

CHAPTER IX  
THE KING'S PATH<sup>1</sup>  
(1618)

“Go, Soul, the body's guest,  
Upon a thankless errand  
Fear not to touch the best;  
The truth shall be thy warrant  
Go, since I needs must die,  
And give the world the lie.

Tell men of high condition,  
That manage the estate,  
Their purpose is ambition,  
Their practice only hate  
And if they once reply,  
Then give them all the lie.

Tell fortune of her blindness;  
Tell nature of decay;  
Tell friendship of unkindness;  
Tell justice of delay  
And if they will reply,  
Then give them all the lie.”

SIR WALTER RALEIGH

I HAVE never seen such a crew of pitiful mean rascals. The most had the visages of dockyard rats and souls as ill-favoured as their skins. They had come out for lust of gold, and thought only that their pockets were empty. 'Twas their own cowardly and rebellious spirits that made them so.

I mind when we lay at Punto Gallo there was a page boy spread a tale that Sir Walter's cabin was full of money. Presently some of my fine gallows birds conspired to set the Admiral ashore and sail off with his flagship and his treasure; and, being of so weak a spirit, came crawling to me to seek my leadership. I drew my sword, and with the flat of it gave them a mighty lesson, and then with the point of it drove them forthwith to the Admiral, and discovered to him their treason. Figure to yourself the situation of a gentleman in such knavish company!

You must know that, with Captain Keymis dead and half our force destroyed, we had given up hope of success in Guiana, though the Admiral was still hot for a return to San Thome, whence he promised to bring a load of gold or leave his body by his son's. His captains looked coldly at the project, and some of the baser sort were all for remaining in the islands, and overhauling Spanish ships from the Main. Piracy is but a dirty trade, but I held this to be no piracy but lawful war, seeing that Spain has ever treated all English voyagers as trespassers worthy of a felon's death. 'Tis idle, I held, to prate of peace when there is no peace, and in the Indian Seas there is never aught but war. Had I followed my own will I would have favoured this enterprise, but Sir Walter was set against it, and I had no mind to cross his purpose. So I opposed the designs of the captains, and warned the Admiral that mutiny was in the air. But the boldest commander on earth cannot hold a flotilla of

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<sup>1</sup> From the notes of the Frenchman, Jacques Pommerol, who afterwards forsook the sea, settled at La Rochelle, and wrote an epic in the classic manner on his adventures, which he called the *Jacquesiade*.

rebels, and at the isle of Granada the captains Whitney and Wollaston sailed away on their own errands. I have heard no more of them. I trust their traitorous bodies have long ago decked a gibbet at Cartagena.

We purposed at first to make Sir Walter's colony of Virginia, to victual our ships and rest our men, with the notion of seeking Guiana again next year. But the temper of the crews was such that, had we landed at Virginia, they would have fled to the woods or joined the corsarios of these coasts. Presently Sir Walter, whose mind moved slow from his great sorrow, came round to another opinion, and at a council of war – which I attended as chief of the soldiers during Captain George Raleigh's illness – it was resolved to sail for home. We stayed awhile at St. Christopher's Island, while the Admiral wrote letters to the King. These he sent home in his fly-boat by means of his cousin, Master Herbert, and with him he dispatched the idlest and most rebellious of the crews. Had I been Master Herbert I would have feared for my throat in the company of such a rabble. But it seems that God favoured gallantry, for I have heard that he reached England in safety.

You must know that we hourly expected news of the Spanish galleons, which had been sent out to take us captive. Our captains were in great terror of falling into their hands, for they had some knowledge of the tender mercies of Spain, and we had no more than four ships. Had we sailed the straight course for home, it was feared we should meet with this fleet or other Spanish ships of war, and we were in no mettle for fighting. Sir Walter advised that we make our course due north by the isle called New Found Land, from which there is a way to England over a narrower ocean. When we sailed from St. Christopher's our fleet was the Admiral's *Destiny*, on which I sailed with the best part of the fighting men, while Sir John Ferme, Captain Pennington, and Captain King had the other ships in charge. I thought ill of these captains, save only King, who was an old lieutenant of Sir Walter's and a stubborn, honest, rough fellow.

We saw little of our consorts, for off the coasts of Virginia we came into a nest of storms, and were sore delayed for more than a fortnight. By the first days of May we were well into the northern seas, where the winds cut like sword-blades and the mist would wrap us round in chilly garments. Those who had sailed this way before were in mortal fear of floating ice, which comes down from the Pole, and has wrecked ere this many a goodly ship. Half of us were ill of the scurvy, and, though the sharp air had cured us of the common fever, we were taken with fits of ague so that scarce one man was free. In my day I have seen many companies of broken men, but never have I beheld a crew so desponding and weary as sailed with us those wintry waters. Ill-fortune takes the steel from a man's heart, and that rabble of ours were but yeast and mire. First they moped and despaired, and then they threatened, so that soon every man had a dark countenance and murder in his eyes. Meantime, in his own cabin the Admiral sat alone with his grievous thoughts.

One day I sought him and bade him be wary. "There are those here," I said, "who bear you little love. You may find a knife in your back some fine morning."

"'Twould be welcome," he said wearily. "Do you think I have any room left for fear, when I have buried my all? As well a shipman's knife as any other ending."

"Nevertheless you are our Captain," said I, "and if you fall 'twill go hard with my honest self and a score of lads who trust their lives to me."

"Then take the lead," he answered. "I am no better than a passenger. Sail where you please, my good Jacques, so long as you leave me alone." And he turned wearily away.

The Admiral had long cast a spell over me, so that I loved and revered him. But now God's hand was heavy upon him, and I was fain to ease his burden. With his consent, I took upon myself the

captaincy, and I promise you I brought that rabble into some order. There were twenty lads who had fought by my side in the Low Countries, and with their aid I kept a fair discipline. I could see anger and scowling wherever I went, till soon I fancied that a seaman's knife was more likely to find my back than Sir Walter's.

One night as I sat alone at supper – for Captain George was still sick, and Sir Walter supped alone – a page-boy came down the ladder as though the Devil were at his heels. He bumped heavily on the floor, and when I picked him up showed a face like a dish-clout.

“Mutiny!” he cries. “They are cutting throats in the fo’c’s’le. The men have got at the muskets, and are fighting for the powder-barrels.”

It took me no longer than a breath to spring up the ladder and run down the deck to the forepart of the ship. We were rolling heavily, and I near broke my head on the bulwarks. I heard no shots, but from the fo’c’s’le came the murmur of men in close and deadly conflict. I had rather hear a yelling like wild cats than that desperate hum.

A fellow had been set with a musket to guard the fo’c’s’le ladder. There was but the one thing to do. I jumped clean down the steps, alighting plump on his shoulders, and knocking man and musket endways. In a second I was on my feet, roaring to the dogs to lay down their arms. I saw what I had feared. Some half-dozen of my lads were pinned in a corner where a door led to the powder store, and against them was a great press of seamen fighting desperately with dirks to win an entrance.

My shouts won a moment's respite. A dozen faces turned on me, their eyes bright with panic and murder. Then I reflected that I had no sort of arms.

“Every dog to his place!” I roared. “I have a gunner now standing by the powder. In three minutes, if I forbid him not, he will blow this ship and all in it to the skies. I care little for death, but the sight of you will cheer the Devil.”

They believed me, or at any rate the resolution in my voice awed them. The press slackened, and I tore men out of it till my fellows could breathe. Help was on the way, for I saw the ladder-hole filling with my men-at-arms. I was half stifled, but by dint of much buffeting I got the mob separated, and presently had the muskets and knives from their hands.

The worst I had pinioned and set soldiers to guard them.

“Now,” said I, “I am about to hold an inquisition. You will assemble on deck, and I will have the truth of this conduct.”

I had them drawn up by the foremast, the leaders in my soldiers' charge, and the others, a sullen crowd, huddled against the bulwarks. A pale moon shone from a watery sky, and ever and anon a wrack of cloud would darken the heavens. A lantern swung from a nail on the mast, flickering with every gust. I sat down on a barrel with a pistol on my knees. “Now for the meaning of this treason,” said I.

At first no man spoke. Then, when I promised hanging, a fellow found his voice. He had an honest, foolish face, and I had marvelled to find him in the business.

“We fear to go back,” he said gruffly. “Some of us have fallen out with the law, and if we land in England will march straight to the gallows.”

“Ay, I can well believe it,” I said. “And to your former ill deeds you have added mutiny on the high seas, for which hanging is too easy a shrift.”

The fellow was still resolute. “We came out to Guiana in hope of gold, and gold meant pardon. But we have no gold, so we look to save our necks. It is but human nature, master.”

“How many of you be gallows-birds?”

It seemed there was a round dozen, and their crimes were pitifully small. One had stolen beyond the value of forty shillings. Another had lain in Exeter jail for cattle-lifting, and had broken prison the night before his hanging. One had fired the stacks of an enemy; one had slain an innkeeper in a brawl; while still another had beaten a King’s Justice for old scores. My heart warmed to such trivial malefactors.

“If that be your grievance, lads,” I said, “I can promise that it will be mended. The Admiral will land you in Ireland, that you may be out of the King’s danger. I have no love for the laws that oppress the poor and let the rich go free. Keep your minds easy. But, touching this late conduct of yours, you will go on bread and water for five days. And those who incited it will have twenty lashes apiece. To your quarters!”

But no man moved, and I could see by their eyes ’twas no common mutiny. The same fellow spoke again:—

“Your pardon, sir, but we have not showed all that is in our hearts. We would save our own necks, but there is another neck in deadly peril. Whatever our danger from the law, the Admiral’s is tenfold greater; at least so folks say. He is going home to death. We would restrain him, master.”

Then I cursed them roundly, for venturing to lay their idle tongues to Sir Walter’s name. I banned them up and down the skies for presuming to interfere with their betters. But the same thought had always been in my own head, and I was amazed to find so much reason in the swabs. The man never winced, but looked at me with honest, dog-like eyes.

“Presumption or no, master, it is death for Sir Walter, and we of this ship would save him. We know him for a good captain, and would plead with him and keep him out of England. He hath many crows to pluck with the Dons, and here is the whole ocean for the plucking. We think as how he can serve England better by keeping the high seas than by putting his neck under the King’s girdle.”

I told them I had heard enough, and sent them packing. But the fear of those tarry-souled knaves had infected my own thoughts. I went to Sir Walter’s cabin, but found him asleep. As I knew that of late he had slept little, I had not the heart to wake him, but retired to my own quarters and meditated till the small hours.

Next morning we were come into a pleasant sea, with the sun shining and a favouring west wind. I went to the Admiral and found him on deck sniffing the breeze – the first time for days that he had been forth of his cabin. He faced me with a brisker countenance and gave me a cheerful good-morning.

“Last night I slept,” he said. “For a little I contrived to forget, and this morning I am the better for it. You look grey about the eyelids. Master Jacques.”

“I have cause,” said I. “Last night, while you slept, I was quelling a mutiny. Nas, nay, sir, do not mistake. I have no hurts. ’Twas an innocent and weakly rising. We carry some gallows-birds aboard,

and they feared to land in England. In your name I promised them the boon of Irish soil. But they pled for more than themselves, for there is a kind of decency in the rascals. They are mortally concerned about their Admiral's fate."

Raleigh looked far out to sea. "There is magnanimity about salt water," he said. "that tinctures very sorry knaves with kindness. But what would they have me do?"

"Like them, evade England. I think they would have you turn pirate, that you may get back from the galleons something of what Spain has cost you."

"And your thoughts, good Jacques?" he asked.

"Oh, as for me, I think piracy a sorry trade, but under your flag 'twould be fair and equal war. I have pondered the matter during the night watches, and this is my counsel. You are too great a leader to waste on the scurvy tribe of your ill-wishers. You hold the commission of my good master, the King of France. I will steer you to a French port, where you will be nobly welcome. A way will be found to repay all who have embarked their substance in this venture. Then, sir, you and I will take the sea in a King's ship, and with us will go the best blood of France and England. 'Fore God, we will harry Spain till no galleon dare put its nose outside Cadiz Bay."

"And this is your considered counsel, Master Jacques?" he asked.

"My considered counsel, sir," I said.

He walked a few paces up the deck, his chin on his breast. Then he laid an arm about my shoulder.

"'Tis not mine," he said. "You tempt me, good friend, but more by your loyalty than your designs. 'Twould be a heartsome task to sail the seas with you and twenty honest gentlemen. I am not so old but my blood stirs at the thought. We should make a gallant company, Master Jacques – you and nephew George, and Jack Carew, and a dozen of your Breton sea-dogs. We should harry the Dons and be outlawed by every Court in Europe. Nay, we might restore that old warfare between Spain and England, without which there can be no lasting peace. But 'tis a boy's dream. For, mark you, I have left something very precious behind me in England which I must ransom."

I looked my bewilderment.

"My good fame," he said. "I have ever faced my destiny. You would not have me run from it at the last. Look you, I have stood before all England for something which is half forgotten. I have preached the gospel of an ocean empire and of plantations in the West. I have urged that if England is to stand high in Europe she must fight her battles overseas. Of late few have heeded me. I was like an owl hooting in the churchyard among things dead and moss-grown. But this expedition hath wrought a change. The eyes of England are again upon me. Had I won, the King and his Council would have swung round with the new tide. But I have failed, you say. Ay, but there is hope for my gospel, if none for me."

I began to see light in his argument.

"What would become of it," he asked, "if I fled the land? 'Raleigh,' all would say, 'is turned pirate and Frenchman.' They would not blame me, but to England I would be as dead. I would have shrunk from my last duty, and God does not prosper a coward."

"But, sir," I said, "if they slay you, what becomes of your high plans?"

He smiled in his odd, subtle way, his eyes looking far into some untravelled country.

“They will flourish, for my blood will water them. *Sanguis martyrum semen imperii*. These last days I have been reading in Plutarch of Julius Caesar, and find much comfort. For mark what Julius did. He built the Empire of Rome, but the Empire would not have endured but for his death. ’Twas Brutus’ dagger that sealed the work. I have often a fancy that the great Julius knew of the plot and welcomed it, for he believed that such a structure must be baptized with the blood of the builder.”

“You choose death, then, of your free will?” said I, “I am an old campaigner and have often faced it, but God knows I have not the heart to walk to it with so calm an eye.”

He smiled sadly. “Your flattery is ill-placed. I have nothing to live for but my dreams. I have buried my dear son, and for my wife I can best save the poor relics of my fortunes by returning home. My old companions are all dead and forgotten. I have only dreams to furnish my bare house of life, and for those dreams I must spend what remains to me.”

I could have wept at his words, but ’twas not for me to frustrate so high a nobility.

“Will you tell the crews?” I asked hoarsely. “They are in an ill temper, and will heed only you.”

A trumpet blew the assembly, and yesternight’s mutineers, besides my loyal fighting-men, gathered below the poop. Raleigh stood by the rudder, looking cheerfully as if he had a pleasant tale to tell.

“Dear hearts,” he said, “it has been told me that you are concerned about the future. Fear not. for I will land no man in England against his will. Those who desire it I will put ashore in Ireland with some provision for their sustenance. It has been told me also that you grieve for the fate of your Admiral, and would have me keep the seas or seek a French port. Your charity stirs me greatly, but you waste your pity. I have nothing left to me but my honour, and I go to redeem it. Think me not boastful, but I hold death as no more than a thistle’s down, if thereby I can come to my desire. If they slay me, England will think the better of me, and in a hundred years men’s minds will turn to my thoughts, and see their worthiness. Fear not for me, brave lads. ’Tis for England’s sake and her unborn people’s that I must return. You would not hinder me from so great a joy?”

There was no answer from the crews, but there were few dry eyes among them. And these were the fellows who twelve hours before would have flung us both into the sea.