

SECTION 7

There was no return of the mutineers—not even another shot from the woods. As the captain said, they had “got their rations for the day,” and we were left in peace to tend the wounded and prepare dinner. The squire and I cooked outside, though the groans from the doctor’s patients made it hard to work.

Of the eight men who fell, only three were still alive: one pirate, Hunter, and Captain Smollett. The pirate died during surgery, and Hunter never regained consciousness. He lingered through the day, breathing heavily, and died quietly during the night.

The captain was badly wounded but not in danger. One shot had broken his shoulder blade and grazed his lung; another had torn the muscles in his leg. He would recover, the doctor said, but he could not walk or move much for weeks.

My own cut was minor. After dinner, the squire and doctor talked quietly with the captain. Then, to our surprise, the doctor armed himself, took the map, and left the stockade.

Gray stared after him. “Is Dr. Livesey mad?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “He’s likely going to see Ben Gunn.”

As the heat and smell of blood grew worse, I felt restless and jealous of the doctor walking freely in the woods. While cleaning up, I quietly filled my pockets with biscuits and took two pistols.

My plan was to go find the white rock and Ben Gunn’s hidden boat. I knew I would not be allowed to leave, so I slipped away when no one was watching and ran into the trees.

I headed for the east coast and walked along the shore. The sea roared constantly. Soon I reached the ridge of the sandy spit. From there I could see the *Hispaniola* with the black pirate flag flying. One of the gigs lay beside her, Silver in command.

Captain Flint screamed from the ship. Soon the gig returned, and night fell as fog rolled in. I hurried toward the white rock.

Below it, hidden in bushes, was a small tent of goatskins. Inside was Ben Gunn’s boat—a tiny, homemade coracle made of wood and skins. It was light but badly shaped.

Instead of returning, I made a bold plan: to cut the *Hispaniola* loose and let her drift away. I waited for full darkness, ate some biscuits, and carried the coracle to the water.

The fog was thick. Only two lights were visible: the pirates’ campfire and the glow from the ship’s cabin. I waded into the water and set the coracle afloat.

The little boat was hard to control, spinning in every direction, but the tide carried me toward the ship. Soon I reached her anchor rope.

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I realized cutting it while it was tight could be deadly. Luckily, the wind shifted and loosened the rope. I cut most of it and waited for another breeze.

From the cabin I heard drunken shouting. Israel Hands and another pirate were arguing and throwing bottles out the window.

At last the rope slackened again. I cut the final strands. The ship began to turn with the current, and I was nearly crushed against her bow.

As I pushed away, I grabbed a loose cord trailing from the stern. Curious, I pulled myself up and looked through the cabin window.

By this time the schooner and the little coracle were moving fast through the water, and we were already level with the campfire. The ship made a loud splashing sound as she cut through the waves. I could not understand why the men on board had not noticed anything—until I dared to glance through the cabin window.

I saw Hands and the other man locked in a violent struggle, each with a hand around the other's throat.

I dropped back into the coracle just in time, nearly falling overboard. The two bloodied faces swayed under the lamp inside the cabin. From shore, the pirates began singing again: "Fifteen men on the dead man's chest—Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!"

Just then the coracle lurched sharply and changed direction. Our speed increased.

I looked around. The sea glowed faintly, and the Hispaniola staggered and turned south. Behind me, the campfire was drifting away. The current had shifted and was pulling both the ship and my tiny boat straight toward the open sea.

Suddenly the schooner swerved. I heard shouting and footsteps. The two drunken men had realized what was happening.

I lay flat and prayed. I expected to be smashed on the rocks at any moment. For hours I was tossed by the waves, soaked with spray, until exhaustion took over and I fell asleep dreaming of home.

When I woke, it was morning. I was near the southwest end of the island. The cliffs were high and dangerous, and the surf crashed against them. I saw large sea creatures barking on the rocks and decided not to land there.

Instead, I drifted north toward Cape of the Woods, where the shore looked safer. The waves were strong, but my little coracle rode them well as long as I stayed low.

When I tried to sit up and paddle, the boat nearly flipped. I learned to stay balanced and gently guide her between the waves.

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Slowly I made progress, but thirst began to torture me. Then I saw the Hispaniola ahead, sailing wildly with no one steering.

At first I thought they were chasing me, but then I realized nobody was in control. The ship drifted helplessly, turning again and again into the wind.

I paddled after her, determined to take her back.

At last the wind dropped and the ship turned broadside toward me. A sudden gust filled the sails, and she rushed straight at my coracle.

I jumped just in time, grabbing the jib-boom as my coracle was crushed beneath the ship.

I climbed onto the deck. No one was there. Bottles rolled across the planks. The ship lurched in the waves.

Then I saw them—red-cap lying dead, arms spread, and Israel Hands slumped against the rail, badly wounded.

Blood stained the deck.

Hands groaned and shifted slightly.

“Come aboard, Mr. Hands,” I said.

“Brandy,” he whispered.

I went below and found chaos. Bottles everywhere, cabinets smashed, mud on the floor. I found brandy for Hands and food for myself.

After drinking deeply, Hands said, “If the doctor were here, I’d live. But I’m out of luck. That other man’s dead.”

“I’ve come to take command of this ship,” I said. “You’ll treat me as captain.”

He looked at me but did not argue.

“I’m striking these pirate colors,” I added, and threw the black flag into the sea. “God save the King.”

Hands watched me carefully. “You’ll want to go ashore now,” he said. “We should talk.”

He offered to teach me how to sail if I gave him food and helped his wound.

“I’m heading to North Inlet,” I said. “Not back to the pirates.”

“That suits me,” he replied. “I’ll help you anywhere.”

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We made our deal. I steered the ship north with the wind.

I tied up Hands' wound with my handkerchief. He ate, drank, and slowly recovered strength.

The breeze carried us smoothly along the coast, and we rounded the northern point of Treasure Island, heading toward North Inlet.

I felt proud of my new command and pleased with the bright weather and the changing views along the coast. I had food and water, and my guilty conscience about leaving the stockade was eased by the success I had achieved. Still, the way Israel Hands watched me made me uneasy. His eyes followed me with a strange smile that seemed both weak and mocking, as if he were planning something.

The wind shifted to the west, which helped us reach North Inlet. We could not anchor or land yet, so time passed slowly. Hands showed me how to keep the ship steady, and after many tries, I managed. We sat in silence while we ate.

"Cap'n," he said at last, smiling oddly, "how about we throw that old shipmate of mine, O'Brien, overboard? He's not much use now, is he?"

"I'm not strong enough, and I don't want to," I said. "He can stay where he is."

"This is an unlucky ship," Hands said. "A lot of men have died on her. Tell me, Jim, do dead men stay dead, or do they come back?"

"You can kill the body, not the spirit," I replied. "O'Brien is in another world now."

"That's unlucky," he said. "Spirits don't bother me much. Now go get me some wine. This brandy's too strong."

I knew he was lying. He wanted me off the deck. So I pretended to agree.

"Red or white?" I asked.

"Doesn't matter," he said. "Just strong."

I went below loudly, then quietly crept around and came back up another way. Hands was crawling across the deck, clearly stronger than he pretended. He reached a coil of rope and took out a long knife stained with blood. He hid it in his jacket and returned to his place.

Now I knew his plan. I went back, brought him wine, and acted calm.

Hands drank and said, "Cut me some tobacco. This may be my last."

"You should pray," I said.

"Why?" he asked.

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“You’ve lived in violence and lies,” I said. “There’s a dead man at your feet.”

He drank again. “I never saw good come from goodness. Dead men don’t bite. Now let’s land the ship.”

We carefully steered into North Inlet. The water was calm, and a wreck lay ahead on the shore.

“There’s the place to beach her,” said Hands. “Once she’s in, we can pull her off later.”

“Starboard... steady... now luff!” he ordered.

I followed his commands. The ship ran toward shore.

Then I sensed danger and turned. Hands was coming at me with the knife.

We both shouted. He lunged, and I jumped aside. The tiller swung and struck him, stopping him for a moment.

I pulled out my pistol and fired, but it was wet and did nothing. He charged again.

I ran around the mast and climbed into the rigging. He followed slowly, groaning. I reloaded both pistols.

“One more step and I’ll shoot you,” I said.

He paused. “Jim,” he said, “I suppose I’ve lost. I’d have killed you, but luck’s against me.”

Suddenly he threw the knife. It struck my shoulder and pinned me to the mast. Both pistols fired, and Hands fell into the sea.

He surfaced once, then sank for good.

I was hurt and frightened, but alive. The knife had barely caught me, and I tore free.

I treated my wound and then threw O’Brien’s body overboard. Both dead men drifted together in the water.

Now I was alone on the ship. I lowered the sails as best I could and let the ship settle.

I waded ashore, leaving the Hispaniola safe behind me.

Proud and excited, I headed back toward the stockade. The moon rose and guided me through the woods.

At last I reached the clearing. A fire still glowed. I crept inside the blockhouse, smiling at the thought of surprising my friends.

Suddenly a voice cried, “Pieces of eight! Pieces of eight!”

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It was Captain Flint, Silver's parrot.

The sleepers woke, and Silver shouted, "Who goes?"

I tried to run, but two men grabbed me.

"Bring a torch, Dick," said Silver.

I had been captured!