

The Treasure Punt #19

The Bountiful was becalmed in the middle of the southern Atlantic Ocean, impeding the boat's progress towards St Helena, the small and isolated island where Captain Blackbird knew - well, rather intuited - that Napoleon had long ago buried his many mistresses' jewels, as well as his own collection of bling. Even redoubling the stringent efforts of the oarsmen had not helped to solve the problem, and indeed had exacerbated the predicament, for most had, after days of endless rowing, either died of exhaustion or reported dastardly sick to Talking Bull, the boat's medicine man and sometime surgeon.

"LJP, get all the deckhands mustered up on deck, and pronto!" Blackbird instructed first-hand Long John Platinum. "We need some buggers to swim to the island."

The first-lieutenant willingly obliged, as good subordinates do to sensible instructions from their leaders, and soon the boat's motley bunch of most-ordinary pirate ratings were gathered together expectantly, chattering madly and resembling a vulture colony.

"Now listen up, yer bleeding rascals," shouted Blackbird, "I need some of you to swim to St Helena, and claim a stake over Napoleon's mistresses' burial grounds, before those ambitious Germans set their sights from seas to oceans, and annex the Atlantic."

"Aye-aye, sir," the men mumbled, in a rumbling way, lacking the disciplined resonance of Nazi storm-troopers.

"Now hands-up! Who of you can swim?" the captain challenged.

Understandably, only a small number of hands were raised, and reluctantly so, and far too few for Blackbird's purpose.

"LJP, rig up a plank, will yer," Blackbird instructed, as the junior pirates exchanged worried, nay terrified, glances.

A gangplank was placed off the boat's stern, protruding about a crocodile's length across the water.

"Okay swimming sailors, strip down to your speedos, and don't be shy," our courageous captain cautioned.

Though sheepishly, the deckhands complied with their instructions, their blushes ruddily mingling with their rum-rosey cheeks.

"Now, as a group, though one-by-one," said Blackbird, "jump in and swim to the horizon and back. We're going to time you. LJP, start counting."

Uncertain by Blackbird's ambiguous instructions, though clear on his intent, the swimming sailors all jumped off at different angles into the water below, gathering somewhat haphazardly, and swimming leisurely. All, to a man, were doggy-paddlers.

“Nine thousand, four hundred and twenty seven, nine thousand four hundred and twenty eight,” LJP’s voice droned on and on, until eventually at seventeen thousand, eight hundred and sixty one, the last of the swimming sailors returned. The midday sun was beating down, and the pirates were ruddier than before.

“Righty oh then. Thank you,” said Blackbird, cognisant of his softer side.

“Now, all you landlubber-loving lot,” Blackbird said the larger group of remaining deckhands, “I want you to do the same.”

Even LJP looked suspiciously at his leader, but not with the same wide-eyed, mouth-agape expressions of his more junior cohorts.

“Er ..., Blackbird, they can’t swim,” LJP whispered under his breath to the old seadog, careful not to show any insubordination and humiliate the captain in front of the crew.

“We’ll, we’ll see about that, now keep ‘yer gob to yer’self,” Blackbird whispered back.

“Come on, get on with it!” Blackbird instructed, with more timbre in his throat than was in the plank.

Reluctantly and nervously the simple subordinate sailors jumped ship. They dropped like stones into the sea, the concentric circles of their splashes intermingling into a disturbing eddy. At first all was quiet, eerily so, as the bubbles of their breath burst to the surface. LJP hung his head in shame, as a conspirator of such horrific treatment.

“Wait,” said Blackbird, noticing LJP’s teary eyes, and patting him gently on the back with the round edge of his hook-arm. “Just give it some time,” he added.

Then, after a minute or two, something near miraculous happened. A few heads started to pop and bob like corks on the surface, attached to frantically flaying arms, feet and torsos!

“SWIM, me mateys, SWIM,” Blackbird blurted enthusiastically, becoming overly collegial with the simple sailors.

More and more thrashing heads, with mouths wide open, appeared on the surface, until almost the same number as had jumped from the plank, though admittedly a few short, had joined together like a shoal of frenzied sardines. The water gurgled with the wilfulness of the surviving sailors.

“Off you go now, to the horizon and back,” cajoled Blackbird, and the sailor-shoal slowly turned direction away from the boat.

“Eleven thousand, one hundred and six, eleven thousand one hundred and seven, eleven thousand, one hundred and eight!” exclaimed LJP when the swimming sailors clung collectively to the rudder.

Blackbird mustered every pirate on board for an announcement, his swimming teams still in their speedos.

“Firstly, I want to congratulate Siphon, Severus, Seve, Steve, Simon, Sergio, Squawk, Sparrow and Snake-Eyes. You’ve all been promoted, and begin an important mission in the morning,” Blackbird announced, his chest filling with pride. “As for those others,” he went on, his voice derisive and his nose upturned as if sniffing smelly gorgonzola or his sock. “They’ll walk the plank again at sunrise.”

Following a promotional, liquor-fuelled ceremony, the officers returned to their mess for the evening.

“How the hell did that happen?” asked LJP of the miracle he had witnessed.

“It’s not miraculous at all,” Blackbird answered. “You know I’ve lately been reading, as part of my self-improvement program. Well, yesterday I finished Lee Iacocca’s memoir of how he turned around Chrysler.”

LJP looked back perplexed.

“Skills like swimming mean nothing,” explained the captain to his less literate colleague. “It’s passion you want in your people.”

“Uh huh ...” LJP added insightfully.

“And for relaxation, I also read up read up in the latest You magazine that the best way to teach a baby to swim is to throw them in. You’ve witnessed yourself how fast we can all, or least most of us, learn to swim.

“Amazing,” suggested LJP.

“Try it yer’self tomorrow,” concluded Blackbird, who as we already know, was not the captain for nothing.

Treasure Hunting Tip: Rather recruit people of higher passion and lower skill, than highly-skilled but dispirited folk. Whereas most basic skills can be learnt, attitudes are far harder to change.

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