
DEAD MAN'S CHEST

Jamaica, 1690

A LLEWARD BREEZE BLEW *FORTUNE'S DOG* toward the green bay, easily visible on the darkening horizon. There was no boarding party standing along the gunnels and brandishing their weapons, for their goal tonight was not a merchant ship. It was the safety of Port Royal, a British town that welcomed the British pirates.

John Leftum was in his cramped quarters, sorting through a medicine cabinet just plundered from a treasure ship. The riches found on these Spanish galleons had dwindled in recent years, just as their plunder of the American natives had also dwindled. But it was still a worthy prize. Being the ship surgeon, John received one and a quarter shares of the treasure, more than a sailor's but half of the captain's. One of the crew, Old Jacob, had lost a hand in the encounter and so was entitled to a bonus.

As ships go, the *Dog* was a happy one. Will Wesley was a popular captain, elected two years earlier by a vote. But Captain Will had been in a black mood for the past few days, odd behavior for him. He was probably as eager as the crew to reach port and engage in activities forbidden onboard, smoking and gambling and, of course, female companionship.

An hour later, they had careened the pirate ketch on a stretch of beach and were heading into Port Royal, leaving a few guards behind for security. Tomorrow they would begin

the onerous task of scraping the bottom of seaweed and barnacles, to keep *Fortune's Dog* as fast as possible. But tonight would be devoted to celebrating their return.

The crew spread throughout the town, heading to their familiar haunts. The largest group, including the captain, his mate Bart Pyle, and the surgeon, sought out The Red Rooster, a tavern owned by Thomas Rooster, one of the rarest creatures in the Caribbean, a retired pirate.

Rooster met them at the tavern door. "I heard you was landed," he said in a cordial growl. "Welcome home." He ushered them inside, but John noticed he didn't touch the brim of his cap, a traditional salute to a captain, pirate or otherwise. Rooster himself had been a captain and Wesley had been his mate. Rumor had it that there was animosity between them, dating back to the days of high plunder ten years before, but neither man ever spoke of it.

They settled in for a night of drinking and gambling and a meal of fresh roast pig, served up by a slave girl Rooster had bought from a sugar plantation. The rest of the serving was done by Martha, the tavern owner's daughter. Out of fear of Rooster, the pirates kept their hands to themselves. But John and Martha shared doe-eyed glances whenever they could. For over the past few months, the surgeon and Martha had fallen in love.

"I'm heading back to the ship," Captain Will said, as he wiped the pig grease from his chin.

"No, stay," said Bart Pyle as he handed Wesley another tankard of rum. "Tell us stories of the old days when the Spanish gold flowed like wine. Let us poor boys drink your health again."

Will Wesley downed the rum in a single, long draught but refused to stay. "You're the heart of the ship, my lads," he said to the dozen or so men. "I'm certain you'll have much more to talk about if I'm not here."

Rooster walked the captain to the door. They shared a few solemn words. Then with a scowl, the captain strode off, never to be seen alive again.

Old Jacob was in his cups that night, more than the others. A round of grapes had gone through his left hand during the skirmish for the galleon. Surgeon John had sawed it off at the wrist and the stub seemed free of infection, a small miracle. In a few weeks, he would fit it with a claw. Old Jacob seemed to take his misfortune well enough, except when he had too much to drink.

"It's all Wesley's fault," he muttered a few seconds after the captain had left. "We shouldn't be having to fight. Back in the day of Morgan, they feared us. We raised the flag and they knew to surrender or else. You didn't just kill 'em. They tried to resist and you tortured 'em without mercy. Wesley is too kind a soul. And I don't care who knows it."

Bart Pyle nodded. "But he's still a man to be feared. Unless we're willing to vote him away—and you know it would be unwise to have an angry ex-captain onboard—then we've got to abide by his methods. Barkeep?" he asked, rousing Rooster from his stance by the door. "Have I permission to go after a keg of your best ale?"

Rooster nodded and Pyle disappeared into the storeroom to fetch it.

The evening lasted a few more hours, with Pyle and Rooster both making trips for more ale. John was the only one sober enough to point the way back to the cove. In the tavern, he had alternated his ale with water. Fresh drinking water was a treat for him, since on the ship, it spoiled easily. Rum and beer were the liquid mainstays. He felt as though he had not been fully sober in weeks.

John made sure there were no unconscious mates lurking under the tables and then said his good-byes to Martha. She blushed and squeezed his hand, then closed the heavy door on him and the others. John could hear it being bolted from the inside.

For most of the crew, the next morning dawned in a haze. Since the ship was on its side, the crew had camped out under the palms. It took John a while to realize that the captain was

missing. He checked with last night's guards, but they had been drinking from the grog barrel and couldn't recall if Wesley had returned or not.

John gathered a few of the revelers and they wandered back into Port Royal. They divided into groups, with John and Old Jacob returning to the place where they'd last seen their captain. John pounded on the thick tavern door and a minute later heard the bolt slide back. The door opened and there stood Thomas Rooster, his red hair still matted from sleep.

"What do you want?" he asked with a yawn.

John explained about the missing captain. "I'm thinking maybe he came back after we left. Is he here?"

"No." Rooster remained in the doorway, refusing to step aside. "Martha bolted the door last night. The only other door to the outside is in the storeroom and that's always bolted."

By this time, Martha had come down the stairs, clutching her robe at her throat. "Get back to your room," Rooster told his daughter.

She turned around obediently. But something had caught her eye inside the doorway to the storeroom. Martha stepped tentatively toward it. John could hear the lid to a chest creak slowly open. A second later, he heard a scream.

John, Old Jacob, and Rooster ran to the storeroom. On the floor, just inside the door, was a Spanish money chest, a memento from the old days. Seeping out of a bottom corner was a pool of clotting blood. And inside... Inside lay the body of Captain Will Wesley, stabbed through the heart with a small, thin dagger.

"My father didn't kill him," Martha pleaded to her friend. "Last night, after bolting the door, we put the tankards back on the shelf, then went up to our quarters."

John wanted to believe her and Rooster did indeed deny the deed. But no one else could have done it. "Both the front

and storeroom doors were bolted. How could Captain Will have come back without you or your father letting him in?"

"I don't know," said Martha. "Johnny, my love, the governor will try him for murder."

"That won't happen," said John, and it was true. His fellow pirates, under the leadership of Pyle, were even now planning to hang her father without any trial. But this he didn't say.

"The common thought is that Captain Will came back. The two men fought. Rooster put the body in the chest to keep it from your sight until he could dispose of it."

"That's not true. Father did not go down again until you knocked. The stairs creak massively. I would have heard."

"I'll try to fathom what happened," the young surgeon promised.

(1) Who killed Captain Will Wesley? (2) How was it done? (3) What was the motive?

If you've already solved this mystery, check the Solution on p. 132.

To discover additional clues, turn to Gathering Evidence on p. 108.

HISTORICAL NOTES ON THE AGE OF PIRATES

ALMOST AS SOON as men began transporting valuables on the sea, other men went sailing off to rob them. Early pirates plied the Aegean Sea over three thousand years ago, robbing Phoenician traders, raiding unprotected coastal villages, and kidnapping wealthy citizens for ransom.

The Scandinavian Vikings of the ninth century were essentially a tribe of pirates, swooping in on their fast longboats and striking terror into the coastal regions of Europe.

A few centuries later, Islamic pirates began a long tradition of raiding Christian ships in the Mediterranean. Unable to stop them, many countries, including a young United States, paid these Barbary pirates not to attack their vessels. One of

the first actions of the United States Marines was to defeat the pirates at Tripoli in 1805, a battle memorialized in the Marine hymn ("to the shores of Tripoli!").

Soon after the Spanish discovered the riches of the Americas, pirates from other countries began raiding their treasure ships. Some of these pirate crews were actually in the employ of European governments. Called privateers, they were commissioned by their kings to plunder enemy ships. Sir Walter Raleigh was one such crown-approved pirate.

Pirates continued to skirt the boundaries between legal and illegal status, with one ex-pirate, Henry Morgan, becoming Governor of Jamaica, and another, Captain Kidd, being hanged for attacking the wrong ships. The Port Royal of our story was a safe harbor for pirates—until an earthquake destroyed it in 1692; divine retribution, according to some.

The pirates had a code of conduct called the Brotherhood that spelled out their rights, rules of behavior, and punishments; for example, fighting on board ship could result in both parties' being left to die on a deserted island.

Although the pirates' profession was harsh and dangerous, it was often better than their previous one. For many, their careers began as legitimate sailors, suffering under the lash of royal navies. After such a life, the freedom and camaraderie of piracy could be quite appealing.