

The Treasure Punt #15

Cresting swells fifteen metres high, the bitter gales blowing at fifty knots, with sheets of water breaching the bows, The Bountiful was buffeted this way and that at the mercy of the storm. The lookouts, at one moment feeling physically on top of the earth, though not emotionally, and another moment surrounded on all sides by a boiling cauldron of liquid which could swallow them up in an instant.

“Tis rough out here in the Cape of Storms,” Captain Blackbird pointed out the bleeding obvious to his first lieutenant.

“Aye, aye, sir, surely not a place for sissies,” Long John Platinum replied.

Then a sudden super-wave hit the boat full-on mid-ships, and the boat listed perilously, as the top of the main mast pierced the water and was split in half as easily as a smoker snapping a matchstick.

“Fleece my flipping fetlock!” Blackbird blurted, admirably shying away from profanity as part of his recently initiated self-improvement program.

“Shunt the cunning punt!” LJP agreed comradely, in the refined and restrained tones befitting his elevated status.

Broken, The Bountiful was swept closer to shore by the Benguela Drift and, severely under-powered by the efforts of the oarsmen, eventually limped into Walvis Bay harbour, dropping anchor in the outer basin. All the crew members gathered on deck to assess the damage, and following heated arguments, consensus was reached that none had the carpentry skills required to repair the main mast. Blackbird and LJP ruminated, but only momentarily, knowing this rare skill would have to be secured elsewhere.

“LJP, this can’t happen again, ever!” Blackbird snapped. “Find me the best boat-builder south of the Sahara, and make sure he also has a stupendous sense of humour.”

“Surely, Captain,” the first lieutenant replied, though puzzled by this strange mix of skills. “But pray sir, why must this man be funny?”

“LJP, don’t you ever think for yer’self?” asked Blackbird pointedly. “Because can’t you see I’m in a foul mood and will stay that way until we’re seaworthy. This man had better whistle while he works. Now, get on with it. Spread the word as far and wide as you can. Make announcements in the Mariner’s Mission, also in the Tattler Times, and don’t forget the Pirate’s Pleasure, and put notices up inside every tavern and inn, and other establishment as well, from here all the way to Beira.”

“That’s thousands of nautical miles away, and these announcements will cost a small fortune,” protested LJP, a commercially-minded pirate.

“I’ll happily spend whatever it takes,” the captain responded. “Without a seaworthy boat we have nothing. And our spoils have been good to boot.”

LJP shrugged before springing into action.

“Oh, and one more thing, LJP,” added Blackbird cryptically. “Make sure you search yourself as well, will ‘yer?”

By the end of the following week simple sailors Seve, Sipho, Steve, Silvio, Sergio, Simon and Stupendo had, with great gusto, paid for and pinned notices on the walls throughout every pub on the Southern African coastline, and LJP had arranged the announcements in every mariner missive.

Though at great cost, the catchy poster, “FUNNY BOAT BUILDER NEEDED BY BLACKBIRD. TOP PAY TO WHISTLE WHILE YOU WORK,” was presented to the entire Southern African sailor community.

But, there was a great hullabaloo when within a fortnight over forty thousand funny boat builders arrived in the small Namibian coastal town. Few could be accommodated, and whole temporary tented villages sprang up in the surrounding sandy patches of the desert. There was almost insurrection when the town, bursting at its seams, almost ran out of food and water, and the local farming community had to come to the town’s rescue. Most distressing of all was when all of the Walvis Bay women, with their children, fled on foot, sprinting manically to Windhoek, driven demented by the relentless annoying whistling, which persistently pierced the dry desert air like swathes of samurai swords, through one eardrum and out the other, and back again, and again, and again.

Even Blackbird was overcome by the positive response to his marketing strategy. Overwhelmed by the sheer number of pre-screening processes required to find good, funny boat builders, he was dismayed and distraught that, even after enlisting the aid of all the other senior officer corps on board The Bountiful, he found none of the shortlisted candidates - forty whittled down from forty thousand - were even capable of building a small rig, let alone a main mast. And he was infuriated that the less capable the candidates were on that technical competency, so too they were proportionately unfunny. Blackbird didn’t laugh once, and became very angry that his investment had proven so costly.

All the while LJP, on the other hand, had spent the last fortnight scouring the dockyards around the coast, pro-bono assisting the grateful boat-builders with an extra pair of hands. Much repartee accompanied the serious construction work.

“You know, you’re very amusing,” he told Boris Bluebeard, a boat-builder as adept at carpentry as caricature.

“You’ll have me in stitches,” he said to Million Mahlangu, clearly as capable of joinery as he was at jokes.

“You’re a real card,” he suggested to Dicky Diamond, who could deliver a dove-tail joint as adroitly as he could drollery.

Having been invited to Walvis Bay by LJP, it was hard for Blackbird to choose between the three funny and brilliant boat-builders, for he was now spoilt for choice.

“But that’s the best place to be,” he mulled. “Good on yer, LJP, let’s have a whisky.”

Treasure Hunting Tip: Talented people with a rare mix of skills are mostly well looked after by their employers, and are generally not on the job market. To attract such candidates through advertising is a waste of time, energy and money, as the huge quantity of applications is always matched by its poor quality. In contrast, the harder work of an executive search brings the far bigger payoff of a smaller quantity but higher quality candidate pool.

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