

Covers

The

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The bones of the whaler groaned as they rode a swell so hump-backed that the bunkhouse angled for long seconds while they waited for Sam Bellamy to continue. All eyes on him—heart a-gallop, face hot. Twelve years old and putting himself forward.

Sam pressed the dog against his ribs and tried to ignore Dempsey; tamping his pipe with a cracked thumb, eyes full of black light.

The sneer Dempsey gave him on boarding in Sydney—Sam was waiting for it. Didn't want to see the yellow teeth in the cankerous hole again. Had thought to make comment to the towering stranger but was glad he hadn't.

Sam made his voice hard as he could. 'Oh, that black Chief was a savage and no mistake.' Sam looked to the faces of the men in the lamplight and saw his voice could be harder; the gentleman's accent got to be gone. Once again he cursed Magistrate George Moore, who'd trained him to speak like his betters. Saw a mockery in Dempsey's eye that hadn't made it to the murderer's face. 'A savage who speared my father through the guts. Da was a limeburner and covered in a mad white dust and the blackfellows stood off for a moment and we thought him saved. But then the fish spear shot out. My father not wailing but a red spittle on his lips; horrible red against his white-powdered face. Watched us hidden under the bed. My brothers, and me just a wean. That warrior putting the spear in his groin, his guts, his throat. Then over the top comes the woman, the Chief's wife, with a hatchet. Goes a-hackin on my Pa till his head is cleave

straight off his shoulder. My brothers all hushed, Jemmy the eldest pinchin my mouth an' nose.'

The words had done work. Even Dempsey was nodding, looking into his pipe, scratching at the eagle tattoo on his neck. Darky Malone saw his chance and spat on the boards. 'What happened to ye then? The savages come back onye?'

Sam nodded, grateful for the enquiry. He had seen Malone skulking at the edges of the murders, more bark than bite, some human feeling left in him. Just like Sam Bellamy, Malone was now putting himself forward to remind them, of his being there, before they finished the work. The piracy hours old, and the blood still up. More killing to get clear of, once the drinking was done. The second mate, still lashed to the gunwale, with his head down the privy-hole. Sam thinking again, I got to make my mark with these men. He didn't want to go the way of Sarah Proctor, sitting behind Dempsey, where he had dragged her. Come onto the ship a single woman although her trade no secret. Handsome proudful woman. She got herself alongside the Captain as soon as they set sail, looked into his eyes, saw what she needed. Went straight to his cabin, didn't come out till Dempsey fetched her this very morning, six weeks out from port. Held her by the scruff while the Captain watched, hand on his knife. Dempsey ripped off her calico garments till she hung white and twisted as a wrung sheet. Shook her while she gagged and hissed, emptied a tankard over her head, kicked her in the slappy-arse. She said nothing. Knew what was happening, as did they all.

Dempsey had spat from the side of his mouth, eyes never leaving the Captain. The American, all vainglorious until then. Not saying nothing now. Knew he was beat. Took his hand off the knife, let them rush him.

Dempsey got the Captain tied to the mainmast. The American must've thought he was in for a flogging, but Dempsey got under him with a cruelly hooked flensing knife and opened his guts,

pulled them tumbling onto the deck. Pitiful wailing then, till the shock took him, eyes paling like a dead fish.

The blood was up and they cut some throats and threw a couple over; some kind of blackfellow and a cannibal. They stood watching them ride the fluming wash—carolling voices like a false rope thrown to the drowning: *she's a long swim back to New South Wales*. Sam Bellamy hid under the netting lashed over the trunks on the foredeck, the dog under his armpit. Tried to make his face clear although his heart sickened and his hands trembled. He'd learned in the Boys Home to shut his mouth and see nothing when the older boys turned spiteful on the weaker boys, but this was a new kind of horror. He watched the naked Sarah Proctor on her hands and knees go down to the bunkroom, to find a bed and wait for Dempsey.

Sam wanted to console her, or reveal his hiding places, but like the others he said nothing and looked away.

Sarah Proctor was looking at Sam now, both of them marked. He knew that look, and knew her for an enemy. Only way she could improve her position was to put someone else beneath their feet. None more likely than Samuel Bellamy, twelve years old and concealing the child's comfort of his mangy pet. Sam's thin arms and small hands. Cast seed of freckles over his gaunt face. Twelve years old but no man's hair on him, only ginger curls. Had the look of a waif in his work-rubbed clothes and bare feet. They were looking for it, and none more than Sarah Proctor. The mark they might have left; those hands of older men, the filthy bruising of his soul. The common tale of the boy alone. Had Sam become tempered hard like Dempsey, or was he gone blowsy like spoiled fruit? So they could do to him what they done to Sarah Proctor.

So he had to keep talking. His tale of woe. But no pity in it—no signal that he come out of it a weepy plaything for the stronger

hand. In his own words, not theirs. Because Sam Bellamy didn't speak the Flash. The Cant. Didn't grow up with it. So he had to speak it hard, and harrowing, though it hurt him to say it. 'My Jemmy, he saw to the warrior in court. They had him in chains. My Jemmy pointed his finger like an arrow. The blackfellow knew it then. They dragged him out howlin. Didn't know what he'd done wrong, see. Like spearin an unarmed man in the groin and cutting off his head was all in a day's work. They tied him to the guardhouse door, shot him down. Hung 'im from the nearest tree, slung in chains—'

'The gibbet. Took my Da like that.'

A spasm in Sam's guts. It was Malone again, but did he pity the blackfellow? Had Sam gone too far in the telling?

'My brother Michael, he went and cut Da down,' Malone continued. 'Capital offence in them days. Had to leave Ireland, over in Boston now. Where I'm headed, boys.'

A slosh of porter round the circle, nods and grunts. 'Let 'im finish,' growled Dempsey. 'The story of the boy and his puppy ain't finished.'

Sam leaned forward to begin, but Dempsey laughed. 'Haven't got to the part about the *silver focken spoon* yet.'

Laughs formed and bust, and Sam had to go along. He'd survived the Boys Home, and the mutiny thus far, when Dempsey and some of the men had gone crazed with the murderousness, even laughing while they killed, but now Sam felt like a rat flushed from a pile of straw. And there was something in Dempsey's eyes that was even more worrying—a quiet burning curiosity like he might prefer Sam in his bunk, over Sarah Proctor.

'My Ma was a broke woman. She got to sellin herself to the soldiers, for our food. Word got around. No room in a village of married men for the likes of my Ma—'

Dempsey laughed, the brute. 'Let me hazard. Put in by the womenfolk. Pitchforks in one hand an' Bible in the other.'

A look from Sarah Proctor, who'd been leaning forward, waiting to get in.

'The Magistrate's wife—'

'Barren, I wager.'

Sam nodded, because he wanted to finish. 'Ma was flogged, then transported to Van Diemen's Land. We never saw her again. We were put on the street, middle of winter. Everybody in that Perth village was hungry. The colony was broke. They'd sent for supplies, see, but the storehouse was empty. We were beggin. The church fed us for a bit. Jemmy took us seaweed and samphire from the river. He ate an orange nut from a palm tree, and died. Robert, only six, wandered into the bush, lookin for native victuals, never came back. They found him later—he died of cold, they say. That left me.'

'The silver spoon. The barren sow, the Magistrate's wife. Took you for her own.'

'She *did*.'

Said too loud; a foolish challenge. Sam's story, his only property, something foul in Dempsey's mouth. Sam took a sip of the rum that had burned his throat this morning, but now tasted like water.

'Don't pine, *silver spoon*, my Ma was a slag too. They give her the hearty-choke with caper sauce at Newgate, for beatin a Jew...'

Dempsey was inclined to continue, so Sam kept his head down. There was no drunkenness in the ringleader's voice, just the taking of voice from the others. They'd heard these stories in the weeks before the mutiny. To listen to Dempsey's stories you would think him an idiot but he was cracking dumb. All the while Dempsey had droned he was fiercely watching them, and the question in his eyes was always the same. Who was on his side? Who had the temper? He was looking for followers, not fellow leaders. Made that clear when he took a sealer's club to the sleeping form of a Scotsman called Dundas who showed some mettle in an argument about rum. Dempsey had described

the plan for them—take the ship and make for the Caribbean islands—sell off the New Zealand sealskins and fill the hold with barrels of rum. They would arrive in California rich men, a share for each. There were guns enough; old breech-load carbines under lock and key, plenty of powder and shot. He'd seen them himself. They wouldn't turn up empty-handed in San Francisco town, no, they'd be welcomed like lords. Sell the ship. Sell the lot. Dempsey described them in new clothes, even Sarah Proctor, up there in the Captain's bed. Made a picture of her in a gingham skirt with lacy petticoats and silken knickers. New set of teeth.

'Away to shite, yer feckin blowhard!' Dundas had shouted from behind them. 'I know you was a peeler in Sydney. I seen you meself.'

But Dempsey had just laughed. Looked around the bunkhouse, little nods, racking the numbers. 'Man's gotta eat. No peeler's uniform gonna hide my junked back. I won't never forget what I am.'

With that he lifted off his sweat-soaked cotton smock, the tropical heat in the bunkhouse and their smell the one vile thing. Dempsey's back was like a vast snowfield ploughed by a demented hand. Junked all right. White skin ripped by long ridges of proudflesh; red straps of dried meat, cauterised by the branding-iron. Put his shirt back on and sang. 'For the smell of the sea is like vittles to me, and I'd trade in my bed for a new wooden leg, and my head is as bald as a newly laid egg, for the life of a sailor is all of my joy.'

'You ain't no sailor,' Dundas had said. 'You's a ignorant bog Irish arse-licker. If you wasn't, you'd ken there's no rum this side of the Americas. Less you can make your ship fly, you won't be dockin no ship in the Caribbean islands. This coast just Induns, vermin and sickness, all the way up till you hit California. It's gold we're goin for lads. Save your strength, for diggin's hard work.'

'Pay him no mind, boys. Tis the pox talkin.'

The Scotsman grunted, turned in his bunk, which is where they found him the next morning, head caved in. Dempsey and another carried him onto the deck and tipped him into the Pacific.

There was no more talk of trading for rum, but no chance either that Dempsey would be faulted in his plans for San Francisco. He took their silence for consent, described them going from the boat mob-handed, his very own hand-forged tribe. The Californian colonials wouldn't know what hit them. Appealing to a native Australian pride that was alien, after all they'd suffered. And weren't they leaving their home, to follow the gold?

It was late when Sam curled into his hessian rags. He didn't have a bed, but slept on the bunkroom floor. He was hungry, and the rum he'd drunk on an empty stomach made him feel poorly. The silver timepiece he'd stolen from the Boys Home master in Van Diemen's Land had paid for his ticket, but no more. He'd heard that a man could live weeks without rations, not that he wanted to test the theory. In his leather pouch he had one hundred yards of catgut and a can of different size hooks. It was fish that he'd contributed to the communal feed. Fish that he plied his dog with, who ate them whole, no mind for the bones. The dog nuzzled into his armpit, drank up his smell. He'd taken it off the Sydney Rocks, barely weaned. Sam had no picture of what the dog'd grow into, much like himself, when he finally started growing. In the meantime, the dog stuck by him, never more than a foot away—its first time on the waves. Sam'd been transported from Perth to Hobart when he was eleven, but spent the weeks below deck and saw nothing. Had gone under one side of the world and come out the other—just the abiding fever-dreams and swell-sickness.

Tonight he would not sleep. It might be Dempsey come for

him, but it could be any of them, emboldened by the casks of rum, ale and porter plundered from the foredeck hold.

The little knife waited in his pocket. He imagined where he would sink it, but didn't believe the pictures he made. The dog would be no help, beyond yapping, a danger to itself. So that he would not sleep, Sam retrieved two of the largest hooks from the can and pierced his thumb, licked away the blood, closed his fists around the barbed hooks. It stung something terrible, but Sam looked out into the eerie shadows, beyond the drunken babble and creaking timbers and groaning ropes, saw himself sinking into the dark waters like the silent Scotsman, and there was a strange comfort to that.