

Blake First Meets The Señora

“May all the malevolent wishes and curses ever known since the beginning of the world, to this hour, light upon you and your pack of Godless sinners. May the malediction of God that fell upon Lucifer and all his fellows, that cast them from the high Heaven to the deep hell, light upon you all, and may the fire and the sword that stopped Adam from the gates of Paradise, stop you from the glory of Heaven. And, may I condemn you and yours perpetually to the deep pits of hell, there to remain in brimstone and sulphur with Lucifer and all his fellows, and your bodies to the gallows of Burrow moor, first to be hanged, then ripped and torn by dogs, swine, and other wild beasts, abominable to all the world in the eyes of the good Lord, Jesus Christ, he who died for our sins, and from whom you and your Puritan heretics have turned your gaze and...”

“Talks a lot, doesn’t he?” Captain Richard Blake leaned against the oak rail of the Spanish ship, *Los Valientes*, an engraved pistol hanging limp from his right hand, smoke still curling softly from the barrel, his left hand resting casually on the silver patterned and welded rapier guard of a steel Toledo sword, hung loosely from his leather belt.

“Aye, they do like to talk, them Spanish papists.” Thomas Speke pushed a wounded soldier to the deck of the ship with the boot of his left foot as he tickled the man’s Adam’s apple with the tip of his blade. “Down with ye, lad. Or you’ll feel more than just a feather’s touch of this steel, I promise ye.”

“For you are all urchin snouted bug bears, hedge born apple johns, stinking puking piss lickers, and full gorged gudegeons!”

“I think he’s getting personal now.” Blake slid his pistol into a wide sash about his waist. The Spanish ship was listing to one side as sea water lapped at the holes in the oak planking where Blake’s round shot had hit hard. Chain shot had torn the ship’s rigging, and now it lay helpless in the cold, uncaring embrace of the Atlantic Ocean. Ignoring the cries of anguish from wounded men littered across the deck, Blake made his way towards the quarter deck to where the small command group stood in a defensive circle. His eyes took time to move from the priest, to the Captain, to the First Mate, and then on to the high born Spanish Lady who stood back from the men.

"Fucking Pirate scum!" shouted the Spanish First Mate, rather less eloquently, but emboldened now by the curses of his Priest. "Villainous clapper toadies! Flap mouthed, fensucked giglets!" He still held a heavy steel cutlass, but showed little enthusiasm for continuing the fight. The ship after all was in danger of sinking in the next few hours.

"May I remind you, Sir, there is a Lady present." Richard indicated the Spanish woman with a casual gesture. "And less of the 'pirate scum' if you please. I will have you know I am not a pirate. I have a letter from my Queen that says so. She even signed it." He smiled and offered the Spanish Lady a formal bow, suitable for days spent at court in London. "And whom do I have the privilege of addressing?"

"I am the Señora Sanchia Amelia Sabina Montoza Gracia Pepita Laquista Consuello Illona Allagante Estaballani Donna Tella Della Rovere of the Castel San Sabillia in the province of Córdoba. But you may call me Señora. Under the circumstances, I suppose I can offer you my surrender, seeing as how you seem to be the only gentleman amongst this pack of rabid protestant dogs."

"May the malediction that suddenly fell upon fair Absolom, riding through the wood against his father, King David, when the branches of a tree knocked him from his horse and hanged him by the hair, fall upon these untrue Englishmen and hang them the same way, that all the world may see." The Spanish Priest had barely paused for breath. "May the malediction that fell upon Nebuchadnezzar's lieutenant, Olifernus, making war and savagery upon true Christian men; the malediction that fell upon Judas, Pilate, Herod, and the Jews that crucified Our Lord; and all the plagues and troubles that fell on the city of Jerusalem therefore, and upon Simon Magus for his treachery, bloody Nero, Ditiis Magcensius, Olibrius, Julianus Apostita and the rest of the cruel tyrants who slew and murdered Christ's holy servants, fall upon you and your filthy band of brigands. May..."

Richard Blake had heard enough of this. With a glance at Thomas Speke, he nodded his head in the direction of the bearded priest.

"May the thunder and lightning which rained down upon Sodom and Gomorra and all the lands surrounding them, and burned them for their vile sins, rain down upon these Englishmen and burn them for their open sins. May the evil and confusion that fell on the Gigantis for their oppression and pride in building... Akk!"

The Priest's monologue suddenly ceased as the huge figure of Thomas Speke suddenly, and without warning, head butted the Priest square in the face. The papist dropped to the deck like a sack of potatoes.

"There. That's better," suggested Richard Blake with a smile. "Now, it would be my great privilege and honour to offer you the courtesy to dine with me this evening in my cabin." He addressed The Captain, First Mate and the Señora Sanchia, but most especially the Señora Sanchia. "Formal dress of course, so you may wish to change before leaving your sinking vessel. I believe it will remain sea worthy until dusk." Blake sniffed under the arm pit of his baggy white shirt, the thongs of which were loose almost to his waist. "To my great despair even I require fresh linen. Shall we say drinks served in an hour? Dinner an hour after that? My cook is French, as are the wines. So I don't think you'll be disappointed."

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"... And then, and then I said to the French Ambassador, but my dear Sir, you don't seem to understand. She's actually a boy!" Richard and Thomas laughed at Richard's oft quoted anecdote. They had finished a rather fine chicken, basted in herbs and spices the Breton way, and were now enjoying another bottle of a very fine Burgundy from the ship's stock. Around the table the Spanish prisoners glared at the English privateers with varying degrees of disdain. "But get this, the Frenchman simply shrugged his shoulders, disengaged, buttoned up his breaches, looking slightly disappointed, and said, 'well, no one's perfect.' No one's perfect!" The Englishman laughed again and thumped the dining table with mirth. "Dear God, but you have to hand it to the French Aristos. They really don't care..."

"I have had about enough of this!" growled Don Sebastian, the Spanish Captain. "Your vulgar and ribald tales of the disgusting depravities of your court in London are not fit conversation for the table!"

"Are they not?" Richard leaned forward, a look of concern etched across his handsome face. "Ah, but you see, therein you have us, Sir. We are but Godless heretics, content to turn our gaze away from the glory of Rome. Standards in other areas are bound to slip as a consequence."

The table was interrupted by the sudden appearance of one of Captain Blake's men.

"Your pardon, Cap'n, but we thought you might care for this bottle of Amontillado at the table." The seaman placed a prized and expensive bottle close to Blake's right hand.

"Well now," he held the bottle by its base and turned it round to study it closely by candle light. "A fine bottle indeed. I think our table will indeed benefit from such a vintage."

"That belongs to the King of Spain!" roared Don Sebastian. "Only thirteen such bottles remain. It is not to be drunk at your table!"

"Thirteen, you say? An unlucky number, or so I sometimes hear from sailors who frequent the flesh pots of London. Why then, we surely do the King of Spain a favour by whittling the number down to a more manageable twelve." Blake picked up a heavy hilted dagger and chopped away the wax seal.

"Drink, beautiful Lady and noble Sirs. Drink to the generosity of the King of Spain, may his fine beard grow ever more pointed still!" The rare Amontillado was slopped carelessly into everyone's goblets. As soon as his was filled, Thomas picked it up and drank generously.

"And what of us, Sir?" The Señora spoke up with the question that had been foremost in her mind since the Spanish ship had finally slid beneath the waves. "What will be our fate after this dinner?"

Blake lowered his cup to the table and leaned forward again, his elbows now resting on the table as it rolled to the left and right in time to the rhythm of his ship. He wore fresh linen and had washed in a barrel of rain water before dinner. Gold earrings dangled from each ear, and his ruff was starched and pristine.

"I have no quarrel with you as individuals. Rest assured, you have nothing to fear. At our next port in friendly or neutral waters you will be given the opportunity to disembark and experience the heady adventure of foreign climes. I won't leave you destitute. A small purse will furnish you with the means to find your way back to Spain in reasonable comfort."

"You could take us to a port in Spain."

“Well yes, but that would be incredibly stupid of me. I am not in the habit of placing my head in a bear trap. Still, think of the fine shopping you can indulge in at the Port of Amsterdam. I’m sure it has some excellent shoe shops.” Blake winked before he raised the cup of Amontillado to his lips.