

THE CAPTAIN

I cannot believe it. My mother has gone and sold me. Sold me — her only child! And to the most notorious, cold-hearted sea captain ever to sail the wild, west coast. What sort of a mother would do such a thing, knowing I will be carried away in a black-painted sailing ship to face untold dangers and probably death a hundred times over on treacherous seas and in exotic ports?

I never imagined something like this could happen in these modern times. After all, it's nearly the twentieth century, and the British Empire outlawed slavery more than seventy years ago. Did Ma somehow miss that? Maybe she did. She is a busy woman.

Ma runs a hotel, all by herself, in Broome, one of the remotest towns in all of the Australian colonies, and maybe even the Empire. Ma is not big, hardly taller than

me, but she can be fierce, and she's scary when she gets angry. I guess she needs to be. More than one unruly crewman from the pearling luggers has been tossed out on his ear. And it is not just the sailors who upset her or behave badly. Faraway Broome seems to attract the scum of the earth, all searching for an easy fortune or escaping from the law.

Ma's hotel sits on a hill overlooking Roebuck Bay. The Smuggler's Curse reads the sign outside, but most people just call it the Curse. From the front verandah of the Curse, you can watch Broome's enormous tides rush in and out over the red mud flats lined with half-drowned mangrove bushes. At low tide the fleet of pearling luggers is stranded in the mud, hundreds of masts all leaning to the same side. Occasionally, a lone crewmember will be scraping a hull, or tramping through the mud carrying equipment.

To the east of us is the fly-infested desert. Its scorching winds blow over our streets most mornings, rattling the tin roofs and sending the temperatures soaring. Westward, as far as the eye can see, the endless blue sea fades into the blue sky, all the way to Africa. Sometimes, when I want to escape Ma and the pub, I take myself down to the very end of the new jetty and sit and watch the water. One time, I saw a fight between a huge shark and a crocodile.

They both fought like demons but eventually just gave up and swam away, badly hurt. It was the most exciting thing I've ever seen.

To the north lies Asia and the exotic Far-East. I have not been there. In fact, I have hardly been anywhere, not even down south to Perth. I hope to one day, but at present, I have to stay in Broome to help out Ma. And go to school, of course, endlessly, day in and day out until I feel my overloaded head is going to burst with sums and spellings.

Ma and I get on reasonably well, most of the time. That is unless I do something she doesn't like, then relations get a bit frosty. Unfortunately, the list of things she doesn't like is extremely long, and lately, has been growing longer. She hates me sleeping in after daybreak, staying hidden, reading when she wants me to go to the Chinese market or run other errands, swimming at Town Beach when I am supposed to be catching fish, or worst of all, not cutting enough firewood for the hotel stove. In spite of her saying I read far too much, she still buys me books, ordering them from Shepherd's Bookshop in Fremantle.

Anyway, I might have been kidding myself to think I was an essential help to Ma, but what did I do that was so bad she would sell me? I cannot believe my life has turned to mud so quickly.

It all just happened. The air hung heavy and humid with the coming rains and Ma and Captain Bowen, skipper of the Black Dragon, were sitting on the verandah of the Curse taking the faint breeze together. I was clearing away glasses and wiping tables when I walked out onto the verandah and in on their conversation.

Captain Bowen had his purse in his hand and was counting out gold sovereigns, placing them one at a time on the table between their deck chairs.

‘That’s it then,’ I heard my mother say. ‘Ten pounds. That is a tidy sum, James. I hope he’s worth it.’

The Captain saw me and scowled. ‘You, boy,’ he announced abruptly. ‘As of tomorrow, you’re crew on the Black Dragon.’

I stood, dumbfounded. Ma had evidently decided she needed the money, and the next thing you know, quicker than a crow can pick the eyes from a dead dingo, I belonged to Captain Black Bowen no less, the most infamous and dangerous man in the colony.

I can hardly breathe just thinking about that moment. Ma is tough, but this takes the cake.

THE BLACK DRAGON

In the early morning light, I stand beside Captain Bowen on the planks of the Broome jetty clutching a brown paper parcel containing my toothbrush, a jar of tooth powder, a few clothes and my three favourite books against my chest. I still cannot believe what my mother has done to me.

I feel as sad as I ever have, and the salt air makes my eyes water a little and my nose run. I look back at Broome in the shadowy dawn, expecting to see ... I don’t know what. Ma to change her mind at the last moment?

A lone dog howls outside the butcher’s shop, echoing my sorrowful plight. In the harbour, a ship’s dinghy eases its way through the pale green water. It is coming to take me away, perhaps forever. Possibly to my agonising

death. Overhead, seagulls cry mournfully, seeming to agree with the miserable dog.

Far out, near where the sea changes from pale green to deep blue, the sleek shape of the Black Dragon, Captain Bowen's rake-masted schooner, waits. For an instant, she looks more like an evil ghost ship than a fully-armed, fighting gaff-rigger. Worryingly, she seems like she has sailed right out of Hell and is headed straight back there, taking me along for the ride.

'She's a looker,' says Mr Cooper, the tobacconist, sitting patiently on an empty ammunition box, fishing. At least, I hope the ammunition box is empty, with him dropping hot ash from his pipe as he is. He is in for a great big surprise if it is full of cartridges. I step back a little, just to be sure. 'I hear she goes like a greased cat out of Hell,' he continues.

'Yes indeed,' agrees the Captain. 'But she's a witch to handle close to the wind. She needs two men on the wheel in a twenty-knot breeze. Still, in full sail, there's not another vessel on the seas that can catch her. Not a one. Leaves those stinking steamers in her wake. And she'll turn on a sixpence. Saved our bacon a few times that has, being able to spin like a top.'

The Captain looks up at the dinghy approaching. 'Ahoy! Put your backs into it, you miserable scabs,' he

calls across the water to the dinghy's crew. 'The tide's on its ebb and if we miss it, so help me, I'll ...' He leaves the threat unsaid, but the four men pulling on the oars lift their stroke rate considerably.

The coxswain lets go the tiller and tosses up a rope to the jetty for the Captain to catch.

'Get aboard, boy,' orders the Captain. 'Quick as you go.' He stands looking at the horizon for a few moments and feeling the wind. 'And don't slip. Fall in and the sharks can have you. With my compliments.'

I look back at him. Does he really mean it? I decide not to chance it, and make my way quickly down the slimy, algae-encrusted ladder, hanging on tight until a crew member grabs my arm and jerks me over the gap and into the dinghy. I half fall in and skin my knee. I want to cry out at the sudden pain, but manage to stop myself. Just. The Captain drops in effortlessly, and the crew push off and head out towards the schooner, the oars dipping quietly in and out of the smooth water.

I look back in case Ma has come down to see me off, but the jetty remains bare. All I can see is poor Mr Copper without any fish. Far off, the dog howls again and, overhead, the squawk of the seagulls fades as we draw further from the land.

'What are you looking so glum about, boy?' growls

Captain Bowen. ‘You should be glad to get away from Broome for a while, flea-bitten excuse for a shanty town that it is. I certainly am. Give me the open seas and a fresh breeze on my face any day. The pearling captains can have the stink, flies and heat, and each other. We’ll be back in a month or so. It’s not like you’ve joined the Royal Navy, away for years at a time. Why we ever put up with that damn nonsense is beyond me. This will be a grand adventure. Make a man of you,’ he adds, implying I am certainly not one now. ‘You might even earn a pound or two.’

I cheer up a little. At least Ma has not sold me as an unpaid skivvy then, but as a real paid worker. A bit like an apprentice boy, maybe. I had just assumed I would be stuck at sea for good, with Ma not knowing if I were alive or dead and eaten by cannibals in far off Tahiti. I have read lots of stories about missionaries being boiled up and feasted upon by hungry islanders. What are the chances I will end up as someone’s lunch?

ON BOARD

We sit in silence with just the low grunt of the men and the quiet splash of the oars. After a few minutes, the Captain speaks again. ‘Why did your mother call you Red, boy? What sort of name is that?’

‘They call you Black, sir,’ I answer without thinking.

The Captain fixes me with a steely gaze that freezes my blood. ‘I earned my name, Black Bowen, the hard way.’ One of the sailors chuckles quietly, and several others nod in agreement.

The Captain doesn’t speak to me again. He stares broodily ahead. I have noticed when he’s visited the Curse that he often seems plagued by dark, dismal contemplations as if demons possessed his soul. And maybe they do. But what do I care if he has dark thoughts. Maybe if he did not have such a guilty conscience he

might have happier ones.

The dark-painted hull of the Black Dragon eventually looms above us. From the bow of the dinghy, I have to leap to the ship's boarding ladder that hangs down the side of the midsection. This far out into Roebuck Bay, the wind has started to pick up and the dinghy tosses about a little. With one slippery misstep, I will be in the drink. Luckily, I manage to catch hold of the thick wet rope and then haul myself up the wooden rungs onto the deck without falling in and getting eaten.

I look around. The Black Dragon is almost ready to sail, the deck bustling with activity. There are about a dozen men in the crew, all busy at their tasks. Up near the bow, a Malay boy squats on the deck. He is dribbling thick, sticky tar from a big black pot onto the decking, filling the spaces between the planks. He seems to have more tar on himself than on the timber. He glances up at me for a moment and then continues with what appears to be an endless and thankless task. He looks as miserable as sin, but then it looks to be a terrible job. I suspect, though, that is not the worst job on the ship. I'm sure someone will be saving that especially for the new ship's boy.

A shadow falls across me. A giant of a man as tall as a door glares down, his eyes almost hidden beneath a black

peaked cap. Brass buttons on his open coat gleam in the early light.

'Well, what do we have here? Some fresh meat for my rope, from the look of him. Shifty, weedy looking character if ever I've seen one. Very shifty. And skinny. By God, he's scrawny. I've seen more meat on a rock.'

I feel myself shrink even smaller. At once, I take off my hat and hold it against my chest. 'I'm Red Read, sir. I'm ... I'm ... to be the new ship's boy,' I stammer, unsettled by the big man looming over me. His eyes are small, and half-closed as if the sun shines too bright, and his skin, brown and weather-beaten like most sailors, looks like leather cut from a horse's saddlebag.

'Ship's boy, eh?' He looks across at another crewman. 'Well then, Mr Cord, we do need a new buoy. Tie a rope around his neck and fling him overboard. We'll see if he floats — just like that buoy over there.' He points to the half-sunk wine barrel that the ship is moored to.

I feel my face turning red, and I wonder if he is serious.

'Very amusing, Bosun Stevenson,' smiles the Captain. 'But he's Mary Read's boy. Drown him, and you'll be feeling the full weight of her wrath before the day's out. You'd be a braver man than me. You can put him to work instead. Not that he looks like he's ever done a stroke of real labour in his life.'

The Bosun shrugs. 'No, not a muscle to be seen, or a callous I'll be betting. Let me see your hands, Master ...' he pauses, trying to remember my name.

'Red, sir.'

'Green, more like. As green as grass,' I hear someone behind me snicker.

My day has started badly and is getting worse by the minute. I wish the deck would just open up and swallow me. Working after school at the pub, I am used to being teased by the customers, but this is different. Everything about the boat is alien. The crew are not complete strangers as I have seen most of them in town, but I do not really know them, and none of them seem to want to know me. I just want to go home.

I nervously hold my palms out for inspection.

Bosun Stevenson nods, apparently unimpressed, then reaches forward, grabs my upper arm, and squeezes it tight, feeling my muscle. Again, he shakes his head in disapproval. 'On a frigate in the old days, we would have made fish food of you, with weedy arms like that. On a pirate ship, they would have sold you to grave robbers for the mortuary doctors to experiment on. How about we do that? Make a profit,' he laughs.

I look down at the deck, fighting off a vision of me being sliced open by a mad, sadistic doctor.

'It's time, Bosun,' says the Captain looking out at the water. 'There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune. Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries. On such a full sea are we now afloat. And we must take the current when it serves, or lose our ventures.' He pauses for a moment. 'My faithful friend, Mr Shakespeare. But now, take us to sea, Bosun.'

I know about William Shakespeare. I like history at school. He was around when Queen Elizabeth was on the throne years ago, so he can't be the Captain's friend, unless the Captain is three hundred years old, and I don't think he is quite that.

'Let's see how strong you really are, boy,' says the Bosun. 'Up the ratlines with you.'

I have no idea what he's talking about and look blankly back at him.

The Bosun rolls his eyes and sighs heavily. 'A bleeding landlubber. The Lord preserve us. I should have known. Right then, listen carefully, boy. These,' he says, pointing at the thick ropes attached to the sails, 'are called sheets. The sheets control the sails. This big one in the middle is the foresail. Those little triangular ones at the bow, the front of the boat, are the jibs, and that big one at the rear is the mainsail.' The mainsail flaps energetically,

cracking like a pistol shot. The wind is picking up and my head is reeling.

‘Facing the front of the boat, starboard is to your right, and port is to your left because if you’re lucky, there’s always a little port left in the bottle. The ratlines are what we tars call the rope steps there by the railing, for landlubbers like you. Now enough. To the top of the mast with you, boy. The crow’s nest, as close to heaven as you can get, then the shortest way down.’ He points to a rope stay running at an angle from the top of the mast back down to the deck.

I don’t fancy that one little bit, but what am I to do? I look up. The crow’s nest seems to reach the clouds. Nervously, I climb onto the side rail and then scramble up the ratlines hand over hand towards the platform. Each step takes me steadily higher, and I am soon sweating with effort and nerves. As I draw close to the top, I can hear Bosun Stevenson below me shouting orders through a speaking trumpet.

As I reach halfway up the mast, the ship suddenly keels over at a sharp angle to starboard as the inner jib sail is hauled in and catches the wind. The canvas stretches tight and powerful. Without warning, the deck is no longer beneath me. I hang precariously over the dark water and white waves from the ship’s bow. The wake

grows smoother as the ship picks up speed. Within a few minutes, the wind increases even more, and because the mast is at such a steep angle, I have trouble holding on. I grip the rope even tighter.

Eventually, the Bosun guides the ship out beyond the protected waters of Roebuck Bay and alters course slightly, and the Black Dragon’s masts come more upright. For just a few seconds, I feel relief. But then the ship begins ploughing headlong into the waves with the mainmast swaying and bucking wildly in time to the water crashing over the bow. My arms are tired from hanging on so tightly, but now, at least, the deck is below me, and not an expanse of shark-infested water. Though, thinking about it, that is probably worse. Terrified, I let go with my left hand and reach out for the rope I am supposed to ride down to the deck. Clutching it as tightly as I possibly can, I quickly let go with my other hand and grab at the stay, but then I’m dangling in the air, with nowhere to put my feet. I now have no choice. I try twisting my foot around the tight rope, but the angle is too steep. I will have to climb down hand over hand, my aching arms carrying my whole weight. If I slide down, the rough hemp will rip the skin from my palms, and I’ll probably drop all the way to the deck anyway. As I hang there, like an over-ripe mango about to fall from a

branch, I wonder if my seafaring career is going to be the shortest in history.

My survival instincts take over. I dare not look down, in fact, I dare not even open my eyes, but somehow I manage to edge my way downwards, hand over hand, my arms and shoulders screaming in pain. My feet finally hit the deck with a thud and I land with a painful bump. I lie on my back, spread-eagled, my heart thumping in my chest and my mouth dry with fear.

I did not have much to eat this morning, but the climb has scared me so much that every morsel comes rushing up from the depths of my stomach with a sudden gush. I turn on my side and vomit up a putrid puddle onto the deck. I feel as miserable and pathetic as can be.

‘He’ll do Captain, at a pinch, God willing,’ laughs Bosun Stevenson. ‘As soon as he learns to stand on his own two feet. Or keep his breakfast down. I’ll toughen him up, so help me — or so help him more likely.’

Several sailors start laughing, which makes it worse. The only sensible thought I have is that at least I am not splattered all over the deck like so many pounds of strawberry jam.

BELOW DECKS

After I’ve cleaned up my own mess, the Bosun sends me below decks with the tar-smeared boy. His name is Teuku Nyak King. It is a traditional Sumatran name, he says, but everyone on board just calls him Teuku, or sometimes Your Majesty, as a bit of a joke.

A smell just like that of the Curse fills my nose and makes me long for home — must, sweat, stale ale and damp timber. The space is the width of the boat, running about half the length and narrow near the bow. Light from a grating in the deck above filters in, casting a checkerboard pattern on the floor at the far end. Canvas hammocks fill the area on each side and a long table, stained and well-worn, runs down the centre. Against the sides of the cabin, wooden chests of all different sizes take up the confined space.