

The Town Drunk

Presents

Cable and the High Seas

Mikal Trimm

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Being the Journal of Captain Judicious Fairweather, Commander of His Omnipotence's Ship the *Tossport*, on this Thirteenth Day of --, 17--:

The men are in hearty spirits, all things considered. We have weathered a storm of inordinate malice, but our vessel remains seaworthy. Amazingly, none of our rations were lost (but for a keg of wine of rare vintage that somehow emptied itself during the storm), and the ship hardly lists to starboard at all.

There is, alas, a minor problem. During the storm, we managed to burden ourselves with two rather odd passengers. They claim to have been blown aboard by the high winds. I am not sure that their explanation is acceptable...

“I want to be a pirate.”

A boy of a certain age, full of wonder and merriment, high on the drug that is youth, might say such a thing flippantly, without thought: “I want to be a sword swallower,” he might say with the same vigor, or “I want to be a burden on my parents.”

This boy, however, this moppet with silver hair and ancient eyes, was Cable, the oldest boy in the world. (Or worlds, if you prefer, since Cable didn't discriminate.) And the recipient of said comment was not a parent, inured by years of such fantastical declarations, but a dog.

An *ugly* dog.

In fact, the dog was so ugly that, if a troll considered cretinous even amongst his own tribe were to be given a “Construct-Your-Own-Ugly-Mutt” kit, the result would be a far sight prettier than the dog in question. The dog had been worst-in-show at so many contests across the multiverse that his reign was virtually unchallenged. (There was, occasionally, the disgruntled young upstart, some poor canine who felt he had the ugliness gift in spades; it was always a heartrending sight to see the puppy, branded merely hideous, slink away from the competition,

ratlike tail between his legs.)

This was, in other words, one pug-ugly dog. (The fact that he considered himself handsome has no real bearing on reality—*any* reality. Pick one.)

“I want to be a pirate.” Cable hunched into a position he considered menacing, his legs bent outward, his face squeezed into a rictus of savagery. The overall effect, unfortunately, was that of a man indecently troubled by his bowels.

The dog, whose name changed as often as a politician’s promises, raised an eyebrow. (His *only* eyebrow, truth be told, but why harp on the subject?) “A pirate, my dear boy? As in ‘yo-ho-ho and I’ll bugger yer mum’ sort of pirate?”

Cable raised an eyebrow himself. (Cable *did* have two eyebrows—they just tended to work as independent agents, not actually troubling themselves to pay attention to his wishes.) His face, unready for such an abrupt change in its personal scenery, tried to accommodate him by rearranging its features haphazardly, finally settling for a look of hopeful despair.

“I *want*,” he said again, “to be a *pirate*.” The air behind him began to shimmer, and the dog smelled a hint of salty spray.

“Well.” After all, what else was there to say? Perhaps Cable would learn something from the experience. For the first time. *Since* Time. “What are we waiting for? After you, m’lad.”

“Arrrrr,” Cable grunted as he stepped through the rift he’d made.

The boy (as he has assured me, on more than one occasion, that he is) is taking to the sea like a fish out of water. That is to say, he huffs around, mouth open, eyes gaping, and he never seems to quite understand that ships move. Strangely, I’m not sure that the “Tosspot” understands either, since the youth never actually falls down. As such.

The three-legged beast that travels with him—a dog, I’m given to understand, but I have my misgivings—is another sort of fish entirely...

“Rapture.”

The sea was a billowing, blue-green blanket beneath them, an errant bit of a giant’s laundry that had settled, fortuitously, at their feet. Well, below their feet. Somewhat. If one didn’t squint too closely and notice the darker masses of enormous deadly sharks, killer seaweed, and unidentifiable *things* that lurked beneath the surface.

But the sky was very nice, and the winds weren’t *too* salty, and Cable nodded in agreement. “Yes, this is the life.”

The dog rephrased the comment. “No, dear boy. I’m saying that my name is now ‘Rapture.’ It is a new day and all.”

Cable stirred, unlocking his chin from the mop he’d been using as a prop. “Ah, I see. How fitting, though, that you would choose as your name, today of all days, a word such as—”

“Sorry, my boy, but you missed a spot over here.”

Rapture moved out of the way as Cable took a casual swipe at the boards beneath them. Unlike Cable, who seemed able to sway and stumble in a way that somehow replicated the motion of the waves, the dog just stumbled. And, occasionally, *rolled*. It was as if he were involved in some ancient folk-dance but didn’t quite know all of the steps. He was dancing a mazurka, but the band was playing a schottish, and though his legs tried to adjust, his stomach refused to get with the program. Thus the need for the mop.

Cable stopped Rapture with an outthrust foot as the deck played fetch with the dog. Their combined weight, shifting against the rolling seas, snapped the mop-handle, and Cable fell limply to the deck, his face coming down inches from Rapture.

“Hey, I have an idea,” he said, smiling.

“No.” The dog slinked away from Cable’s grinning, somewhat flattened face. “Whatever it is, my boy, the answer is...”

Clunk.

Pad, pad, pad, *clunk*. Rapture turned and walked back to Cable. Pad, pad, pad, *clunk*.

“It’s a perfect fit!” Cable brushed a few errant wood shavings from his breeches and tried unsuccessfully to swagger while standing. “Now you’re a real pirate dog. *Arrrrr!*”

The dog raised his stump of a leg and shook the peg that Cable had whittled for him. It stubbornly stayed in place.

“Shiver me timbers,” he said.

“That’s the spirit!” said Cable.

The seas are calm, the wind is soft, and all hint of trouble seems to be behind us. I can feel the tension leaving the men—they are back to their standard routine, cleaning decks, mending sails, even singing the occasional tune.

My only concern is for my kitten, Misses Tumtum. I wish I knew where she was hiding, dash it all...

“But don’t you know any *songs*?”

Cable was confused. The crew of the *Tosspot* were terrible pirates. Not a one of them had an eyepatch, or a hook hand, or even a *scar*, for that matter. (Well, Old William had a scar, true, but since he had to drop his trousers to show it off, it didn’t seem very pirate-like.) The men *bathed*. Worse, the crew didn’t even try to be scurrilous—when Mudlow the cabin boy dropped the Captain’s dinner plate one evening, the harshest comment he could muster was, “Oh, deary me.” Pitiful, really.

Cable, on the other hand, had made himself over into the very model of a high-seas marauder. His hair stood from his head in sticky spikes, and the tar hardly ever dripped into his eyes. His beard was tarred as well, and braided through with bits of cannon fuse. (No one thought to wonder how Cable had grown a beard in a matter of hours, of course, just as no one had yet noticed that the Captain’s cat was mysteriously absent.) He’d been unable, alas, to secure a parrot, but with some leftover pitch, a few seagull feathers, and a bilge rat...

“Songs? Is it songs that you want, then?” First Mate Dropsy’s eyes lit up. “Why, we know simply *scads* of songs. In fact, Tudlow, Bracket, and I were in the ‘Men’s Chorus and Ballroom Dance Team’ at university.”

Second Mate Tudlow chimed in. “Oh, *do* let’s have a bit of the old croon, shall we? What say you, Bracket?” Bracket, who was not a mate of any sort but tried not to let it bother him, simply smiled and nodded his assent. His neck clicked with each nod, as if he’d done it many times before.

“Lovely, then! What shall we perform? Oh, I know, let’s do ‘Those Sporting Boys of Pudley.’”

In less time than it took Rapture to think, *No, really, you shouldn’t bother*, the three men leapt up to the forecastle, tidied their wigs, and joined arms. Bracket produced a small wooden flute.

“Give us a ‘c,’ Bracket. A *bouncy* ‘c’!” Dropsy gave a little titter. “Sorry. Couldn’t resist a bit of nautical humor, what?” Bracket blew a soft note, the three men followed with a soft hum, and Rapture quickly curled into a tight, lopsided ball, accidentally thwacking himself on the snout with his wooden leg.

“Perhaps the pain will preserve my sanity,” he muttered. Cable simply stood and stared, for once at a loss for words. And the song, as songs tend to do whether you want them to or not, began:

*Oh, would you hear the story of
Those dashing daring boys
That hail from lovely Pudley,
Dear old Pudley-udley-udley?*

*O, would you, could you stay a bit
Sit down, and do not stray a bit
Our tale begins, and this is it,
And you won't have to wait for it
Again, this is the start of it,
The sto-o-o-o-ory
Of those spo-o-o-o-o-rting
Boys of Pud, oh Pud, oh
Middledy-mud, oh
Piddledy paddledy Pudley!*

When the song (all twenty-seven verses, some done in screeching falsetto to indicate the gentle trills of the female characters) finally permitted the air to flow untroubled once more, there was silence but for the recurrent thud of Rapture's wooden leg upon his skull.

"Oh, honestly," First Mate Dropsy said, bowing, "there's no need for applause!"

Second Mate Tudlow turned to Cable. "So, old—er, young man. What did you think of our little number?"

Cable finally closed his mouth, slowly, and with the needed intervention of both hands; his jaw squeaked audibly. "Well, I." Pause. "That is, I." Further pause. "It." Then his inner diplomat, never the strongest member of Cable's personal Cabinet, fled his post entirely. "There weren't any 'aaaarr's'!"

Tudlow drew himself up haughtily. "Well, I would say that there were as many 'r's as were necessary to the piece..."

"Not 'r's, *aaaaarrrr's!* And you didn't mention bottles of rum, or dead men's chests, or strange and curious diseases, or a woman named Salty Sal, or *anything!*" Cable was livid. The heat from his face was melting the tar in his hair, and at least two of the fuses in his beard started smoking spontaneously. Even Rapture had to admire Cable's general resemblance to something approaching pirate-ness at the moment.

"*This* is the sort of song I'm talking about!" Cable joined the men on the forecandle deck, indicating with his arched eyebrows either: one, that they should give up the stage, or two, that it was raining frogs and everyone needed to run screaming back to the protection of the fjords. Dropsy, Tudlow, and Bracket gave way, grudgingly.

Like many a great singer, Cable cleared his throat, demanding attention. Like many a seasoned bard, he stood straight, thrusting back his shoulders and raising his head to look into the far reaches of the Unknown for inspiration. Like many a celebrated minstrel, he took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the very vapor of the troubadour's art.

Then the first note crawled pleading from his throat, and any resemblance to matters Euterpic ended. The sound made by Rapture's wooden leg against his head was now a staccato rhythm

previously mastered only by a manic woodpecker that had somehow managed to find a caffeinated bird-feeder in close proximity to an ironwood tree during a major earthquake.

Admittedly, Cable's song contained all the elements necessary for even the most bloodthirsty cutthroat. There was the lovely bit about doubloons dripping with blood, the amazing middle-eighth comparing scurvy to the shining face of Dead Mathilda, Queen of Miscreants, and the almost unutterably unspeakable verse thirteen, which somehow managed to fit alcohol, buggery, murder, the lash, the gangplank, taxes, and terrible things about someone's mum into a solemn pirate's prayer. Cable was, as they say in certain circles, *on*. Of course, those circles exist in Hell, but...

When the third or fourth seagull landed lifeless on the *Tosspot*'s deck, though, the crew decided that the show must *not* go on. Seagulls, by and large, should not be falling from the sky with nooses of hair and seaweed about their necks.

"How do we stop him?" Dropsy whispered to the dog.

Rapture quit beating himself about the head, shook himself, and said, "You have two choices. You can either scuttle the ship," and at that there were a few thoughtful nods, "or you can join him."

After a hasty crew-meeting, and then a re-vote when someone brought up the notion that the Captain might take umbrage if the *Tosspot* were to suddenly go missing under several fathoms of water, the men closed their eyes, prayed to their respective deities, and joined Cable for the choruses.

Rapture watched as the feathered rat on Cable's shoulder managed to tear itself away from its pitch-soaked post and hurl itself overboard. *I know exactly how you feel*, he thought.

There is a strange undercurrent of confusion afflicting my men. While they continue to complete the chores that are their duty, they tend to lose concentration at the most inopportune moments, their eyes glazing, their lips mouthing strange, heretofore unknown phrases.

I would blame the odd pair who now "grace" our ship, simply because of my intuition as a Captain, but truthfully, they've done nothing but talk nonsense.

Admittedly, their nonsense is very convincing, at times...

The stars winked at each other in some stellar conspiracy, the moon hid in shadowed secrecy, and the sea took notes, reflecting the covert code of twinkles and glimmers back to the heavens as a message in response. The night breeze carried a thin shroud of mist in its grip, censoring out the naughty bits, most likely.

Cable lay on the poop deck (which he had chosen simply for the novelty of its name) and watched the evening slip past. “This is the life, eh, Rapture?”

“Thunderations!”

“Oh, dear. Should I get the mop?”

“No, no, lad. I’m merely noticing that it is, in fact, a new day, and thus I am now to be called ‘Thunderations!’”

“And the shouting is part of the name, is it?”

“I’m afraid so. All part of the air of mystery and danger that surrounds me, you understand.”

Cable nodded. “‘Mystery and danger,’ eh? So I take it that you’re feeling a bit... *pirately*, then?”

The dog shrugged. “Well, my stomach has settled, at least.”

There was a noise from the port side. Cable looked right immediately—

“*Port*, Cable.”

—left *almost* immediately. A shape huddled in the shadows, doing its best to skulk. Unfortunately, it hadn’t quite gotten the notion that ‘skulking’ and ‘cringing’ were two very different activities.

“Hello, Bracket.” Thunderations! stood gingerly on his three legs and peg. “Glad you could make it.”

Bracket quit skringing and shuffled into the moonlight. “Beggin’ yer pardon, but how’d you know it were me?”

The dog pondered. “Well, you weren’t still whistling ‘Those Sporting Boys of Pudley,’ for one.”

“Ooh, aye. I do be hatin’ that song.”

“And,” the dog continued, “I smell fresh pitch—which is unusual, because Cable’s tar has already lost its heady scent, I must say, leaving only *Eau du Cable* in its absence.”

Cable sniffed himself, stymied by this last comment, but Bracket nodded slowly.

“And, finally, you tend to click when you nod. I’d imagine this malady comes from repetition, if I’m not mistaken?”

Bracket started to nod again, froze, and then rolled his head in a full circle. The firecracker *pops* engendered by this motion were effective, to say the least. “Ahhh...” he said, and rolled his head

in the other direction. The firecrackers became full-fledged rockets. Some of the sparks settled in Bracket's eyes.

Cable rushed forward, losing interest in the poop deck. "What did you say?"

Bracket backed away, and now his face shone in the light of the moon and stars. Well, *patches* of his face, at least. Bracket had tried to apply the makeup of the pirate in order to give an impression of danger. Instead, like a dowager new to the art of face-painting, he had merely smeared his hairless face with gunk. His eyebrows fought to separate themselves from his forelocks, his eyelashes, and, finally, each other. The battle was, alas, futile. "Umm, beggin' yer pardon, master, but I be done said some several things—"

"No, no, that thing you said after your neck went all pop-py on us."

"Um... 'ahhh'?"

Cable frowned. "Oh, sorry."

Thunderations! cleared his throat. "Tell me, Bracket, have you always talked that way?"

"And which way might that be then, if'n ye don't mind me askin'?"

"Well, in a way that is, shall we say, markedly different than how everyone else on the ship speaks."

Bracket nodded in understanding. Pop, pop. "No, no." He smiled proudly. "Self-taught."

"I only ask, you understand, because you sound very much like a—"

"Pirate!" Cable shouted with an embarrassing amount of glee.

"Sshhhh!" Bracket quickly put his hand to Cable's mouth, glanced both ways (poppoppoppop) and held a finger to his lips. "We don't be wantin' just everyone to know, now do we, gents?" He smiled a crooked smile, made almost sinister by the tar he'd managed to dab on his teeth.

"Oh, no, of course not, we wouldn't want to alert those not cognizant to, that is we must needs be aware of the delicacy of the, er, um..." Cable tried to express himself in the proper way, then realized his error. *Proper* was right out. "Ooh, aye. Aarr." That seemed to do the trick.

Thunderations!, not quite ready to join the ranks of the monosyllabic, asked, "But why, pray tell, did you decide to begin speaking in this particular, um, idiom?"

Bracket put a finger aside his nose and gave a wink. The finger stuck, but Bracket decided to speak anyway, ignoring the whistling sound that accompanied his response. "Well, I was listening (*tweet*) to the lad's singin' (*toot*), and I starts to thinkin' to myself (*warble*), 'What's all this, then? I mean, what's it all about?' (*twittle*) Er, would you be excusin' me for a moment?"

Bracket turned away, braced a foot against his forearm, and shoved, thus releasing his finger, along with a healthy amount of nostril, from his tar-blackened nose. He turned back around, his eyes glinting wetly in the starlight. “Now, as I was sayin’ ... ooowwww!”

Cable’s eyes widened. “What? What was that you said?”

“Er... it were ooowww, thankee.”

“Oh, sorry. Never mind.”

Bracket continued his speech, fighting the urge to grab his injured nose and thus run the risk of pulling it entirely off his face. “I was sayin’ that I listened to the song ye was, er, attemptin’ to sing, and some of the words sort o’ dribbled in my ears when I wasn’t holdin’ my hands against ‘em tight enough. All that talk about gold, and ships, and Salty Sal... and I was thinkin’, ‘Ye know, old Bracket wouldn’t mind havin’ some gold, or a ship, or maybe a taste o’ salt now and then,’ when it hits me!”

“Ah, you had an idea, then?” the dog asked.

“Naah. The rat what jumped off the young master’s shoulder bounced off me head. That were one big rat, so say I. Made me a bit dizzy, mates. But when I quit hearin’ that ringin’ in me ears—”

“Ah, from the blow to the head,” Cable said.

“Nah. From yer singin’, lad! Once I was clear o’ that cat’s screechin’, I lay there in my bunk and *thought*. Like how as no one really owns anything, and as how the sea is like a vast lady what has many suitors, but few lovers, and the thing being that ships are like men what want to plow her creamy crests and whatnot, like with Salty Sal...” Bracket, gazing soulfully into the night sky, lost himself in the moment, and Cable and the dog gave him plenty of room to do so. He snapped back to the present with a fusillade of congratulatory reports from his afflicted vertebrae. “So’s I decided that the *Tosspot* is really *my* ship.”

Thunderations! shook his head, sure in the knowledge that his hearing had not only gone, but slipped into another dimension of reality. It was only when he saw Cable nodding furiously, his eyes so wide and worshipful now that one might reasonably expect a god to descend, pluck the shiny orbs from Cable’s skull, and use them to create an entire race of zealous sycophants, that the dog realized he’d merely slipped into the comfortable insanity that was Cable. Just as a final test, though, he asked, “And what do you think the Captain and the rest of the crew might think of this little, er, *rearrangement* of property and, more importantly, pecking order?”

Bracket gazed steadily into the dog’s eyes, and gave that crooked, hideous grin. His upper lip stuck to itself a bit, admittedly, but the overall effect was, if not chilling, then at least somewhat disconcerting. “Well, the crew won’t be no problem, sar. Seems Tudlow stumbled across a bald cat below-decks. The cat weren’t too happy to be hairless and surprised at the same time. It be an awful business, what with the blood an’ scratches and hairballs an’ all.”

Thunderations! shuddered, clutching his missing paw reflexively. (Thunk.) *Oh, those dreadful memories...*

Cable, however, had enough presence of mind (which happened rarely enough that this was quite a moment in his personal development) to say, “Hairballs? From a hairless cat?” He clutched his rapidly-shedding beard. “Not that I had anything to do with that, you understand.”

Bracket chuckled evilly and managed to throw in a wheeze as well. “Oh, it weren’t the *cat*’s hair, mind ye.”

“But what about the Captain?”

Bracket stood, defying the moonlight to frame him in any pose less than forbidding. “Oh, I thinks I have a thing or two to say to the *Captain*. Especially as to why there can’t be a *Third Mate*.” Bracket gave his now-signature laugh and stumbled into the darkness of the middeck. Cable and the dog heard shouting from below, frenzied and just a tiny bit overacted.

“You know,” Thunderations! said, “they scream like girls much more convincingly than they sing like girls.”

Cable merely looked into the blackness that had accepted Bracket like a brother (or at least a fairly analogous nephew) and shouted, “You forgot something!”

From somewhere in the distance (most likely near the Captain’s cabin), there was a reply, faint but heartfelt: “Aaarrrrr...”

Being the Journal of Captain Judicious—that is, um, what was it again, Third Mate Bracket?—oh, yes... Cap’n Bloody Death of the seafaring scourge “The Salty Sal,” on Whatever Day I Say It Is:

Ahoy, ye landlubbers, and all ye ships at sea! Be ye grabbin’ yer mizzenmasts and hidin’ yer bloomers... ah, thank you, Bracket, sorry for the mix-up ...doubloons, lock up yer womenfolk and scuttle yer childrens... oh, really, Bracket, is this necessary?, and the spelling is just—right, right... and don’t say ye hain’t been warned (especially if we ask you, very politely, for your ship and your valuables and all)... again, so sorry, Bracket, just not used to this method of communication, I’m afraid... ’cause WE HAIN’T GOIN’ TA WARN YE! Well, that makes it fairly specific, don’t it—er, I mean doesn’t it. Aaaarrrrr! Is that strictly necess—ah, I see by your knife that it is...

“Now *that* was a pirate! Stealing his own ship and all.” Cable put his hands behind his head and lounged as far as the empty wine barrel allowed.

The dog, lying in the dregs and still trying to remove his peg leg, agreed halfheartedly. “It seems

a shame that he had to throw us overboard, though.”

“Well, he couldn’t very well let me stay on board. Too much competition, don’t you see.”

“Oh, of course.” The dog watched as the last sad remains of Cable’s fur beard slipped from his face. “I can’t imagine what I was thinking.”

“And you couldn’t have had a very good time there, what with the cat and all.”

Thunderations! trembled violently at the thought.

Cable stood, trying to catch a final glimpse of the newly-christened pirate ship as it sailed into the distance. This had the immediate effect of causing the barrel to spin and tilt precariously. Thunderations! spun with it, his stomach doing its best to remain in the same place and failing miserably. Meanwhile, his wooden leg, through a miraculous display of the sheer ingenuity sometimes mustered by the god of bad luck, lodged itself into the bung-hole of the wine barrel, knocking out the wax plug that Bracket had thoughtfully inserted when he had them tossed from the ship. The dog, beaten by the seas, the peg, and, most importantly, by the ingrained mental image of a naked, vicious cat, managed to croak out, “Cable, did you happen to bring the mop?”

Cable wasn’t listening. “Ah, it was a good life, being a pirate and all, but I’m afraid I must retire from my days of skullduggery and high-seas mischief. It is time, I think, to pursue new goals, seek new pleasures.” He stood staring into the distance, somehow not noticing the thud against his legs as the dog, suspended from his entrapped peg leg, swung gently to and fro with the waves.

In a firm, not-to-be-trifled-with voice, Cable announced, “I want to be a Dragon Hunter!”

The dog’s hopeless moans carried a long, long way across the peaceful waters.

Mikal Trimm has recent and forthcoming stories in *Polyphony 6*, *Interfictions*, *Black Gate*, *Postscripts*, and *Weird Tales*. He is the father of two pre-teen girls, but he still manages to fake a sense of humor.

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