

Prologue – an unpleasant awakening

ThumP!

ThUmp!

CruMp!

CruuUnChH!

The sea was as flat as a pancake, and a wisp of mist crept over the prow of *The Black Pig* as it edged slowly forwards through the floating debris in its path. Now, you and I both know that *The Black Pig* is more of a plough-through-the-wreckage-regardless sort of ship, and as for the crew ... but this morning was rather different.

In fact, it was very different indeed.

The crew were silent, wincing every time the ship crashed through a treasure chest or barrel, crunched a hammock or two ... well, the hammocks didn't usually crunch, unless they were particularly old, but ...

Flotsam, that's what it was.¹ Not your usual flotsam, either. This was different.

It was very different indeed.

- I don't see any damage, Cap'n.

¹ The word flotsam comes from the phrase 'floating samwiches'. As no-one's likely to throw their samwiches overboard on purpose (unless they're egg and mustard), flotsam usually means that a ship has gone down in a storm, been sunk by enemy action, or worse, scuttled by a desperate captain.

Said the first mate.

- No.

Replied the Captain. Quietly.

The Captain of *The Black Pig* and his first mate stood at the ship's prow, just behind the rather embarrassed figurehead.² The crew fanned out behind them, unnaturally quiet. Even the parrot was silent. That's how ominous things were.

- It's not a good sign.
- No.

That the flotsam was undamaged suggested that the ship had not been sunk in action. The seas's stillness, which had lasted for days now, rather scotched the storm idea. The mist? Well ... the mist was something else altogether.

There was, however, another factor.

- How long have we been following the trail, Bo'sun?³
- An hour and a half.

The flotsam from a wreck, as every seadog knows, tends to bob about, mildly crumpled, in a roughly circular area around the spot where the ship finally gave up its fight with the ocean and slid, slinkily, beneath the waves, going gently (or not, as the case might be) into that watery good night. This flotsam was in a line. A long line.

Oh, and usually there are bodies.

- Where are the bodies?

You see? Told you. They may not be quick on the uptake, but even a pirate gets there

² The Black Pig's figurehead looked for all the world like a large lady in her nightie who'd just dropped a plateful of biscuits. This was not what the model was doing when the original drawings were made. It was, as a result, known as the go-figure head.

³ The Bo'sun, or 'Bossiest old geezer under the sun', was the captain's go-to man. Whenever he needed something doing, he'd go to the Bo'sun, who'd instinctively be elsewhere.

eventually. Oh, didn't I mention that we were on a pirate ship? Really? Oh, come on ... *The Black Pig*? Hardly the name of a pleasure cruiser, now is it? '*We had a delightful holiday on board The Black Pig, Tarquin ...*' And everyone knows that only pirate captains are allowed parrots. Don't they?

- It's as if they were ... running from something.

The Bo'sun said the word 'running' very carefully – pirates don't like the word. Pirates run from no-one – the more their victims run, the less they respect them. And the less they respect them, the more unpleasant they are when they catch them.⁴

The Captain, resplendent in coat, tricorn hat and luxuriant black beard, simply *hurrumphed*.

And his hurrumph made the already discombobulated (nice word, eh?) crew wince.⁵

- They weren't running from us.
- If they weren't ...

The Bo'sun's voice trailed off as they saw the skull and crossbones in the water, and a collective gasp went through the crew as quickly as one of the chef's special curries ...

- RESCUE THAT STANDARD!

Thundered the captain. The pirate flag, you know, the skull and crossbones, the Jolly Roger, the Ecstatic Damian ... oh, ok, maybe I made that one up ... is not just there to scare people, it's a pirate's identity. It was hooked and brought aboard.

- GIVE IT HERE.

The thunder gave way as the sodden material, limp and lifeless, was placed in his great, bucket-like hands.

⁴ It's known as Pullen's Law. A later version, Pullen-Moijambe's law, added that when a pirate gets tired from chasing, the first things they lose are empathy, compassion, and patience. Moijambe obviously never met a pirate.

⁵ This is nothing to do with 'disco' mBob, the famous dancing sailor from Zanzibar.

- So. It's been untied.
- Oh, Cap'n.

The untying of the skull and crossbones meant one thing, and one thing only: the flag's owner rejected their piratical identity. And this only happened on retirement, when the aged Pirate handed down their 'bones to the appointed successor, assuming the successor hadn't appointed themselves in the traditional manner.⁶

Oh, there was one other time.

When a pirate was so scared that he no longer felt he deserved to be called a pirate.
When a pirate was so scared that he began to run ...

The whole crew knew. No-one dared say it out loud. This was only partly because it was expressly forbidden.

Then, rising gently out of the mist was the ship, bobbing like a plastic duck in a cold, day-old bath. One of the crew let out a breath, and under that breath was a word, and that word, well, that word was a name ...

- n i g e l ...

Usually, such insubordination would have led to the pirate in question being turned into flotsam. Not today.⁷

- I fear you are right.

The Black Pig approached the mystery ship quietly, and calmly. Not its usual approach to approaching at all.

- Stand to, Bo'sun.

Whispered the captain. The Bo'sun rang the deck bell, which punctured the silence

⁶ Pirates are sticklers for tradition, you know.

⁷ Pirates were banned from mentioning Nigel's name, on the grounds that it could only lead to no good, and that by denying that he existed, he might just go away.

like a stiletto. He winced.

- Sorry, Cap'n.

The men, with uncanny softness, took up their positions. The mist suddenly felt uncommonly cold, chilly, clammy.

- Unheimlich.

Said the cabin boy (he read too many books).

- This is the sixth sea. Why's it so cold?

The Captain replied with a single word.

- Nigel.

The crew shivered.

The Black Pig drew level, the crew fastened it securely to the mystery ship with boathooks and grappling irons, and then, well, just stood there, innocent as you like.

The crew looked. They listened. They looked again.

Nothing.

Nobody.

Nowhere.

The ship looked perfect. Decks swabbed, sails furled, brasses polished. Cannon loaded.

Everything but signs of life.

- Gunther.

- Eh?

- Gunther. This is ... was ... Gunther's ship.
- Where's the name? The figurehead?

The Captain frowned.

- *He* takes them.

He turned and walked to his cabin.

- Burn it.
- But Cap'n, we should search it first ... there may be ...
- BURN. IT. NOW.

When the Captain raised his voice (and when he shouts, it's in 28-point), it stayed raised. Unless he decided to unraise it.

- Unhook us. Burn the ship. Set course for Tangiers. Our summer is over.

He opened the door to his cabin.

- Do Not Disturb.

He shut the door behind him. The entire crew winced as they heard the wail of frustration, anger and pity which exploded out of their captain.

Half an hour later, *The Black Pig* was making sail for Tangiers. On the horizon, a vivid orange glow competed with the sunset. All was quiet.

Chapter one – meet BlackBeard, scourge of the seven seas

The long summer of the Caribbean is finally drifting away into a distant memory, and as the nights begin to draw in *The Black Pig* has set a course for Tangiers, one of the most lawless ports in the Seven Seas, where the legendary BlackBeard intends to cash in his summer's looting, refit his ship, rest his men, and prepare for the lucrative autumn. In the autumn, you see, traffic on the Seven Seas increases as the merchants stock up for the winter season and the traditional feasting around Christmas. Demand for gold, spices, silks and other expensive luxury items, like chocolate, rockets. Pickings are rich.

But you don't want to know about international trade. That's not what you're here for. Don't think I don't know, because I do.

That's BlackBeard there, standing at the prow of his fine ship, feeling the power of the sea beneath him as *The Black Pig* cuts through the waves. BlackBeard is the most feared of all the pirates in the South Seas, one of the most feared in the Seven Seas – voted number three at the last pirate council. Not bad going for an orphan, eh?

That's right. That fearsome gentleman, who has spent years terrifying innocent travellers, stealing their belongings, kidnapping their children, drinking too much rum and generally being thoroughly unpleasant in between times, was once an orphan. I know, I know. Odd to think that such an unpleasant character wasn't born into piratitude, but there you go.

In fact, he had been adopted by RedBeard, three-times winner of the 'most feared pirate' award, when he captured the ship the young BlackBeard was travelling on. RedBeard had murdered the boy's parents and was about to do the same to BlackBeard (who, you may already have guessed, didn't actually have a black beard, and whose name was actually Nicholas), when he thought better of it – why? mainly because the soon-to-be BlackBeard put up such a spirited defence to this ultra-scary pirate, he looked to the old hand to be good pirate material himself.

And so he proved to be. Like all good fathers, RedBeard brought up the young lad in his own image (which wasn't really that of a good father, I grant you) and taught him the family business (which was not a good one, I also grant you). Pirating.

RedBeard taught his adopted son to pillage and steal, swear and curse, sink ships, take

ships, burn towns, blackmail, bribe and all sorts of bad things – as well as instructing him in the more subtle of the piratical arts, like keel-hauling and plank-walking.

After a few years instructing his young apprentice, RedBeard decided, one fine December morning at the end of the winter stock-up, that it was TIME. He'd spotted a merchantman to windward of the leeward islands,⁸ and it was time to let his son, who was even then barely ten years old, lead the attack. He braided slow-burning tapers in his hair, plastered his face with horrific make-up and sent him swinging onto the merchantman's foredeck. The sight of a ten-year old boy with burning hair waving a cutlass (and, mark you, waving it skilfully, and with what was quite clearly murderous intent), terrified the sailors beyond measure and they immediately surrendered, begging the smouldering child for mercy.

Being a proper pirate, BlackBeard (for he had already been dubbed BlackBeard by the crew, even if it was just a touch ironically) had no truck with mercy. Father and son enjoyed making the captured crew walk the plank together that day. Forget picnics, forget fishing – this is proper bonding, thought RedBeard, as he fought back a proud (though obviously BAD) tear. Ah, memories!

Eventually, RedBeard retired, like all sensible pirates do, to a life of golf and gentle pillage on the mainland, handing his ship, *The Black Pig*, over to his adopted son, who became captain.⁹

BlackBeard carried on the family traditions most excellently – stealing treasure, sinking ships, swearing mightily, drinking as much rum as he possibly could, and so on, just doing bad things in general – but he had one great advantage over his illustrious father: he had a very keen eye for business. He realised very soon that if he held back on the murder just a little, he could make even more money. After all, there was a thriving slave trade springing up in the east, especially for children, who were coveted for their ability to climb up chimneys and generally be small and not eat much. Yes, his crew were a little more than suspicious that he'd turned soft, but this soon changed when the doubloons came rolling in. And anyway, making *children* walk the plank seemed just a little too easy, almost embarrassing for a properly

⁸ Leeward means sheltered from the wind, while windward means on the windy side. The ship was therefore rather confused.

⁹ Now. Of course, you know as well as I do that the usual way for a pirate to become captain is to kill the previous owner of the vessel in question, or to fight for the vacant position. but BlackBeard (and by this time it was an increasingly less ironic name) was such a very *good* pirate - by which I mean he was so very *bad* - that no-one dared challenge him.

vicious pirate. Far better to cash them in.

But you'd be wrong to think that BlackBeard's heart was as black as his beard, mind (though, to be fair, it wasn't far off). His heart had a lighter corner – a very, very small corner, it's true ... but a lighter one. It's not like he didn't think about the past, about his past. Only week ago, for example, while ransacking a merchantman, he stumbled upon a particularly pretty young girl who was travelling with her parents. BlackBeard knew that she'd fetch a fine price if she were sold into the service of some nobleman or other, and so he grabbed her in one of his brawny arms as he stomped over the decks ...

- Let go of me, you brute.

She fairly shouted in his ear, while pulling at his beard.

- That hurts

Said BlackBeard, before he remembered who he was, and simply *roared* at her:

- DO
YOU
KNOW
WHO
I ...
AM?

- Yes. You're a very rude man, that's what you are. And you smell. Now let me and my parents go.

BlackBeard was taken aback. No-one had ever spoken to him like this before. Well, not since school, anyway. And he'd burnt that to the ground ... He stopped in his tracks, laughed a deep, rich laugh, and shook his head.

- No. I shan't.

And he bundled the girl into the hold, ignoring her biting and scratching, chuckling to himself as he did so. But when it came to setting fire to the ship and making the remaining crew and passengers walk the plank, he made a rare gesture of mercy.¹⁰ He told the crew to get into one of the ship's boats, and set them and the passengers adrift.

- And don't let me hear any of you lot complain, either. Or I'll change my mind.

Perhaps, just perhaps, BlackBeard saw in this young girl (whose name was Perdita, should you care), something of the spirit he once showed to his adoptive father, RedBeard.

Or perhaps not. He certainly wasn't going to bring her up as a pirate. Oh no. She'd fetch a good few pieces of eight in Tangiers. Which was where he was going right now, if you haven't forgotten. And she's still below, cooped up in the hold. Tired, damp and hungry. But not scared. Perdita doesn't really do scared. Not that it matters to you, because she'll be sold off to some rich nobleman to work in his kitchens or polish his spectacles or whatever in a couple of days, so you'll never see her again. Oh well.

¹⁰ He had been given a truckful for his birthday, and had to do something with it.

Chapter two - Tangiers

The Black Pig is now safely moored in Tangiers harbour, the booty of a hard summer's pirating has been sold or banked and the crew are mostly to be found in the taverns and related emporia of the town itself.¹¹ They'll be drinking rum, getting into fights, visiting their ageing mothers ... look, even pirates have mothers, ok?

BlackBeard has already sold *Perdita*, and is feeling pretty full of himself. It's been a very lucrative summer, and what's more, he's been asked to deliver the keynote address at the annual Pirates' Council, quite an honour for one who took up pirating rather late - and one he'll soon be enjoying. But first, as he walks along the quayside, he decides it's time for a little treat.

- I know what, I'll visit Madame JoJo.

I know what you're thinking, but you're wrong. Madame JoJo is simply the most famous clairvoyant in Tangiers, if not the world. Don't worry if you haven't heard of her - she's heard of you, and that's what matters. The fact is, even though BlackBeard had made a good profit selling *Perdita* (I promise I won't mention her any more, after all, it's not like we'll ever see her again, now is it?), he was feeling a little odd about the whole affair. Guilty, even. No, no, no - not like that! Not guilty for kidnapping her and selling her, but guilty about letting her parents go. It's not that it was against the Pirate Code, but it certainly wasn't in the spirit of it. He mumbled to himself as he stomped JoJo-wards.

- Then again, if I don't let the occasional victim go, it's tough to establish much of reputation.

This was something he had argued over with RedBeard - whether murdering everyone or letting some go free was the best course of action.¹² BlackBeard was keen on nurturing his image, whereas RedBeard was very much 'old school': 100 per cent make 'em walk the plank ...

¹¹ Well, they're hardly going to bury the loot in a chest, now, are they? This isn't the dark ages. I mean, anyone could find it, and the return's dreadful!

¹² After all, if you murder everyone you meet nobody will get to hear how very fearsome you are, and the first three articles of the Pirate Code are very clear on the subject: reputation, reputation, reputation. It's no good being bad if no-one knows it. A pirate isn't just in it for the money and the travel, you know. Or the rum. Pirates crave attention. Remember the Pirate charts? The opinion polls? These days, pirates are meant to get their victims to fill in questionnaires before they set their ships alight and make them walk the plank, just to keep the information rolling in.

Sorry, I'm off again. Where were we? Ah yes, on the way to Madame JoJo's. Madame JoJo worked out of a small caravan just off the main square. She didn't live there, of course.¹³ The caravan looked just as you'd expect a clairvoyant gypsy's caravan to look, covered in intricate designs painted in bright colours that never seemed to get smeared with the sooty murk of Tangiers – it was almost as if it was enclosed in its own little protective bubble. There was one of those doors that opens in two halves, as if a horse were living inside, and a flickering lantern hung on the right side. When the top of the door was merely a curtain, Madame JoJo was in, and the wise knew to knock once and wait for the curtain to be drawn back and an invitation given.¹⁴

BlackBeard was no fool, and he was a great respecter of people's personal space – unless he was pillaging it, of course. He strode up to the caravan, gave one massive, timber-rattling knock, and waited. For what seemed like ten minutes. Then a voice rang out – liquid, almost a purr.

- BlackBeard. Do come in. I've been expecting you.

BlackBeard was a little surprised by this, but then, he thought, she *was* a clairvoyant. If she couldn't tell who'd come to see her, she'd be a pretty rubbish one. The curtain drew aside, BlackBeard climbed the steps, opened the lower door, and stepped into the caravan. Its floor sagged under his weight.¹⁵

The inside of the caravan was festooned with silks and satins, drifting like cobwebs in the breeze that BlackBeard brought in with him. Madame JoJo motioned for him to sit on a plump cushion, and as he eased his bulk onto it, she glanced at him through her veil, only her eyes visible through a small gap in the multicoloured scarf. BlackBeard sat, and her hand moved gently towards him, pushing aside a plume of incense smoke as it did so.

- What? Oh, yes. Sorry.

13 Well, I say of course, but in truth no-one actually knows where she lives. Probably because no-one's ever been sober enough to follow her home when she leaves her office come midnight. Actually, I'm not entirely sure anyone's even seen her leave. Or arrive, for that matter.

14 Knock, and wait. That was the key. Rumours abounded about what happened to the few who didn't know, and simply wandered in, but no-one knew for sure. Certainly, no-one ever admitted having been so stupid – either that, or the rumours were true.

15 I must point out that BlackBeard is not in any way fat. He's just one big, bad pirate. And when I say he's big, I mean BIG. He's very well-built, huge shoulders, tree-trunk thighs ... arms like, er, smaller trees ... not an ounce of fat on him. No, no, no.

He took out some silver coins from his pocket and placed them in the outstretched hand.

- You're a little out of date, my boy. We prefer gold, these days.

BlackBeard grunted, reached deep into his tunic and took out a small pouch, placing this on her palm (the silver coins had mysteriously vanished). Madame JoJo felt the pouch's weight and held it to her face, drawing deeply on its aroma before seeming to drop it and snatch at it while it fell from the air – the coins flashed, and were gone. She handed him back the empty pouch.

- You'll be wanting your wee baggie back, aye, my boy?

BlackBeard held out his hand to grab the pouch, grumbling something about theatrical gypsies as he did so, but Madame JoJo grabbed it and opened his fist, palm upwards. She stroked the rough skin with a blood-red fingertip and sighed to herself.

- You are an evil man.

She began.

- You steal from the hardworking, you take the innocent child from its parent, the parent from its child. You spread sadness wherever you go.

BlackBeard grunted.

- Well *I* could have told you that. I thought you were meant to be good at this?

Madame JoJo simply hissed and tightened her grip: BlackBeard couldn't help but grimace.

- There are some things, my boy, that are not understood by your philosophy.

BlackBeard couldn't help wondering why she kept calling him her boy, or what on earth she was on about, but let it go.

- There are powers beyond arms, riches beyond gold, joys beyond rum. These things are shallow, which is why no matter how much you have, you never

seem to have enough. You take because what you had was taken. What you seek is not what you think you seek.

- Rubbish. I take because I like to take.

Madame JoJo simply smiled. Usually at this point in a story, the evil pirate should start to feel just a little uncomfortable – perhaps as if there *were* forces at work that he didn't truly understand. Maybe he'd see the ghosts of those he'd killed, the sad, upturned, pleading faces of the children he'd orphaned. Not BlackBeard. No sirree. Madame JoJo continued.

- You make children sad because you were made sad. You don't want them to have what you never had. You're jealous.

BlackBeard rolled his eyes. Never trust a woman in a scarf, wasn't that what Dad told me? He thought to himself.

- Like I said. Rubbish. I like it. And now I'd like some rum.

He got up to leave, but Madame JoJo held tight.

- You can say what you like, but it has been decreed that you will atone for your sins. You will give back what you have stolen. Whether you like it or not.
- I couldn't possibly. I've drunk most of it.

BlackBeard laughed, like only an evil pirate can laugh. He'd had lessons when he was young, after all. Evilecution lessons. All the best pirates have them.

- Not the gold, you idiot. The happiness. You are a stealer of joy. You will repay this. You cannot escape your fate. It is decreed.

At this, Madame JoJo threw down BlackBeard's hand, stood up, and practically floated out of the room. The festoons of material hanging from the ceiling barely registered her passing.

- Piffle.

Said BlackBeard, as he rose and trotted down the steps.

- Time for some rum, and then off to the Council of Pirates.

Chapter three - Jamaica inn

We enter a room thick with the smell of cedar-woodbines. In the middle there is a vast, round table, around which sit eight dastardly looking pirates, each one sprawled inelegantly on his own carved wooden throne as the low ceiling fan gently whirrs and hiccoughs just above their heads. On the back of each throne is a perch, seven of which are occupied by parrots: the eighth by an albatross. The albatross is the mascot of the the Pirate Council, you see – legend has it that one pirate, having been captured by a navy warship, his ship sunk and crew all dead, was imprisoned with nothing but bread and water for rations. ‘Water, water, everywhere’, he said, ‘what’s an honest pirate to drink?’ Then he was saved by an albatross.¹⁶

Anyway, back to the eight throned pirates. You’d think, looking at them, that they are competing for the ‘pirate with the most inelegant sprawl’ award. That, of course, would be because they are. It’s a small award, true enough. Not worth much in real terms, but for some reason it’s accorded an awful amount of kudos by the corsairs of the seas. Pirates, eh?

Now each of the eight had clattered and clunked their way up the steep and rickety stairs of the Jamaica Inn – without doubt the roughest and toughest inn in Tangiers (which naturally makes it by far the roughest and toughest inn in the world) – hindered by cutlass blades, paunches, fidgety parrots and ill-considered peg-legs.¹⁷

The ceiling’s low-slung beams are dripping with pirates’ hooks of all shapes and sizes, and around the sides of the room another thirty or so pirates are rather hastily arranged, sitting on the low bench that hugs the wall, with another couple leaning in through the filthy stained-glass window. Each of these lesser pirates has his hat on his lap, unlike the pirates at the high table, whose hats remained firmly clamped on their heads. Hats, you see, are vital symbols of piratical hierarchies, and are generally passed down from ‘father’ to son (or daughter) – when they’re not stolen as trophies from vanquished enemies, of course. Many a pirate feud has been waged over a hat-

¹⁶ Look, I don’t write these things, you know. It’s not *my* fault. Pirate legends are generally short – the average attention span of a pirate is woeful, and then factor in the rum ... the legends have to be short or they just get ignored. Either that or the average pirate only gets to the bit about rum and loses interest ...

¹⁷ Like eye-patches, peg-legs are something of a necessity in the pirate world. No-one ever seems to take a pirate seriously unless they have an eye-patch or a peg-leg. And, as many a pirate will tell you, having only one eye available when you’re more than capable of using two makes sword-fighting rather difficult. And as for tying your leg behind you and strapping on a peg-leg, well, it doesn’t bear thinking about. It’s the cramp, you see. That fearsome expression pirates always seem to have? Nine times out of ten it’s peg-leg cramp.

related misunderstanding. So make sure you look after yours.

Anyway, I digress.

Below the albatross sits a particularly old pirate, by tradition a retired luminary of the pirate world, around whose shoulders is wrapped an ancient and official-looking leather munitions belt – the belt of the chairman of the Pirate’s Guild. He stands up slowly and raps on the table with a gnarled oaken club, which looks very much like a thighbone. Legend has it ...

- Order!

Oops! Best we pay attention ...

- By the power vested in me by the Council of Corsairs, the Board of Buccaneers, and the Parliament of Pirates, I declare this sixteenth session of the Seven Seas Sea-Rats open!

The room murmurs in approval and each of the eight holds up his glass. Did I mention they're all clutching large tumblers of rum? No? Well, perhaps you should have guessed that bit ...

- Yo, ho ho!

Says the chairman. The whole room chants in unison.

- Yo, Ho, Ho!

They drain their glasses and slammed the empties down onto the oak table. The chairman speaks once more.

- I call on the Beastly BlackBeard, Terror of the Ten Islands, Scourge of the Seven Seas, Pillager of the Pacific, and recently re-elected Keeper of the Flame of Fearfulness, to deliver our keynote address. Our venerable and venal colleague is particularly well-qualified to speak on this subject – the economics of child slavery in a modern piratical world – as he, as a child, was first enslaved, and then accepted as apprentice, by the Raging RedBeard, may

flights of demons sing him to the next village to pillage.¹⁸

BlackBeard stands up, holding up his left hand to swear the pirates' oath.

- May all that I impart at this wicked gathering be evil, abominable, and downright rude!

The audience cheered its approval.

- But first, it is incumbent upon me to call for a minute's raucousness in memory of Egregious Gunther, who ...

The audience fell silent for a second or three, before erupting into cheers and table-thumping and shouts and whistles and jumping up and down and crashing of pewter mugs and ... with a wave of his brawny arm, Blackbeard silenced the crowd, which went from raucous to subdued as the great pirate unfurled Gunther's skull and crossbones and hung it on the great hook behind the chairman's chair ...

Now, pay attention, because this is what happened next:

He took up the stick from the middle of the table and pointed at the flip-chart which two dwarves in bandannas had wheeled into place. The audience strained to see, and prepared to take notes.

- As we know, the good pirate has, from time immemorial, concentrated on stealing large caches of treasure, rum where he can find it, and generally dispatching anyone unlucky enough to be taken prisoner. It's piratical tradition.

There were murmurs of approval as he pointed to the flip-chart, which showed a series of pictures of bulging treasure chests, barrels of rum and a cartoon of a prisoner being made to walk the plank. He cracked one of the dwarves on the head with his staff, and the dwarf flipped the chart.

- Oops, wrong page.

¹⁸ He may well have added 'And may his putting be precise', but he looked far too serious.

He walloped him again, this time on side of the head, and the dwarf went back a page. The new page showed a graph, some equations, and a couple of pie charts. And a picture of a child, crying.

- Better. As these charts clearly show, there are two reasons why allowing the odd prisoner to live is worthwhile. Firstly, they live to tell everyone how terrible you are, and they are as valuable as treasure.

The audience erupted into guffaws and almost as suddenly fell quiet and, the words 'he's going soft in his old age' floated into the unexpected silence. Two rather shifty looking characters – and looking shifty in this company is no mean feat – suddenly looked rather embarrassed, and one of them choked back a snort, making him resemble a slightly startled hyena. BlackBeard shot him a look so filthy it turned his collar black, before picking up one of the dwarves and hurling it at him. The impact knocked the offending pirate unconscious, but the hurled dwarf picked himself up, dusted down his clothes and walked back to the flip chart as the luckless pirate's body was dragged out of the room and thrown down the stairs.

- Going soft in my old age. Piffle!

The audience laughed, a little nervously, and Blackbeard ploughed on, explaining exactly how the increase in notoriety, combined with the extra revenue, increased the amount of rum each pirate could consume on the average voyage. Blackbeard may have understood statistics, and been an unusually thoughtful pirate, but he also knew his audience. Talk to them in their language, and their language was rum!

Blackbeard reached the end of his presentation to warm applause, cheering and random shouts of 'Rum!' and 'Gold!'. BlackBeard picked up a tankard, and shouted to the throng.

- So, let's charge our tankards with rum!

He held up his glass, just as had been done at the beginning of the session, and led the pirate chant.

- Ho, Ho, Ho!

He shouted.

- I said, YO, HO, HO!

An embarrassed hush fell over the pirate horde. There was some whispering. The dwarf looked at BlackBeard, and then dived for cover under the table. A small voice broke the silence.

- Err, no you didn't.

The embarrassed hush turned into a ripple, then a wave, then a force-eight gale of laughter. BlackBeard turned Red.

- I'll give you no you didn't, you insolent pup!

He dived at the speaker. The room was instantly transformed into a mass of flailing fists and split lips, black eyes and dislodged peg legs, with hats flying and rum spilt and parrots squawking overhead, perching on the ceiling fan and hurling walnuts at the melée below. Before long, all that was left was a pile of groaning bodies at the bottom of the stairs, with BlackBeard standing, somewhat bedraggled, his hat dented and his coat ripped, at the top.

- Ho, ho, ho indeed. Whoever heard of such a thing?