looked over. It seemed shallow enough, and holding the cut rope in both hands for a last security, I let myself drop softly overboard. The water hardly reached my waist and the sand was firm and covered with ripple marks. I waded to shore feeling much happier, leaving the HISPANIOLA on her side, with her main-sail floating wide on the water of the bay.

At last, I was on land, and I had not returned empty-handed. The ship was cleared from the buccaneers and ready for our own men to board and get to sea again.

I now thought only about getting home to the stockade and boasting of my achievements. I might be in trouble for running away, but the re-capture of the HISPANIOLA was surely a good excuse and I hoped that even Captain Smollett would be pleased with my work.

Feeling good, I began to head for the stockade and my friends. I ran along the river which flowed into Captain Kidd's anchorage from the hills up on my left, in the hope to cross over it while it was still small. The forest was pretty easy, and keeping to edges, I soon turned the corner of the hill, and waded across the knee-deep water. This brought me near to where I had met Ben Gunn. I walked keeping a sharp eye out on all sides. The sky was growing darker and as I turned between the hills, I could see a flickering glow against the sky, where it looked like a man of the island was cooking his supper on a roaring fire. I wondered, why he would show himself because if I could see the light, couldn't someone else like Silver see him from his camp too? Soon the night fell blacker and it was getting harder to find my way. I kept tripping on bushes and rolling into sandy pits.

As I kept trying to move, a kind of brightness fell about me. As I looked up, I could see that the moon had risen.

With this to help me, I moved quickly. Sometimes walking, sometimes running, so that soon I got closer to the stockade. As I began to wind my way through the small forest nearby, I slowed again to a cautious pace. It would have been a bad end of my adventure to get shot down by my own party by mistake.

Then right in front of me, a glow of a different colour appeared. It was red and black and looked like the embers of a bonfire smouldering. I could not think what it might be.

At last I came right to the edge of the clearing. The western end was lit by moonlight; the rest, and the log house itself, still lay in black shadow with long silvery streaks of light. On the other side of the house an immense fire had burned itself down to embers and still glowed red. There was no-one around and not a sound apart from the wind.

I stopped with a little fear. It had not been Captain Smollett's way to build great fires, and I began to worry that something had gone wrong while I was away. I crept around the eastern end, staying in shadow, and where the darkness was thickest, I crossed the ground.

Just to be sure, I got down on my hands and knees and crawled, without a sound, towards the corner of the house. As I got closer, I started to feel better.

I had often complained about it at other times, but just now it was like music hearing my friends snoring together so loud in their sleep. "All's well," I thought... The seafarers watch.

There was no doubt they were keeping a bad watch. If it had been Silver and his lads that were now creeping in on them, not one of them would have seen morning. I now blamed myself for leaving them in danger with a wounded Captain and not enough men to keep proper guard.

When I got to the door and stood up, it was dark inside. I could not see anything. But I could hear the snorers and a small, funny pecking noise that I did not know.

With my arms out in front of me I walked slowly in. I would lie down in my own place (I thought with a silent chuckle) and laugh at their faces when they found me in the morning. My foot struck something soft... it was a sleeper's leg; and he turned and groaned, but did not wake up. Then, all of a sudden, a shrill voice broke out of the darkness:

"Pieces of eight! Pieces of eight! Pieces of eight! Pieces of eight! Pieces of eight!" which seemed like forever, without pause or change, like the ticking of a clock.

Silver's parrot, Captain Flint! That was what I had heard pecking at a piece of bark. It was keeping better watch than any person!



I had no time left for me to escape. At the sharp, clipping tone of the parrot, the sleepers sprang awake and with a mighty oath, the voice of Silver cried, "Who goes there?"

I turned to run, but struck hard against one person, turned and then ran full into the arms of a second, who closed them and held me tight.

"Bring a torch, Dick," said Silver when he was sure his capture was secure.