

YOUNG RICHARD BLAKE. AUGUST 1562.

(In exposition): Not yet a man, nor still a boy, Young Richard Blake is the son of a fisherman in North Devonshire. After all of an expected education could give he spent his early years working on fishing quay and boat with family and community. In such as he grew the excitement of smuggling and wrecking caught him, as with others at the adventurous years of age.

Already experienced with as much that the sea could send at a small fishing boat he was an easy catch for a smuggler crew needing to replace those lost in their illegal, but romantic (to a lad's ear) adventures.

It was just his first voyage with the Black Gull and Captain Hardacre's motley crew of spice smugglers when disaster struck. Caught by weather upon one side, and a Spanish frigate intent on picking off smugglers on the other, the Black Gull caught a rock as she escaped with a risky close pass to an unknown headland somewhere across the northern coast of Spain, and thence, taking on water beyond the meagre capacity of the crew, beached upon a sandbar.

Blake, most recently familiar with the perils of foul weather and small boats, was the first off as the Black Gull's sinking keel dragged. Leaping through the sucking, pounding surf to the sand bar's knee-deep relative-safety, he splashed and struggled away as the roar of huge waves reared behind him, not daring to look back as he struggled for the shore and the cliffs.

The breaking waves tore the Black Gull apart, and swept away all crew but Richard Blake as he climbed to the rocks and cliff side, thence clinging, climbing and clutching as a grim rain-lashed dawn light struggled up. He crawled, exhausted, up the nearest beach, and to the waiting sword points of the Spanish.

Unsure what to do with a young man as sole survivor of a wreck, the local fishermen handed him over to their nearest authority who, in the the absence of their master, decide to hold him, for he is clearly English and hence not to be trusted, to await the return of one with authority to deal with the battered, half drowned, young man.

Blake, meanwhile was wise enough to keep quiet about his surprising skill with language, having a fair tongue in Spanish he'd learned from an old Spanish seaman and friend living nearby as he grew up.

But youth is robust, and despite his near drowning and pounding upon the rocks, it is but a few mugs of clear spring water, several bowls of chunky vegetable stew and a couple of good nights sleep behind bars in the Casa basement before Young Richard is rested and recovered.

Never one to await his fate Blake's mind turns to thoughts of Escape and Return to England. It is here, then, that we join him...

The lazy guard who fed him had stepped too close to the bars of Blake's cell, so a grab and a heave had put his dagger within reach, and thence the keys while he trembled and sweated with the blade at his throat. It had been only moments for Blake to grab a sword as he had to release the guard, and kill him as he stumbled to set guard with his own blade. Then the commotion caused two from the corridor to rush in, surprised and unprepared for an energetic and armed young Englishman lunging at them as they crossed the threshold. It had taken only moments, but those filled with surprise and death.

Bodies cooling in the dungeon cells below, Blake guessed his chance of surprise hereafter was slim. He crept up the stairs to the door ajar to the Casa courtyard, relieved to see dusk descending as the evening began and shadows starting to crowd around the nearby pillars of the house and the palisade all about the court yard. Alas, the courtyard was too busy with armed men, and a noisy, inquisitive Sergeant to make a break for it. Blake realised he would be sneaking out. Across the way, some fifty yards distant, the big gates stood closed, but a single gate for individuals was set in the greater gates, and movements suggested there might be others about the courtyard, each a way out!

It was about a moment to relieve one of the bodies below of its doublet, and all that passed for a uniform amongst the guard here - a hat, a sash and armband, all of a particular colour. Similarly at the top of the stairs a convenient sack quickly filled with rubbish, for, Blake reasoned, a man in familiar garb, striding purposefully with a heavy sack, clearly had been told

to do something and hence belonged, at least as far as the nearest door beyond the wall.

In the dusky shadows of a pillar at the top of the cellar stairs Blake heaved up his sack and made to step out into the light.

“Hsst!” A voice off. He looked about sharply. “Not that way! Watch!” In Spanish, from the shadows behind the next pillar. A maid? A crone? The voice was young yet the clothes, as much as he could see them, looked old. He hesitated.

In the courtyard the Sergeant blew a whistle, shouting for assembly and inspection. The guards ambled and sloped towards the centre of the courtyard in their own time, to an extent that even Blake was surprised at the lack of discipline. But the warning was fair. He did not want to be in the middle of an inspection...

He looked at his new accomplice in the shadows

“Thank you!” He whispered loudly in Spanish.

“Oh Richard Blake. So young! So brave! I knew you would come”

Blake hesitated, confused, and looked around and back uncertainly.

“You have me at a disadvantage - do I know you?” Blake was taken aback - how did she know him? He was certain he didn’t know any Spanish women here, and certainly not in Devon.

“There is little time: Here take this letter.” In the shadows she handed him a parchment letter, folded and sealed with a wax seal, the addressee inscribed upon the front. Even in the dim light Blake could see the writing on the front was smudged, blurred and smeared after exposure to water, and the parchment felt damp and limp in his fingers. Unsurprisingly the seal was unknown to him.

“Deliver it only to the one addressed.” She stated urgently. “And hope that you are present at the appointed hour, on the appointed day.”

“I cannot read the name.” He protested, waving the damp, limp letter feebly, exasperated.

“You will know.” She said.

"But. Señora, you seem now me but where are you from? I struggle to recall..."

She smiled in the dimness, he could see the turn of her head and softening of her stance, and something changed in her voice as she spoke, a softness

"Here, a fountain above" she gestured behind the Casa walls, "In the Chapel of the fountain."

"You know my name, have we met?" Asked Blake.

She hesitated, and smiled warmly, as if in memory.

"You wore blue, the sea salt still crystal in your hair, and the orange blossom filled the air..." she trailed off, almost wistfully.

Blake struggled to understand, confused.

"But I've never..." he began, but she shushed him, gesturing towards the courtyard where the inspection was concluded and the guards dismissed with a curt shout. A milling confusion of bodies and voices: an ideal moment...

"Señora, at least your name?" He begged.

She hesitated : "Yaquim, you may know me as." She turned before he could protest and question, and darted to the shadow behind the next pillar, and the next and the next, before indistinct in the darkness he lost sight of her.

Confused, but still with the challenge of actually escaping, Blake turned his attention to the courtyard.

The uniformed guards were dispersing. Blake realised it was 'now or never'. He grabbed his sack, and boldly stepped out towards one of the ladders leading to the rampart above the courtyard. For any close contact he found a grunt in vague Spanish and a nod was enough for no-one to look at him twice. He heaved himself up the ladder to the ramparts, and was surprised when a helping hand grasped to pull him up - one of the guards, older perhaps than the others, and in the dimness a wiser twinkle in his eyes.

"Thanks." He mumbled in Spanish, resisting the temptation to look at the man again, in case conversation ensued.

“Looked heavy.” Was the reply, but a noise beyond the rampart distracted the guard from more conversation as he turned to peer into the dimness and shout at someone below. Blake shouldered his sack and walked away more steps than was convenient for a conversation.

The sun had set, and torches were being lit in the gathering darkness. Blake smiled: as he knew well from a life at sea, lights blind everyone nearby with their light, leaving the darkness beyond. He peered over the rampart, and was surprised to see shacks and lean-to's up against the walls. Blake judged it an easy drop to a lean-to roof if he could make it over the wall unobserved.

It was but a minute until the guards standing by the torches nearest in both directions turned away for a moment. Leaving the sack Blake slipped over the rampart, hung by his fingers for a moment and dropped into the darkness. The crash of the shack roof as it disintegrated beneath him raised an angry bellow from the rampart above

“Hoi! What's going on down there!:" shouted a Spanish voice.

“My pig!” Shouted back Blake in his best peasant Spanish. “Escaped! Pig!” He heaved himself out of the smashed wood, and stumbled away from the wall towards the cliffs down to the sea. “Pig! Pig!” He shouted. “Here, piggy, piggy, pigggyyyyy.”

It was barely two hundred yards to the cliffs, and having grown up next to the sea Blake knew well that he was invisible in the darkness and inaudible against the noise of the sea. He paused to consider: Here at the Casa of the local Spanish lord he was half way down the sloping cliffs to the bay below, where twinkled lights of the small fishing town of Ceidera. Above, up the headland slope was the village San Andreas de Teixido - he'd listened carefully to the guards about his cell to discover his location. Now a mysterious woman with a damp letter had stated she was something to do with that Chapel in San Andreas. He felt the inner pocket of his stolen doublet. It was still damp. He wondered idly when it would dry out.

With the night but young, and to turn in the least expected direction should his escape be discovered, Blake went up towards the headend and San Andreas de Teixido, hoping for clarity for some of the questions he'd blurted out to her, but she had, perhaps carefully, ignored.

Blake arrived at the hamlet of San Andreas de Teixido (for village would have been aggrandising the small chapel and half dozen houses to something they most certainly were not). A little out of breath for it had been a steep climb further than he expected to the headland, which was surprisingly high, Blake paused to take stock. A Chapel, well looked after, so money spent. Perhaps there would be answers inside. He approached and tried the doors, unsurprised they opened to the warm glow of candle light, and a deserted altar. He walked in but fearful of observation made a guess at appropriate Papist behaviour in one of their churches, knelt and held his hands as if at prayer while he glanced about. It was a chapel as he had never seen before - gold glittering in the candlelight from the candle sticks and other accoutrements on the Altar, paintings and carvings all about of Saints and those Holy to the idolatrous Catholics, even statues to worship, of Mary, and Jesus upon a cross. Blake was both awed and shocked at what he saw.

It was but a few moments before the sound of sandals upon stone approached, a priest.

"A late hour for prayer." Interrupted the priest.

"Forgive me, I had a need to be closer yet to God" Blake nodded, "so far from home, as I am, and carrying such a burden with my family gone to the plague..."

"How long ago?" Asked the priest sharply.

"At least two months gone." Replied Blake hurriedly. "Far to the south."

The protest relaxed. "And what brings you here?" He asked

"Since their deaths I have wandered." Explained Blake. "Lost as to my future, until I came upon this place and decided to appeal for guidance. But, may I ask, where am I here?"

"This is San Andres de Teixido above Ceidera." Explained the priest, and here is the Chapel of San Andreas, of La Fuente de los Tres Canos".

It was but a moment of further appreciation and idle conversation to persuade the priest to lead Blake to the fountain. Through a side door of the chapel, housed in one of the extensions to the building was an old room, the chapel clearly built beside that much older. A simple circular stone fountain

barely a yard cross, with three pipes rising a few inches above the surface to sputter and spout fresh, clean spring water.

“It is said that casting a crumb of the holy bread baked here upon the waters with a prayer may have that prayer answered.” Explained the priest. “As a blessing from St Andrew for the merciful Angel of our Lord that saved him when his boat sank in the bay beyond.”

“Alas, I am but a poor traveller without coin” Blake suggested. “Do you have bread from which I may cast a crumb to better my fortunes?”

“They bake it in the village here.” The protests voice hardened.

“Alas, I am of empty belly and far from my original home, is there anywhere...?” Asked Blake, at his persuasive best.

The priest sighed. “Of course.” He muttered, gesturing “Third cottage along, say I sent you, Father Lopez”

Blaker nodded his thanks, and made his hurried departure.

It was scant minutes before Blake was in front of a bowl of hearty vegetable stew from a sympathetic farmer’s wife and her begrudging husband, and a had a fine night’s sleep in the freshest straw with a couple of warm goats for company. At dawn and after a wash in the water trough Blake considered the day. The absence of alarums through the night rather indicated that his escape had been discovered, but no-one really cared, which was a relief. One less person for the locals to worry about he suspected, just so long as he didn’t come to anyone’s attention.

To plan his next steps Blake headed past the chapel to the edge of the high cliff point. Peering over the edge he was awed by the height of the cliffs here - far higher than anything his home of North Devon might present. He sat on the edge then, and fingered the mysterious letter, damp still, in his pocket and wondered what to do next. It was obvious that he should find a way back to England, which looked most likely by stealing a boat or stowing away aboard a ship, but not what he should make off the letter and the mysterious woman ‘Yaqum’.

Blake considered money, and eyed the chapel and its rich selection of gold and precious objects. He was reluctant to thief stuff, even from a Papist church, but if he needed gold to get home...

In confusion Blake tried the only thing he could think of, and prayed, seeking enlightenment as to the right thing to do, a sign, a portent, guidance, anything to see him home safe, or the path now to take in his hour of need, not least if it was right and proper to turn over the Papist chapel for its gold...

The mule that clopped slowly up the path to the headland where Blake sat was an annoyance that only got closer, until he could not ignore it longer and continue in his prayer. With an irritated eye he looked about from where he kneeled, to spy an old fat man atop approaching mule approaching at a leisurely pace.

"Ho traveller. What brings you to San Andreas de Teixido?" He asked of the ragged man atop his ragged mule. The man shrugged.

"Nowhere else to go...."

The mule man introduced himself as Guido, from nowhere but back there and no one, other than someone who'd had a family, all gone. For an hour they discussed the world, and what was to be done as lonely travellers hungry, and full of loss. Guido was clear - his direction was on, ever on, but preferably after a good charitable meal, for which Blake was able to supply directions to the Chapel and Father Lopez who had pointed him in the right direction the previous night. Of the philosophical nature of their discourse Blake was quite clear as to Guido's guidance - do what you have to do to get to where you need to be. Driven by necessity, most things are forgivable in the eyes of God. Or at least, Guido sincerely hoped so.

At least, in the hours that followed, that's how Blake remembered it.

Guido departed seeking charity of the chapel and the farmer's wife Blake had mentioned to him, and Blake waited out the day. As evening fell he entered the deserted chapel and grabbed a single, gold candlestick. It was more wealth than a fisherman such as his father had ever summed up in a life time. Blake ignored any nagging guilt - it was Papist gold, and it was what he had to do. As evening drew in he descended to Ceidera to scout out the docks.

In Ceidera Blake searched the dark, narrow streets for a Blacksmith's. He would have to convert the gold into some sort of smaller chunks he could use, and make them unrecognisable as a stolen candle stick. Finding a blacksmith's he banged upon the door until answer came, then barged in with the surprise of the open door to request, then demand tools to render his gold candlestick to something unrecognisable.

Alas request turned to demand that turned to argument with the burly Blacksmith, a sword in Blake's fist, and an iron poker in the Blacksmith's, and shortly then joined by the apprentices, more appropriately armed!

The disagreement was short and bitter, with both the Blacksmith and an apprentice felled by Blake's merciless blows. Finally, as the Blacksmith's widow wailed on the floor above the remaining apprentice saw reason and conceded. Thence he chopped and hammered Blake's stolen candlestick into unrecognisable chunks. Blake fled through the side gate as a crowd of locals alerted by the shouting and clash of weapons and thence hammering, pounded upon the front gate. The chunk of gold Blake left for the widow seemed slight recompense for the death of her husband and apprentice son to Blake's cold hearted slaughter.

Now secure with blade and some small wealth in gold chunks Blake browsed the docks of Ceidera for an opportunity. A fishing village in main, it presented little by way of interest or opportunity for voyage further that evening, and less so with the place aroused by the callous killing of the blacksmith by a madman, still at large. Blake selected a small row boat with potential for simple sail and as dusk fell quietly strolled along the ill lit quay, and made away strongly with a boyhood of rowing and fishing boat experience into the darkness outside the harbour.

He was free!

A fisherman from life, Blake make good time and miles out of the bay and along the coast to the North and East, his aim to find another opportunity well away from his point of wreck, perhaps even France, and find a ship willing to take him working passage or with payment in the gold he carried back to England.

Alas his plan was thwarted. He rowed at a steady pace a couple of hours through, but he could feel the weather change as midnight approached. The swell deepened and wind rose, forcing him ever inshore and alarmingly close to the rocky coastline until it was all his effort to stay clear, let alone make much progress. He started to seek an opportunity for shelter in a cove, any cove nearby where he might beach and wait out the coming weather.

After a struggling pull around another headland it seemed his prayer was answered - while narrow and high cliffs a cove with a long run of sand presented, and he allowed the boat to be washed and pull in with the waves towards beaching.

Only then did he spot the ship riding at anchor in the cove, lightless and naught but a clean shadow in the broken moonlit cloud, and in a moment he also spotted the two beached ship's boats and silhouettes upon the beach, with not light about them. Blake had been with smugglers' beach parties enough to realise what he had stumbled into. Too late to draw out of the cove, he beached close to the smugglers' boats, in full view of them all.

In a moment he was surrounded by the smugglers, from the gabble they were clearly Spanish, when suddenly another accent interrupted:

"Oh shit!" Snarled a voice in the best Queen's English, then in poor Spanish "Who the fuck are you? Give me one reason not to blow your fucking head off right now!"

"No No!" Begged Blake in Spanish as he heaved his row boat across the sand, but not too far. Then in English "I'm a seaman escaping the Spanish - wrecked, captive, stole the boat..." he trailed off, realising that the shadow in front of him was pointing a pistol at his head, and other about had closed, holding swords and knives. Either way, his chances were very poor.

"Yeah? And who might you be, then?" Snarled the English voice.

"R-richard B-blake, off the B-lack Gull. Only survivor, wrecked near Ceidera" he stuttered. "First ... first job under Hardacre...." He trailed off, facing the loaded pistol pointed at his head as best he could, his back itching as he expected a knife from the spaniards behind him.

"Fuck. Hardacre? I know him. Is he captured?"

“No, dead in the wreck, with most everyone else.” Blake shook his head. “I made it to the sand bar and the cliffs - The Gull was smashed to pieces. They caught me, I stole the boat - I’m a Devon man...” Blake trailed off, aware he was babbling in desperation.

“And you washed up here? All the Saints these bastards have, why me? Why us? Look, what’s your name, ‘Blake’, just keep out the way - I’ll not kill an Englishman out here amongst...” he lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper “all these Papists, but if you move a muscle I’ll blast yer fucking head off. “

Blake nodded fervently.

“Yes, Sir. By the way what do I call you?”

"Call me Sam. Now get over there and look after the shore boat with Dinko."

Blake nodded, “Righto Captain” relieved to be alive and with a possible passage, but Sam had already turned away and gestured his men about in the darkness, after a moment of conversation with ‘Dinko’ and stares at Blake. Even Blake could guess what that was about.

It was some ten minutes as Blake stood by the shore boat before he saw the wink of hooded lanterns dimly, momentarily upon the cliff, and answering from the beach amongst the smugglers. In the absence of anything in the boat he stood by and upon the beach he surmised this was receiving something.

Momentary flickers of light back and forth seemed to complete the deal, and a brief shout went up from the Smugglers and everyone seemed to relax.

Alas, it was barely for a moment.

A loud shout came from one side of the bay. Then a whistle, more pierced the noise of the surf. Cries of alarm from the smugglers. Then, a pistol shot, another, and a heavier, longer boom of several muskets. Running figures in in the darkness - an ambush!

Abruptly everything changed - powder flashes erupted up the beach and to either side and muskets and pistols discharged. Blake looked about in horror. In the darkness men ran towards the smugglers and sparks scattered as steel met steel!

Not a moment to lose Blake leapt forward towards the last position he could see for Sam. A shadow rose before him as he heard the Englishman swearing as he fought two to his right. Blake slashed and cut, and the figure before him fell with a cry, to be replaced by two more as they raced up. Suddenly the man to his left howled as something punched through his shoulder spraying Blake in a haze of blood and gore. The thump of the pistol shot swept back by the wind only a moment later as the smuggler hit the floor. Another shot buzzed past Blake's ear, and he hoped desperately that they had run out of guns to fire. Blake dragged his sleeve across his face to clear his vision, and cut the first and then the second of the two ambushers before him. One fell, to his slash, but he heard the smuggler defending Sam's right hadn't side go down at the same moment. With a savage desperate thrust Blake took down his last opponent, and turned to support Sam, but the Englishman had already backed out of facing three opponents and run for the boat. Blake cut at one, and being closer to the boat ran and made first.

"Here Captain!" He cried, I'll hold them - I'll push off." It was but a moment as a couple of men tumbled into the boat, a pitiful remnant of the numerous smugglers in the beach but a few minutes previous. Blake waved his sword menacingly, fearing a pistol or musket shot at any moment, before stumbling back as the ship's boat gained way in the waves and slithered aboard.

There were bangs and booms from the beach in the minutes thereafter, as the muskets and pistols were reloaded despite the dismal weather, but none came close as they pulled out to the Smuggler's ship moored in the cove. Barely five men in their boat, of 8 upon the beach, and worse yet four from nine in the other that had made it away but moments later.

They hauled hard, with Blake pulling for all he was worth. After an eternity they made the Smuggler's cutter riding lightless in the bay, and were heaved aboard by willing hands.

Sail set, the smuggler vessel upped anchor and turned to make a run for the open sea as Blake hauled and pulled, a young lifetime upon the waves guiding him without the need for orders.

They were away. Blake relaxed for a moment, relieved, but even a moment's rest was not to be.

"Sail Ho!" Above the wind. About the headland west, a sail lit appeared - the final closing trap sprung upon the smugglers!

But, light and sprightly in the weather without cargo, the smugglers's ship tacked on an eddy and pulled hard close to the wind to edge past the next headland running fast and well clear of the larger Spanish ship. In barely half an hour they were around the headland and with weather and land in balance, enough room to manoeuvre so they were away to the open sea and never within canon range, just one cargo the lighter.

It was weeks later that young Richard Blake stepped ashore in Bristol dock, his life changed forever. The high seas called, a life of adventure beckoned, with all the risk and excitement it could bring.

Weeks later still he hunched over a table and by candlelight scribbled a note of reassurance to his Father, somewhere in North Devon, still. A drip of wax, a village and surname, ready to be passed to anyone going that way from Bristol the next morning. He squeezed the damp (still!) note in his doublet for reassurance - still there. He was intensely aware that Richard Blake had two appointment's to keep: one near a coast most likely far south of Bristol, where he wore blue, the sea salt still crystal still in his hair, on a coast far away from England where the orange blossom filled the air, and another at a time a place he had to hope he was at, to deliver a letter whose smudged destination he could not read.

He was Richard Blake. And his future was looking quite adventurous!