

(Old Vivat Regina - Session 1)

Richard Blake's memory of events, partially complete.

Part 1

"A bottle of wine! Make it the finest! Make it a cup for a sea dog's thirst!"

Everyone was in agreement that it made no sense at all. How and why the Silver Eel tavern in Bristol was able to serve some of the finest wines in England was a topic of considerable curiosity amongst men ranging from the highest to the lowest families in Gloriana's realm. For the wines were truly superb. Served in old Spanish bottles (surely some sort of elaborate forgery, for how could the Silver Eel actually possess genuine vintages so rare that only the cellars of the great houses of Spain might rival them) stopped with heavy wax seals, the wines were the talking point of artisans and gentlemen alike. Why, some even dared to suggest that a Gentleman of good breeding would be served lesser wines in Hampton Court, and such a thought was dangerously close to treason. Could the Queen of England actually be drinking inferior wines to those now available in a small, dingy tavern close to the Bristol docks, hidden as it was between the closely packed buildings on Dim Lane, halfway between Cheap Street and Carter Street and backed by Bones Alley? Surely not.

Some regular drinkers at the Eel might perhaps note that the consignment of Spanish wines had been acquired by the tavern the day after the esteemed English Privateer, Richard Blake, had returned to Bristol from a number of months at sea, many of which it was rumoured had been spent in Spanish waters. Coincidence it seems has a way of inspiring rumours and theories that may or may not be true.

But true it was that Blake had returned to his home port where he kept a couple of rented rooms to the rear of the Eel for the brief periods away from the ocean brine. There by the log fire, seated in his favourite chair, the Captain would hold court with the other patrons, trading ribald jokes and stories as he quaffed good English ale. And on occasion he would be joined by a darkly attired nobleman – his patron of sorts, Sir Alistair.

"You remain in good health, Blake," said the serious faced man as he took a seat opposite his protégé. His ruff was immaculate and stiff with starch.

"And good spirits, Sir Alistair. A life at sea enriches the soul I believe. Can I buy you dinner? There's some hearty mutton on the menu tonight and the leeks are shipped in from the renowned Welsh leek fields of Cardiff. No finer leek can be had for hundreds of miles it is said."

"I shall eat later." Sir Alistair had frequented the Eel enough times to know that the menu was adequate if hardly remarkable. Besides which, his body seemed to require little in the way of sustenance in order to operate at peak efficiency. "But I shall try one of your plundered Spanish wines while I'm here."

Blake raised an eyebrow. "Plundered wines?"

"Yes." Sir Alistair was frugal in his conversation as ever. "The ones you should by rights have offered to her Majesty first, but be that as it may it's not why I'm here."

Blake signalled the owner of the Eel and tapped a wine goblet by way of order. The owner – a heavy set man - an ex sailor himself whose father had once served under the renowned explorer, Sebastian Cabot, while Cabot was employed in the service of the English crown, selected one of the choice bottles and broke the wax seal with a hook bladed knife as he stood by the side of the table. A small portion of the rich, velvet wine was poured into Sir Alistair's cup. Silence reigned as the spymaster raised the cup to his lips, tasted the vintage and, after a moment's thought, nodded his approval.

"Lord Cecil would have your head if he knew you'd disposed of wine this good in the cutthroat dives of Bristol." Sir Alistair raised the cup for it to be filled properly. "Your sense of humour will be your undoing one day, Blake, mark my words."

"Surely not while I enjoy the patronage of such a fine man as yourself, my Lord?" Blake winked and joined Sir Alistair in tasting the wine. "But you have to hand it to the Spanish Dons. They know how to press a grape or two."

"They do. But listen now, Blake, for I have a task in hand. And frankly I need someone such as yourself who has proved he has something closely resembling a brain." Sir Alistair wiped his beard with the fingers of his right hand before he produced a folded letter marked with the privy seal. He slid the document across the driest portion of the table. "This despatch is for the hand of the Governor of the Isle of Man. It comes from Lord Cecil himself, and I need you to deliver it to the Isle with all due haste, for the contents are important. I assume you have no current commitments that outweigh ones to the Crown." It was a statement not a question.

"The Kestrel is always ready to serve the will of the Queen. Long may she reign and prosper!"

"Good. Then you can leave on the morning tide." Sir Alistair paused to finish the cup. "I understand you have a Frenchman with you at the moment?"

"Jules de Plessy. Ex-Cardinal's Guard I believe. An acquaintance of my surgeon, Kerr Avon. They discuss philosophy, medicine and astronomy from time to time."

"A Catholic?"

"I'm not sure, but no, I don't think so. There was some scandal perhaps... in any event, he fled his estates in France."

"Hmm. Well, the continent is constantly in turmoil over matters of scholarly interpretation of some passage or other. I wish you a safe journey, and I'll speak to you when you get back."

Part Two

"In the port of Amsterdam, where the sailors all meet, there's a sailor who eats, only fish heads and tails, and he'll show you his teeth, that have rotted too soon, that can haul up the sails, that can swallow the moon..." The grizzled old sailor with an accordion in his lap sat on the side of the harbour wall as seagulls circled in the sky, dipping and diving in time to the ragged tune that creaked and croaked and wheezed its way out from his battered instrument. Prematurely grey stubble speckled his chin as he sang his mournful refrain to the delights awaiting a seafaring man in Protestant ports far from England. "And he yells to the cook, with his arms open wide, 'hey,

bring me more fish, throw it down by my side!' And he wants so to belch, but he's too full to try, so he stands up and laughs, and he zips up his fly..."

The Kestrel had sailed for a day and a night and had reached the port of Castletown on the Isle of Man with no more trouble than having to tack the sails twice against temperamental winds. Early in the morning a sail had been observed far off on the horizon, belonging to a ship that could perhaps have been tailing the Kestrel. It flew no visible flag, which in itself aroused a degree of suspicion in Captain Blake's enquiring mind.

Situated close to the coast of Ireland, the Isle of Man shared many of the myths and legends pertaining to the emerald isle. In Manx mythology, the island was ruled by Manannán mac Lir, a Celtic sea God, who would draw his misty cloak around the island to protect it from invaders and who lent it a corruption of his name. Other stories spoke of mythical creatures and characters including the Buggane, a malevolent spirit who according to legend blew the roof off St Trinian's Church in a fit of rage; the Fenodyree; the Glashtyn; and the Moddey Dhoo, a ghostly black dog who wandered the walls and corridors of Peel Castle. The isle was also said to be home to fairies, known locally as the little folk or themselves, or alternately Mi'raj and the Arkan Sonney.

A mere 32 miles long and but 14 miles wide at best, the Isle was not, by any stretch of the imagination, a major piece of geography and yet it was English and therefore warranted a small garrison and provincial government.

"In the port of Amsterdam, you can see sailors dance, paunches bursting their pants, grinding women to porch. They've forgotten the tune, that their whiskey voice croaked, splitting the night, with the roar of their jokes. And they turn and they dance, and they laugh and they lust, till the rancid sound of the accordion bursts! And then out of the night, with their pride in their pants, and the sluts that they tow, underneath the street lamps..."

"Protestant songs do seem to lack some of the romantic beauty of French ones," mused Jules de Plessy as he stepped from the ship's boat onto the harbour quay and threw the bedraggled sailor a small farthing before pressing a pomander filled with orange peel and spiced scents to his nose. "You English seem obsessed with sordid subject matters."

"We're a sordid, wretched people. Didn't you know?" replied Richard with a smile. "It's all the boiled beef we eat. Turns our minds to matters of pox ridden sex in foreign ports."

"Fastyr mie!" cried the pot bellied harbour master as he approached Richard and Jules.

"I'm sorry?" Blake had no idea what the man had just said.

"Good afternoon! And welcome to Castletown. Would you be the Captain of yonder ship." He pointed towards the Kestrel that Richard had cautiously anchored outside the inner harbour, not wishing to risk being trapped between the harbour walls should circumstances dictate a swift departure was in order. Many years of ambiguous activities had prompted him towards caution in most things.

"I would indeed. The ship is the Kestrel and it dances across the waves like an especially nimble dolphin. My name is Captain Richard Blake, and this is the Comte Jules de Plessy. Of the mighty walled city of Plessy," he added by way of an explanation, in case the harbour master didn't understand French titles.

"Plessy!"

"The very same." Blake watched the fat man dip and bow low, automatically ingratiating himself in the presence of a noble. "You're familiar with the place?" Blake certainly wasn't. It could be a small village for all he knew.

"Uh, no..."

"Thought not." Blake secured the small ship's boat to an iron ring on the wall of the jetty. "We come bearing a letter from the Queen's Court in London to be delivered to the Governor himself. I believe his name is Thomas Etheridge."

"You are well informed, Captain Blake, for that is indeed his name."

"Excellent. I can see matters progressing in a most satisfactory and resolute manner. Already we have established perfect agreement on simple but important principles such as the name of the Governor to whom the letter must be delivered. So then, be good enough now to provide the customary fine brandy that is required upon arrival of a noble from Plessy, and then while we savour the fine liquor, send forth fast horses and direct us to the Governor's house!"

"Fine brandy..." the Harbour Master had a look of confusion upon his face.

"But of course! You are familiar with the traditional form of greeting when in the presence of a Gentleman of Plessy? Be quick with the proffered cups and we shall overlook the fact that they weren't already to hand as we moored our boat. You're obviously a busy man, and in fairness to you, you didn't know one of the most important men of France was due to arrive today."

Having a posh Frenchman on board ship had its advantages, mused Captain Richard Blake as he watched the worried harbour master hurry to procure expensive brandy and horses for the short trip to the Governor's fort. It would have been a mere five to ten minute walk at best, but appearances were of course very important in the grand scheme of things.

Part Three

"I put my hand, all on her knee. She says to me, do you want to see? I put my hand, all on her breast. She says do you, want to be kissed? I put my hand, all on her thigh. She says to me, do you want to try? I put my hand, all on her belly. She says to me, do you want to fill 'ee? Gently, gently, Johnny. Oh gently, gently, Johnny. Johnny, my jigaloo..."

Blake tapped his fingers slowly in time to the gentle rhythm of the song as he nursed a cup of rough tasting red wine in a dimly lit alcove wreathed in dry smoke emerging from the nearby fireplace. He sat with Jules de Plessy in the common room of the Mermaid tavern, pondering the curious turn of events earlier in the day when they had together presented themselves at the Governor's keep.

"I'm sorry? I may have misheard you..." Richard had said to the smiling and slightly too friendly figure of John Cobb, assistant procurator to the Governor of the Isle of Man as he had met them both in the inner Keep of the castle. Several well armed men loitered in the courtyard, regarding the strangers with emotionless detachment.

"I am sorry if my words weren't completely clear." John Cobb was polite but very firm. "The Governor is not a well man. He rests in his residence, eating but two bowls of thin chicken broth a

day while a malignant fever does its worst. Under the circumstances he is not well enough to receive visitors. I would of course be only too happy to oblige by taking the letter you bear and later on ensure it reaches the Governor's hand personally."

"Yes, now that's precisely the sort of thing I thought I had misheard." Richard faced John Cobb, smiling in the same mask-like manner, while Jules de Plessy gazed with tepid disdain at the poor state of the Keep's outer wall. "Perhaps I hadn't made myself clear. Mr Cobb, was it?"

The man nodded with another broad smile. "John Cobb, always at your service."

"Indeed. Well, the thing is, the letter I carry comes from the Court in London, from the hand of Lord Cecil himself. So in other words, I'm quite literally here on the Queen's business. With all due respect Mr Cobb, you don't outrank Lord Cecil. And Lord Cecil was really very explicit in what he wanted done. The letter is to reach the Governor personally."

"And so it will. But he is not receiving visitors at the moment. The fever you understand? How it ravages his body. Peace and quiet and lots of rest is always the best medicine in these circumstances."

"No, Mr Cobb, I don't understand. This is the Queen's business. I rather think the Governor can find the will to receive a visitor representing the Queen of England. I have no idea of the contents of this letter, but the words 'with all due haste' were bandied about with serious intent, so for all I know there's a Spanish fleet sailing towards the west coast of England, and you only have a few hours to prepare a defence. Under the circumstances I think you're taking a serious gamble in not allowing me to deliver the communication immediately."

"And the Governor will receive the letter. I shall be only too happy to convey it to him personally." Again the smile as Mr Cobb stood there, pleasantries dripping like honey from his lips.

"I have been charged to deliver the letter to the Governor. Not to anyone else. The terms of my duty were very specific."

"But alas the Governor is ill and cannot be disturbed. Such matters perplex even the most stringent and precise instructions. All is mutable in the great scheme of things. I am sure Lord Cecil would understand."

"And I'm sure he wouldn't." A pause. "You're really not going to let me see the Governor, are you?"

"But there's no need, Captain Blake!" Another soft smile. "I can deliver the letter personally. You need trouble yourself no further."

A cough and the men turned to see the well dressed figure of the Viscomte de Plessy interrupting their exchange of words with a perplexed expression. "Perhaps you can offer us lodging in the Governor's house and later when perhaps the Governor is awake we might perhaps petition again to speak to him?"

"Alas, we have some renovation work in the Governor's house at the moment and sadly cannot offer any hospitality in the keep. I can however recommend a superb tavern close to the harbour walls – the Mermaid by name. Live music and fine ales await weary travellers such as yourselves."

"Renovations you say?" Blake gazed at the Governor's house which stood close by, seemingly devoid of any sign of scaffolding or workmen. Several surly men at arms however loitered in the vicinity, watching Blake and de Plessy with cold, hooded eyes.

"Indeed. A slack period this morning, but the place will be bustling with paint pots and lump hammers very soon." John Cobb spread his hands as if to say, 'workmen – always taking unexpected ale breaks.'

"I see." Blake grinned at Cobb and then at the half dozen armed men. "Well, the Mermaid sounds like an excellent place. Live music and ale you say? A splendid combination." He turned to face de Plessy and added, "I think a pot roast and a flagon or two after our sea voyage is called for now. Mr Cobb is obviously a busy man and we should let him see to his business."

"You're welcome to sail your ship into our inner walled harbour, Captain Blake. You'll find it so much more secure than the outer harbour exposed to the Irish Sea."

"A generous suggestion that I shall certainly consider at leisure over a cup of wine." Blake bowed slightly and stepped back towards the double portcullis guarded gate, with de Plessy following close by. "Until next time, Mr Cobb. Until next time."

Part Four

The bedroom door crashed open under the sudden onslaught of four burly ruffians clad in pointed beards, dark cloaks and even darker ruffs. With a violent splintering of wood, the simple latch lock and one of the door hinges broke free simultaneously. Loud voices in clipped Spanish added to the commotion as the assassins crowded in through the narrow doorway, brandishing swords and knives with grievous bodily harm uppermost in their minds.

Captain Richard Blake had anticipated something like this happening and had gone to sleep with a loaded and primed flintlock pistol on either side of his bed, for while Godly men trusted in the protection of a crucifix nailed to the wall, Richard preferred to rely on black powder and the preventative medicine of a .65 calibre smooth bore.

"There he is! Kill him quickly!" screamed a man in Spanish. "Death to the English man! Death! Death! Death!"

Blake gripped both pistols and pointed them in the direction of the doorway. The range was practically point blank and the ruffians had been good enough to pack themselves into a narrow funnel. Most obliging of them, mused Blake as he fired. The loud bangs prompted screams as two men dropped to the floor, conveniently improving the odds in Blake's favour. The pistols were quickly discarded in favour of a Toledo steel blade that by chance had also been placed within careful arm's reach of the right hand side of the bed. As the assassins recoiled in confusion from the fusillade, Blake leapt from the bed and tore his sword free of its leather sheath. It would take a few moments yet to accustom his eyes to the room, but in the meantime Blake pounced and stabbed quickly at the flurry of bodies pushing through the doorway. He felt his blade slip inside something soft and with a wry smile he gave it a sharp twist before sliding it out. The resulting scream suggested the odds were improving even further. Unfortunately though one of the two men who had been shot was now regaining his feet.

A thundering crash of timbered doors echoed down the hallway as the outraged form of the Viscomte de Plessy emerged to discern what manner of brazen oafs were disturbing his rest. With

little patience for the blundering footsteps of cutthroats in the night, he drew his own blade and engaged the men from the rear. While a Gentleman assailant might warrant a cheerful 'en-garde!' these poltroons were best despatched in a more practical and resolute manner.

De Plessy sliced a few nimble strokes in the body of one of the Spanish men and stepped back to allow the wretch to claim the rough wooden floorboards as his own. A quick stamp on the man's sword hand rendered further combat on his part impractical.

"After such a rough and frankly stringy piece of mutton pot roast, I thought to sleep off the horror of the meal," remarked de Plessy to Blake. "Have the English never heard of seasoning? And now this subsequent noise and uproar is quite unwelcome."

"My sincere apologies," replied Blake as he parried a clumsy Spanish sword thrust. "I did pin a note on my door instructing black clad cut throats to kill me quietly in my sleep, but alas they had to break the door down first."

"A disagreeable situation, but probably not your fault," agreed de Plessy as he kicked the legs out from under the man trading sword cuts with Blake. "You will perhaps require one Spaniard for questioning?"

"That would be useful, yes," said Blake as he pressed the point of his sword to the man's throat.

"Mercy!" cried the man as he discarded his weapon.

"Who are you? And what are you doing on the Isle of Man?" it had occurred to Blake in between sword thrusts that the presence of four Spanish men at arms on English territory was at best an unusual state of affairs. The recent meeting with John Cobb now seemed even more sinister in light of this attack.

"You were asking awkward questions at the keep. We were told to kill you."

"Hmm. By chance would I be correct in thinking the thuggish men at arms who watched our every move at the keep are all Spaniards such as you and your friends here?"

"Yes." The man twitched as he felt Blake's sword point tickle his Adam's Apple.

"So the Keep is in Spanish hands? Where then is the Governor and his men?"

"The Governor is our prisoner. His men, under the command of Captain William Gore, were ordered north by John Cobb under the excuse of a training march. The keep was swiftly occupied in their absence, and now we await troop ships from Spain to reinforce our position. A beacon will be lit to guide them into the harbour. The Isle of Man is to be a beachhead for Spanish foreign policy."

"It seems," said Blake as he turned to face de Plessy, "that we have by chance stumbled across skulduggery of the very worst kind. Still, we seem to have caught the Spaniards off guard at a critical point in their plans. Let us make haste back to the Kestrel. We'll sail along the coast, locate Captain Gore and his men and maybe, just maybe, we can retake the keep before these troop ships arrive to overrun the isle."

"It seems they really do wish to kill us." Richard Blake sat with his back to a line of barrels containing salted fish heads and tails as he rammed home powder and shot into his pistols. He was referring of course to a second gang of cutthroats who lurked with malice aforethought by the side of the harbour where Blake's small boat was moored, awaiting the early morning tide. The fish barrels acted as a convenient screen concealing the heroes from the line of sight of their foes. In the far distance, safely anchored in the outer harbour where murderous Spaniards could not trap it between conveniently sited gun emplacements, the silhouette of the Kestrel waited patiently for the return of its Captain.

"A disagreeable race, the Spanish," mused De Plessy as he trained an expensive spy glass on the clutch of rogues who carried swords of obviously Spanish craftsmanship. As Blake watched, the Frenchman rotated the screw of the optical tube slightly to enhance its focus in the dappled moonlight. "But their steel is good."

"Very good." Richard blew some loose powder from the cuffs of his shirt. "I counted six men just now. Would you agree?"

"Six it is. One of rank and prestige, the others of middling births and consequently pig-like sloping brows. No offence, Captain Blake."

"None taken, my Lord. We cannot all be born in cradles hand spun from gold thread." He grinned as he carefully placed his loaded weapons on the ground. "I suppose you'll wish to duel the officer?"

"He would probably deem it an insult if I chose the men at arms instead."

"Of course. Well then, I suppose I shall engage the five soldiers while you..."

"Will five be an inconvenience, Captain?" De Plessy folded his spy glass and returned it to his coat pocket. "If you feel the odds..."

"I foresee little in the way of inconvenience, and an Englishman often sneers at the prospect of poor odds. My pistols should drop two of the rogues as we close, and then their own numbers will work against them."

"An interesting phrase, Captain. I've often heard men say that very same thing, though I have never understood how exactly the advantage of superior numbers in a battle are supposed to work against you?"

Blake rubbed his chin. "Nor I, but if it wasn't true then surely men of learning such as ourselves wouldn't say it?"

"Very true. So then, shall we?"

The two men sprang to their feet and ran quickly towards the soldiers guarding the quay side. They managed to cover half the distance before they were spotted and the alarm raised. Blake wasted no time in discharging his two pistols on the run as soon as it became clear that stealth was no longer an option. As he charged through the billowing plumes of smoke he was disappointed to see that both of his shots had missed. "A damnably inconvenient time for accuracy to desert me," mused Blake as he threw the pistols away and drew his Toledo sword.

"Surrender and your life will be spared!" cried the first of the Spanish soldiers, seconds before Blake crashed into him, bowled him over and stabbed him deep in the chest.

"My thanks for such a generous warning," Blake span round, pulling his sword free and engaged the second closest man. "Every small advantage helps!" De Plessy had reached the Spanish Captain and as Blake danced around his second opponent, the Frenchman prepared to duel the Spanish officer in a flurry of finely schooled thrusts and ripostes. De Plessy seemed to be conducting a lesson in duelling finesse as he and the Spanish Captain exchanged complex sword craft manoeuvres, conducting a fine example of Balestra footwork, while Blake, rather more practically minded when fighting at close quarters in semi-darkness, proceeded to kick, punch with the hilt, and cut his way through the second, third, and indeed fourth men at arms in rapid succession.

"A little more haste is called for, perhaps, my Lord?" Blake slashed the edge of his blade across another Spaniard's face and, while the man reeled backwards, stunned by the blow, Blake stabbed him through the gut.

"An impressive combination of Passata-sotto combined with a superb recovery into Croisé, monsieur." De Plessy tipped a short nod of respect to the Spaniard as, ignoring Blake's suggestion that he finish the duel sooner rather than later, he parried the Croisé and turned it with a compound riposte. The Spaniard was breathing heavily as he fought De Plessy back a few steps only to lose the gained ground mere seconds later. "I am considering attempting an Appel, followed by a swift Coulé and a Trompement, Captain Blake, but I fear the combination may prove a little gauche."

Blake nodded and, as De Plessy pondered his options, Blake stepped behind the Spanish Captain and simply stabbed him in the back.

"Captain Blake!" De Plessy looked rather annoyed.

"Sorry about that. I got bored."

Part Six

The grey-bearded Captain William Gore of the island Guard belched a second time as he regarded the uneaten half of his plucked strawberry basted pheasant stuffed with honey roasted hog. It sat congealing in a rum and mustard gravy.

"Mon Dieu!" exclaimed De Plessy in amazement. "That you English can stuff a whole hog into a single..."

"And just who did you say you were again?" interrupted Captain Gore. A painted doxy sat on his knee with her ample and pendulous melons on display, enticingly revealed by a low-cut linen and lace bodice, her waist throttled tight by a crippling corset. With a soiled napkin she wiped away a little of the rich gravy that dribbled down Captain Gore's chin and then cooed something into his ear which prompted him to slap her rump. "Saucy minx!" he remarked with a none the less happy smile.

"The Comte De Plessy. We are here on a matter of grave urgency." They had sailed at remarkable speed, considering the Kestrel had been required to tack into the prevailing winds, to reach the northern port on the Isle of Man where the English garrison was conducting its 'wargames'. "I suspect you are largely unaware of the vile infamy that has occurred in your absence from the Port of Castletown? I regret to inform you that the Governor is currently a prisoner and the keep has been infested by Spanish soldiers disguised as your men"

"Are you... *French*?" William Gore squinted at the lace clad man and his very ostentatious triple-tiered hat. De Plessy held an orange scented pomander to his nose with a distinctly limp wristed gesture.

"I am. What of it?"

"I hate the fucking French. Garlic sniffing, chicken molesting, cock sucking swamp donkeys who dress like cheap tarts infested with syphilis and gonorrhea and..."

"If I may perhaps explain..." Captain Blake placed himself between Captain Gore and De Plessy before the day might possibly turn ugly. "My name is Captain Richard Blake, English to a tee, and as cocksure a swashbuckling, knee slapping privateer sea dog as you're ever likely to find on the high seas which, by definition, are of course all English. I'm as reassuringly English as boiled mutton and warm ale. What De Plessy says is true. Your garrison has fallen into Spanish hands and even now your Governor is held a prisoner in the confines of his own house, no doubt being force fed a diet of chorizo sausages and leeks."

Captain Gore's brows furrowed. "Leeks aren't Spanish."

"I never said they were. How many men do you command here, Captain Gore?"

"One hundred and thirty five, though not all are able bodied at any one time. Less than ninety can probably fight at a pinch."

"Then, Captain William Gore, the time has come for you to take up arms in the name of good Queen Bess and perform the single act of heroism that your life has until now been preparing you for. A Spanish fleet is on its way to the Isle of Man and intends to reinforce the port. There is no time to sail to the mainland with news of this blackguard invasion force. We must deal with the Spanish as best we can. Tell me - do you love your country?"

Gore squinted, not used to this kind of speech. "Well..."

"Excellent!" Blake clapped him on the shoulder. "Think not of the peril of assaulting a fortified position surrounded by a shit filled ditch, its walls bristling with cannon and angry Spaniards armed with sharp hook bills, but rather of the glory and privilege that will be showered upon you afterwards in the court of London." Blake paused to pour himself a flagon of ale. Sailing against the wind was thirsty work after all. "So then - to arms! Call out your men! There is no time to waste. The Kestrel will convey an advance force of your best men to seize the harbour while you march the rest of your garrison across the island to Castletown where we shall liberate the Keep from the Spanish. This is the day that men will speak of in villages and towns across the land for years to come. Were you there, they will say, that fateful day, when Captain William Gore stood firm and said to the Spanish - not one step further shall you take!"

"Well, well, if it isn't our old friend the suspicious looking ship that loiters some distance from the coast and doesn't fly a flag. If I'm not very much mistaken, I think I can almost smell the chorizo sausages and paella from here." Blake snapped his optical spy glass shut and regarded the distant shape as it lay at anchor, a mile outside the usual shipping lanes. He stood on the foredeck of the Kestrel with the chill salt wind in his hair.

"There is no evidence it is a Spanish ship," remarked Jules De Plessy as he too snapped shut his far superior optical device. "The lack of a flag is circumstantial evidence at best."

"True enough, but since we now know that a Spanish troop ship is expected at Castletown, the presence of an obviously armed vessel such as that one that has no business to be skulking around in English waters is more than just a little convenient."

"I suppose you could draw alongside, hail the vessel, speak to the Captain, and ascertain his nationality?"

"An admirable suggestion in many practical ways, my Lord. But if it does prove hostile, it puts the Kestrel at a crucial disadvantage. On reflection I prefer plan B."

"Which is?" De Plessy wasn't aware there was a plan B.

"I maneuver the Kestrel to the enemy's vulnerable rear and disable it with some excellent round shot. If I turn out to be wrong, well, I can always run up a Spanish flag. I think I still have a few in my cabin..." Blake rubbed his bearded chin thoughtfully. "So then, I think we've allowed ourselves to be buffeted by the fickle hand of fate long enough. Now that I have good solid English oak under foot I think the conditions have shifted in my favour." Blake sprang into action, calling down to his crew: "Ready about, lads!" Several men looked up and, drilled to perfection, ran towards where the sheet lines were secured as the helmsman spat into the palms of his hands and gripped the wheel.

"Lee-ho!" cried Blake as he watched the helmsman push the tiller to the leeward side of the boat. The bow of the Kestrel came quickly up and turned through the eye of the wind as several men began to adjust the sheets and haul them in, setting them properly for the new point of sail. Now the ship cut quickly through the water, aiming directly at the stern of the Spanish vessel in the far distance. The maneuver had been executed with such speed and precision that the Kestrel was locked on course and closing before the enemy vessel had time to react and position itself port side where its cannon could fire efficiently. Recognising the imminent danger he was in, the opposing Captain began hauling up the anchor and unfurling his sails, hoping to run before Blake closed sufficiently to fire with his lighter guns. It was a race to see whether Blake could get close enough before the larger ship was capable of flight, and perhaps a turning circle that would in time allow him to fight back if Blake insisted on a reckless pursuit.

But what the Kestrel lacked in heavy guns it more than made up for in speed. Its bow cut through the sea with the grace and agility of a shark fin. Blake had taken up position beside one of his cannon and watched as two men rammed home the powder and round shot.

"Nice and steady, Mr Preston!" he called out. "Our fish isn't getting away, no matter how much he may wriggle." And wriggle the mystery vessel was most certainly doing. With sails down the ship was moving off, tacking sideways to try and turn as she ran, but Blake simply turned at an equal angle, and minute by minute closed the gap between them both.

“Good seamanship is all about positioning yourself, my Lord,” explained Blake to De Plessy as he lit a long taper. “There’s precious little aiming when it comes to ranged cannon fire. It’s principally a case of getting in close and positioning your ship to fire a broadside on an enemy ship that isn’t in a position to fire back with equal force.”

“It may not be a Spanish ship...” pointed out De Plessy again.

“Then the Dutchman or Frenchman ahead of us will have learned a valuable lesson today to always fly his national flag when sailing in English waters.” Blake stroked the cold iron of the gun muzzle. “’tis a dangerous life on the ocean waves, my Lord, especially if you choose to run from Captain Richard Blake when he’s in a hunting mood.”

Five more minutes passed as the Kestrel closed the gap. Then in the fifth minute Blake gave further orders and his vessel tacked slightly to port side, bringing the side of his vessel and guns to bear on the stern of his target. The range was close and now it was a case of firing at an oblique angle on the retreating ship and trusting that his guns would deal sufficient damage before his prey escaped out of range.

Several broadsides pounded out as smoke stained men cleared and reloaded the guns under Blake’s well rehearsed drill. After the first two broadsides the smoke was so thick that Blake was giving directions blind, judging where the enemy vessel would be based on wind speed, water resistance and the target’s turning angle. After the fourth round of fire he guessed there wouldn’t be any point in a fifth broadside. Either the ship had escaped, or it would be crippled enough for the Kestrel to close again.

Anxious minutes passed while Blake waited for the smoke to clear. And then he saw what he had hoped for – shattered masts and debris scattered across the deck of the other vessel. The Spaniard, or whoever he might be, was going nowhere.

Part Eight

Thump. Thump.

“I think...”

Thump. Thump.

“Actually, I really think...”

Thump. Thump.

“Preston! Enough! The man is surely dead by now!”

Preston looked up from where he was steadily and rhythmically pounding a Spaniard’s unhelmeted face into the stone harbour wall with the strength he usually reserved for driving stakes into the ground with a single blow of a lump hammer. “Cap’n?” The burly sailor wrinkled his sloping brow and released the body that fell with a wet slap, face first, onto the cobbled walkway. “I just thought it was best to be certain.”

"He hasn't got a face any more, Preston."

"I hadn't really noticed, Cap'n. Pardon my enthusiasm." The man's huge mallet like hands resembled those of a mountain gorilla. It was dark, with light rain in the night air as Blake, De Plessy and ten hand picked men cleaned up the last vestiges of Spanish opposition on the harbour walls. It had been surprisingly easy, which suggested the chorizo-eaters hadn't expected the Kestrel to sail back so soon, drop anchor half a mile out of sight and sneak a small boat full of men in a quiet night assault on the harbour mouth of Castletown.

"See. I told you that sailing back, anchoring half a mile away, and sneaking into the harbour with a small boat containing ten men in the dead of night for a surprise assault on Castletown would be a clever move."

"Indeed you did." De Plessy wiped the edge of his sword on the cleanest Spanish tunic he could find. "A French harbour mouth would of course have been more expertly guarded. These Spaniards were far too complacent."

"True. But you French would have all surrendered. Same result at the end of the day."

"You seem to have this ridiculous notion that the glorious armies of France surrender at the drop of a hat." De Plessy tutted in a disapproving manner. "At least we HAVE armies."

"England has armies." Blake began to roll the dead bodies over the edge. They fell with resounding splashes and sank quickly to the murky depths, thanks to their metal breastplates.

"I don't consider a rag tag band of village idiots armed with gardening implements to be a proper army, Captain Blake. Thank heavens you never have to fight a proper European army in a conventional land war. Your countrymen spend far too much time sailing around oceans that don't belong to them in tiny leaky boats. One of these days an enormous armada will roll over England and then you'll see the error of your ways."

"I think you're standing on someone's face, my lord." Blake pointed to the mashed remains of some flesh that had previously decorated the front of a Spanish head before Preston had set to work on him.

"Ah. I thought the cobbles were unusually slippery." De Plessy wiped his kid leather boot on a nearby corpse. "So then. What now?"

Blake picked up a hooded lantern and slid it open. He signaled across the water to indicate it was now safe for the Kestrel to sail into the inner harbour where it would turn portside facing the narrow entrance. Any Spanish ship that tried to enter and disgorge troops into Castletown would be met by a withering broadside against its bow. The Spanish troop ship, wherever it might be (for the ship Blake had crippled had turned out to be an advance guard waiting to escort the relatively unarmed troop ship in) would have to sail further up the coast to locate an alternative beach head which would result in an overland march of many hours at least. Blake had simply left the crippled Spanish ship to bail sea water. He had neither the time nor the inclination to risk a boarding action which would almost certainly have been met with fierce resistance. On the other hand he was not so callous as to sink the helpless vessel and kill the crew.

"I think it's safe to say the harbour is secure." Blake completed the series of lantern signals and slid the cover back in place. "Captain Gore will not arrive for another few hours at least, but that doesn't mean we need to be idle."

"I find idleness occasionally conducive to a pleasant and relaxing disposition," remarked De Plessy. "But under the current circumstances..." He glanced in the rough direction of the fortress keep. "Perhaps we should investigate the possibility of entering the keep by stealth while the valiant but no doubt clumsy Captain Gore assembles his band of garden labourers for a formal assault?"

"You have an idea, my Lord?"

"I do. It is a little known fact of life that it is possible to sneak into every castle in Europe through the conveniently placed open sewer outlet. Why, it's practically a back door for the use of manual labourers and passing tradesmen!"

Part Nine

"Aren't you a little... overdressed... for sneaking through a sewer, my Lord?" Blake led the way with a storm lantern in hand, his feet splashing through what he hoped was simply water, but suspected was quite the opposite. The rank waste slurry had the consistency of sloppy mud, stank of methane and ammonia, and sat seven inches deep in the tunnel mouth. The Comte De Plessy followed close behind, accompanied by a handful of men clutching short stabbing weapons. Rats the size of cats scurried away in the distance, frightened by the approaching humans and the artificial light that they carried.

"You think so?" De Plessy considered his velvet lined tunic, ornate ostrich plumed hat, fine leather brogues with silver buckle tongues inset with South Sea pearls and pale stockings of Chinese spun silk. "I thought I was quite under dressed. These are my rough and ready rambling clothes."

"You ramble?" Blake seemed quite surprised.

"I have indeed rambled. Of course I am usually accompanied by a lavish picnic sufficient for a couple of dozen men and women, and a silver table service that requires three pack mules, but yes, I do ramble on occasion."

The entrance to the sewage outlet had been protected by a heavy iron grille which in turn had been secured by a thick iron padlock. Preston had set about the padlock with a piton and a lump hammer and had cracked it open within a couple of minutes of furious battering. A strong northerly wind had masked much of the noise, but even so the Spaniards were conspicuously absent from the main battlements.

"They don't like the weather," suggested De Plessy. And it was true – stiff sheets of rain and howling wind assailed the upper ramparts of the keep. "No doubt they assume we have fled and will not return for many days yet, by which time their position will be reinforced considerably."

"Their complacency is very welcome, my Lord. And what would men of adventure such as ourselves ever do without conveniently placed storm drains in castles? To think of all the many lives unnecessarily wasted in long drawn out sieges or storming fortified battlements in the past. And here we are, sneaking in under the very noses of the Spanish, because they don't bother to guard the storm drains." Blake whistled a jaunty tune. Despite the imminent danger he was in fine spirits, enjoying the rush of adrenalin that came from foolish endeavors such as this.

"Indeed." De Plessy discarded his orange and lime scented pomander and unwrapped a fresh one. "Did I ever tell you about the siege of La Rochelle, and how I recruited a circus troupe of Bulgarian midgets to navigate the impossibly narrow sewage tunnels that run under that castle? The tunnels there are barely three feet wide at best, but those determined midgets bravely crawled through reeking sewage with short knives clenched between their teeth to storm the castle. Plucky souls one and all. I do hope they rest in peace."

"Good for them. Thankfully English drains are somewhat larger. But even so..." Blake ducked his head down low and crouched slightly as the tunnel ceiling sloped inwards. "I'll be glad when this tunnel comes to an end."

A second grille, lighter in construction than the first, blocked the inner most end of the tunnel. Once again Blake gave way to the burly Preston and waited patiently as his chosen man grunted and heaved against the rusting lock with his tools.

"That's the spirit, Preston," offered Blake by way of encouragement. "Double rum rations tonight if you..." the metal lock broke in two with first a grinding protest and then a loud crack of brittle iron. One set of hinges also tore away from the cement fixtures as Preston heaved the grille open with an unmistakable Somerset grunt that should by rights have raised the alarm. Peering out in the early morning light Blake could see the wide expanse of the courtyard, cobbled in places, muddy in others. To his left, fifty short paces away stood the bulk of the inner keep, while to the right was the far less imposing Governor's building. But of immediate interest was the gate itself. The heavy wheeled winch mechanism for the portcullis and drawbridge was guarded by two men who huddled under the archway in sopping wet oil skins to avoid the worst of the rain. They looked wet, cold and miserable, and would be longing for the end of their shift and the welcome relief of a warm fire and ale. Both men were issued with pole arms, but the weapons had been propped up against the stone wall.

"'tis time for sword play once more." Blake slid his Spanish sword free of its scabbard. "We take the gate, reinforce our position with Gore's men waiting outside, and then free the Governor. Oh, and there's a gold sovereign to any man who brings me Mr Cobb in one healthy piece. For England, Gentlemen. For England and good Queen Bess."

(To Be Continued...)