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By

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PROLOGUE

Off the north-west coast of Western Australia

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The murk below decks seemed immune to the effects of the forlorn single lantern swinging overhead more wildly with each massive roller that surged under the *Hougoumont*'s barnacle-encrusted hull.

The gloom gobbled up what feeble light managed to skitter across the damp walls, recasting eye sockets of the frightened men into hooded, skinless death masks. When the wan light flashed over the grisly remains on the makeshift operating table (a hastily overturned door anchored to two sagging wooden barrels), it offered up a momentary glimpse of blood-soaked pulp and bone, turning them into faux rubies and pearls.

Standing outside the light's impotent range at that moment, the First Mate would later swear that the ship's doctor winced at the gruesome sight spread before him like a butcher's picnic. 'A bad sign', he would say later. As a thirty-year veteran of pirate-infested seas, the doctor should have been immune to the numberless desecrations of which men were capable. *Should* have been. But then, what could prepare a man for this?

The stench was beyond appalling in the humid pre-dawn stillness. The *Hougoumont* wallowed in the high seas but there was no breeze, above or below deck. A churning sea below and doldrum winds above. A sailor's nightmare. With nothing to stir the awful mixture of cloying decay and the searing fetor of vomitus which hung about the small group crammed

into the aptly-named “sick” bay, most of the men sardined into the room could only dream of the piquant spray of brine on the breeze.

‘It’ll be light soon, Captain,’ surgeon-superintendent Dr William Smith observed in not quite his usual no-nonsense manner.

‘Aye. We best be getting on then,’ sighed Captain Cozens.

‘Same log entry as last time, Captain? “*Lost at sea*”?’

‘Aye. What choice do we have? If that lot down below gets wind of *this*,’ the Captain waived his arm in the general direction of the pile of intestines on the table, a half-squashed eye glaring balefully back at him for his trouble, ‘we’ll have a mutiny on our hands for sure. You got problems with that Reverend?’

Reverend Bernard DeLaney, one of the few paying passengers on board, took a heavily-scented handkerchief away from his bulbous cauliflower nose just long enough to answer the Captain. ‘To be sure, I’ve got problems. Plenty of ‘em boyo! But I agree with yez too. I’ll likely go to Hell for bein’ a part ’o such sin and that pains me no end... but, then again, I wanna get off his boat alive more!’

‘We’ll be in Fremantle in a day or two anyway,’ the First Mate observed, a touch of desperate bravado in his voice. ‘Given the time between the last two...’ he groped for the right word, ‘...casualties...?’ he said eventually, ‘it’s hardly likely that he’ll strike again before we get there. Is it?’

‘Pray that’s so, Mister Mate!’ the Captain lamented and then seemed to snap out of his negativity a little. ‘Okay lads! Clean this fuckin’ mess up. Sorry, Father,’ he doffed his cap to DeLaney and nodded. Nevertheless, he was all business now that a decision had been made. ‘Toss that poor sod over the side before a soul *down there* even so much as *thinks* about taking a morning shit and sees him like that!’

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