

THE QUEST OF THE SILVER SWAN

A Land and Sea Tale for Boys

**BY
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THE QUEST OF THE SILVER SWAN



“WELL, SHIPMATE, OUT GUNNING?”

CHAPTER I

THE RAFT AT SEA

THE sun, whose upper edge had just appeared above the horizon, cast its first red beams aslant a deserted wilderness of heaving billows.

Here and there a flying fish, spurning its usual element, cut the air like a swift ray of light, falling back into the sea again after its short flight with a splash that sent myriad drops flashing in the sunlight.

There were not a few triangular objects, dark in color, and looking like tiny sails, darting along the surface of the sea, first in this direction and then in that. There was a peculiar sinister motion to these fleshy sails, an appearance to make the beholder shudder involuntarily; for these objects were the dorsal fins of sharks, and there is nothing more bloodthirsty and cruel than these “tigers of the sea.”

It was quite noticeable that these monsters had gathered about an object which, in comparison with the vast expanse of sea and sky, was but a speck. It labored heavily upon the surface of the sea, and seemed to possess a great attraction for the sharks.

It was really a heavily built raft, more than twenty feet in length, and with a short, stumpy mast lashed upright amidships. Near each end was a long sea chest, both placed across the raft, and there were also a broken water butt and several empty cracker boxes lashed firmly (as were the chests) to the strongly built platform.

At one end of this ungainly craft, behind one of the chests, lay two men; at the further side of the opposite chest reclined another.

One might have thought the sea chests to be fortifications, for all three men were heavily armed, and each was extremely careful not to expose his person to the party behind the opposite chest.

Between the two boxes lay the figure of a fourth man; but he was flat upon his face with his arms spread out in a most unnatural attitude. He was evidently dead.

Of the two men who were at the forward end of the raft (or what was the forward end for the time being, the ocean currents having carried the craft in various directions during the several past days), of these two, I say, one was a person of imposing, if not handsome, presence, with curling brown hair streaked with gray, finely chiseled features, and skin bronzed by wind and weather; but now the features were most painfully emaciated, and a blood stained bandage was wrapped about his brow.

His companion was a hearty looking old sea dog, well past the half century mark, but who had evidently stood the privations they had undergone far better than the first named.

He was burned even darker than the other, was of massive figure and leonine head, and possessed a hand like a ham. One leg was bent up beneath him, but the other was stretched out stiffly, and it took only a casual glance to see that the old seaman had a wooden leg.

Every few moments the latter individual raised his head carefully and peered over the chest, thus keeping a sharp watch on the

movements of the single occupant of the space behind the other fortification.

This person was a broad shouldered, deep chested man, seemingly quite as powerful as the wooden legged sailor. Privation and hardship had not improved his appearance, either, for his raven black beard and hair were matted and unkempt, and his bronzed face had that peculiar, pinched expression with which starvation marks its victims; and this look did not make his naturally villainous features less brutal.

In truth, all three of these unfortunates were starving to death; the fourth man, who lay so still upon the rough boards between the two chests, was the first victim of the hardships they had suffered for the last ten days.

These four men had been members of the ship's company of the good brig Silver Swan, bound to Boston from Cape Town and Rio Janeiro. After leaving the latter port three weeks before, several severe storms had arisen and the brig was beaten terrifically by the elements for days and days.

Finally, after having every stick wrenched from her and even the jury mast the crew had rigged, stripped bare, the brig, now being totally unmanageable, was blown upon a narrow and barren reef several leagues to the south and west of Cuba.

The crew, who had ere this most faithfully obeyed the captain and mate, Caleb Wetherbee, now believing the vessel about to go to pieces, madly rushed to the boats, and lowering them into the heavy sea, lost their lives in their attempt to leave the brig.

Captain Tarr and mate Wetherbee were able to save only two of the unfortunates—Paulo Montez, a Brazilian, and Jim Leroyd, the latter the least worthy of all the crew.

These four had built the rude raft upon which they had now floated so long, and not daring to remain with the brig during another storm that seemed imminent, they set sail in the lumbering craft and left the well built and still seaworthy brig hard and fast upon the reef.

This storm, which had frightened them from the Swan, was only severe enough to strip their rude mast of its sail and rigging and drive them seemingly far out of the course of other vessels, for not a sail had they sighted since setting out on the raft.

Slowly their provisions had disappeared, while the now calmed sea carried them hither and thither as it listed; and at last the captain and mate had decided to put all hands upon still shorter allowance.

At this, Leroyd, always an ugly and brutal fellow even aboard ship, had rebelled, and had tried to stir up his companion, Paulo, to mutiny against the two officers; but the Brazilian was already too far gone to join in any such scheme (in fact, he died the next forenoon), and Caleb Wetherbee had driven Leroyd to his present position behind the further chest, at the point of his pistol.

Captain Tarr, who had received a heavy blow on the head from a falling block at the time of the brig's wreck, was far less able to stand the hardship than either of his living companions, and, now that ten full days had expired since leaving the Silver Swan, he felt himself failing fast.

Alone, he would have been unable to cope with Leroyd; but Caleb Wetherbee stood by him like a faithful dog and kept the villainous sailor in check. As Leroyd had demanded his share of the water and scanty store of provisions, the mate had, with careful exactness, given him his third and then made him retire behind his chest again; for he could not trust the fellow an instant.

“The scoundrel would put two inches o’ steel between both our ribs for the sake o’ gettin’ the whole o’ this grub,” declared Caleb, keeping a firm grip upon his pistol.

“He’d only shorten my time a little, Cale,” gasped Captain Tarr, a paroxysm of pain weakening him terribly for the moment. “I can’t stand many such times as *that*,” he added, when the agony had passed.

“Brace up, cap’n,” said the mate cheerfully. “You’ll pull through yet.”

“Don’t deceive yourself, or try to deceive me, Caleb,” responded Captain Tarr gloomily. “I know my end is nigh, though I’m not an old man yet—younger than you, old trusty, by ten years. And my life’s been a failure, too,” he continued, more to himself than to his companion.

“Tut! tut! don’t talk like that ’ere. Ye’ll have ter pull through for the sake o’ that boy o’ yourn, you know.”

“I shall never see him again,” declared the injured man, with confidence. “And how can I die in peace when I know that I shall leave my son penniless?”

“Penniless!” exclaimed Wetherbee. “Didn’t you own the brig, an’ ain’t you been makin’ v’y’ges in her for the past ten year?”

“I *did* own the Silver Swan, and I *have* made paying voyages with her,” replied the captain weakly; “but, shame on me to have to say it, all my earnings have been swallowed up by a speculation which turned out to be utterly worthless. A sailor, Caleb, should stick by the sea, and keep his money in shipping; I went into a mine in Nevada and lost every cent I had saved.”

“But there was the Swan,” said the dumfounded mate; “there’ll be the int’rest money on her—and a good bit it should be, too.”

“Aye, *should* be,” muttered Captain Tarr bitterly; “but the brig is on that reef and there’s not a cent of insurance on her.”

“What! no insurance?” gasped Wetherbee.

“No. When I left port last time my policy had run out, and I hadn’t a cent to pay for having it renewed. So, if the old brig’s bones whiten on that reef, poor Brandon will not get a cent.”

“*If* they do,” exclaimed the mate in wonder.

“Yes, *if* they do,” responded Captain Tarr, rising on his elbow and speaking lower, so that there could be no possibility of the man at the other end of the raft hearing his words; “for it’s my firm conviction, Caleb, that we’d done better to stick by the old Swan. This last storm drove hard from the west’ard. Suppose she’d slipped off again into deep water? She didn’t leak enough to keep her sweet, in spite of the terrific pounding she got from waves and rocks, and she might float for weeks—aye, for months—and you know she’d have plenty of company drifting up and down the Atlantic coast.”

“But that ain’t probable, cap’n, though I’ll grant ye that we might have done better by stickin’ by her a while longer.”

“Probable or not, Caleb, I *feel* that it is true. You know, they say a dying man can see some things plainer than other folks.”

Caleb was silenced by this, for he could not honestly aver that he did not believe his old commander to be near his end.

“And we had a valuable cargo, too, you know—very valuable,” murmured Captain Tarr. “I put every cent I received from the sale of the goods we took to Cape Town into this cargo, and would have cleared a handsome profit—enough to have kept both Brandon and me in good circumstances for a year. And then, there is something else.”

“Well, what is it?” Caleb asked, after taking a squint over the top of their breastwork to make sure that Leroyd had not ventured out.

“If I’d got home with the Silver Swan, Caleb, I should have been rich for life, and *you*, old trusty, should have had the brig just as she stood, for the cost of makin’ out the papers.”

“What?” exclaimed Caleb.

He looked at his commander for several moments, and then shook his head slowly. He believed that the privation they had suffered had at length affected even Captain Horace Tarr’s brain.

“I’m not crazy, Caleb,” said the captain faintly. “I tell you I should have been immensely wealthy. Brandon should have never wanted for anything as long as he lived, nor should I; and I had already decided to give the brig to you.”

“What—what d’ye mean if ye *ain’t* crazy?” cried Caleb, in bewilderment.

“Do you remember the man who came aboard the brig at Cape Town, just before we sailed?” asked Captain Tarr, in a whisper, evidently saving his strength as much as possible for his story. “He was a friend of my brother Anson.”

“Anson!” interjected Caleb. “Why, I supposed *he* was dead.”

“He is now,” replied the captain; “but instead of dying several years ago, as we supposed, he had been living in the interior of Cape Colony, and just before he actually did die he gave a package (papers, this man supposed them to be) to an acquaintance, to be delivered to me. I happened to touch at Cape Town before the friend of my brother had tried to communicate with me by mail, and he brought the package aboard the brig himself.

“He did not know what he was carrying—he never would have dared do it had he known—for with a letter from Anson was a package, done up in oil silk, of—diamonds of the purest water!”

“Diamonds!” repeated Caleb.

“Yes, diamonds—thousands of dollars’ worth—enough to make one man, at least, fabulously rich!” The captain slowly rolled his head from side to side. “After all these years the luck of the Tarrs had changed, Caleb. Fortune has ever played us false, and even now, just when wealth was in our grasp, it was snatched from us again.

“After wandering up and down the earth for forty years, Anson finally ‘struck it rich,’ and am I, who was to profit by his good fortune, and the son whom I love more than I do anything else on earth, to lose this treasure after all?”

He fell back upon the raft, and the exertion set the wound in his head to bleeding again. A dark stream appeared beneath the bandage and trickled down his forehead, while he lay, gasping for breath, upon the bit of sailcloth which served him for a bed.

“What did you do with the diamonds?” the mate asked, when the dying man had again become calm.

“I—I have written a letter to Brandon, telling him all about it,” gasped the captain. “That is what I wrote the second day we were on the raft. I dared not take them with me from the brig, and they are hidden in the cabin. I know now that we made a grave mistake in leaving the Silver Swan at all, for she may hold together for months.

“Take—take the papers from my pocket, Cale,” he added, feebly unbuttoning his coat, “and keep them. If you are saved I charge you to give them to Brandon with your own hands, and I can trust you to assist him in every possible way to recover his fortune, should such a thing be possible.”

The mate bent over the unfortunate owner of the Silver Swan, and with trembling hands removed several thick documents from his pocket and thrust them into the breast of his flannel shirt.

As he did so and turned again, he saw the scowling visage of Jim Leroyd peering at them above his chest. Quick as a flash he seized his pistol and aimed it at the sailor; but Leroyd dodged out of view at once. Without doubt, however, he had seen the papers passed from the captain to mate Wetherbee.

“Take good care of them, Cale,” whispered Captain Tarr. “And let nobody else see them. I believe that Leroyd suspected something

back there at Cape Town, for he came into the cabin on an errand just as that friend of poor Anson gave the package into my hands, and I caught him snooping about the companionway several times afterward. It was he I feared most when we left the brig, and therefore dared not take the diamonds with me.”

“I’ll shoot him yet,” muttered the old seaman fiercely, with his weather eye cocked over the top of the chest. “I hated the sight o’ that fellow when he first boarded the brig at New York. His face is enough to bring bad luck to any ship.”

But the captain was not listening to him. He had floated away into a restless slumber, from which he only awoke once to whisper, “Remember, Cale!” and then passed into a dreamless sleep from which there could be no awakening in this world.

Caleb Wetherbee closed the captain’s eyes tenderly, wrapped him in the bit of sailcloth which had served as his bed, and fastened his lifeless body so that no unexpected roll of the raft would precipitate it into the water. Then he took the scant share of food left of the captain’s hoard, and religiously divided it into two equal portions.

“Jim!” he said, when this was done, allowing himself but a moment to gloat over the pitifully meager supply which he laid on the chest lid.

“Aye, aye, sir!” responded the sailor gruffly, cautiously raising his head from behind his fortification.

“Captain Tarr is dead, Jim, and I have divided *his* share o’ the grub. Put down your weapons and come forward to the chest and take

your part. Remember, no slippery business or I'll bore a hole in ye! Step out now."

Suddenly the sailor arose, his ungainly, dwarfish proportions being more manifest now that he was on his feet, and approached his officer, stepping over the body of Paulo without a glance at it.

His fierce eyes lighted eagerly as he saw the little supply of food (he had already consumed all his own), and he seized it at once. While he did so he looked at the wooden legged sailor with a crafty smile.

"Wot was it the old man give ye, Caleb?" he asked familiarly.

The mate scowled fiercely at him, and did not reply.

"Oh, ye needn't act so onery," went on Leroyd. "*I* knowed there was somethin'—money I bet—that was given to the old man at the Cape. He's acted like a new man ever since, and if there's anything in it, I'm goin' ter hev my share, jest like this share o' the grub, now I tell ye!"

"You take that food and git back to your place!" roared Caleb, pointing the huge "bull dog," which had a bore like a rifle, at the fellow's head. "An' let me tell you that I shall be on the watch, I shall, an' it'll be a long say afore you catch Caleb Wetherbee asleep. Ef I ain't saved, *you* won't be, let me tell you, for ef I feel myself a-goin' to Davy Jones, *you'll go along with me!*"

Leroyd sneaked back to his place again, and crouched behind the chest. In that position he could not see the movements of Caleb, who, after a few moments' thought, deposited the packet of papers where he believed no one would think of looking for them.

“There!” he muttered grimly. “If I *do* foller Cap’n Tarr, I reckon these papers’ll never do that scoundrel any good, an’ he can throw this old hulk to the sharks and welcome. If the cap’n’s boy don’t profit by ’em, *nobody* shall.”

Then he folded his arms, the pistol still in his grasp, and continued his task of watching for the rescuing sail, which it seemed would never come.

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