

Annabelle's Fall

Jamaica, 23 June 1650

Annabelle tweaked her pilfered, walnut-brown trousers and thought to herself “This disguise is awful.” Yet, it worked. For once, a lack of figure had been to her benefit. The squeezing bandage over her chest stomped out the last of her girlish traits – not to mention her breath. Her white shirt fluttered in the air like a bedsheet out to dry. The once long and buttery yellow hair was cut short, hidden under a black kerchief she had tied around her head.

Blue and tangerine rays of light frolicked at the horizon, inaugurating her fourth day at sea. Just a few more days now she thought, and their ship would arrive in Kingston. She could dress like a girl again, and find her aunt. But that was then.

Now, standing on the deck of El Leon Dorado, she observed the merchant ship they had been chasing for hours. The Caribbean trade winds whooshed the 110 foot, single masted sloop closer to its prey, splashing through wave after wave. Annabelle had expected the never-ending rolling and motion to calm down in the evenings at least, when she went to sleep. She quickly realized though, that the ocean cared little for nightly comforts of simple deckhands. Being without a hammock didn't help either, as she tried to sleep right on the cargo hold deck. She would curl up every sundown to stay warm. But for the most part, she would shiver like a leaf all night, clutching a small bag with her most prized possessions: a hairbrush and a hand mirror her mother had gifted her for Christmas, and a small piece of soap she had purchased with her last coins before leaving port.

The constant rocking and swaying of the ship produced another effect. She had bent over the railing three times that night to throw up. Now, she was feeling sick again and jolted towards the port side so as to not vomit onto the main deck. She coughed and gagged with her tongue out as if her very bowels were hurtling their way up, only to see a thin stream of slimy fluid drool out from her empty stomach.

As the merigold glow of sunlight peered over the horizon, Annabelle pondered that running away from home and joining a band of pirates for passage to Kingston was perhaps not the best decision in her so far 15 years. She also reminisced about what her father had once told her; “You grow up quickly on a ship.” She hated when he was right.

Annabelle dried her mouth as the ship's quartermaster walked up to her and leaned on the railing. James Begg had a comforting look on his face. One that hinted at his confident yet calm and compassionate nature. Unlike many of his crew mates, he still had all limbs and teeth attached to him, despite being almost 40; old for a gentleman of fortune. He rested next to Annabelle and pulled out a small pipe, stuffed it and lit it. His first drag sucked in his cheek and highlighted his already chiseled jawline. Annabelle glanced at him. He must be so at peace with everything, she thought. Always so wise and unaffected by everything going on around him. She imagined he would have been a good parent, or an uncle. Someone with a noble reason for caring and protecting someone like her. That must be what uncles did, she imagined.

"Boy, I don't understand poets," he said while exhaling and pointing the mouth-end of his pipe at the blooming sunrise. "They care so much about portraying and praising something that happens every day. Particularly, if it happens over the sea. Like it's making you question your soul or think of something profound somehow." Annabelle looked at him with slight confusion before he continued. "I've seen a thousand sunrises. Never impressed me. But, what any sailor will tell you though, is that sleeping right next to the hull at night, that makes for a much grander assault on the senses. Hearing that old creaking inch of oak wood being pounded by the waves; knowing that that is all between you and the deep dark cold. That will make you question your soul; actually sleeping well too, now that is profound." Annabelle looked with amusement as his impulsive diatribe ended and tried to put on a brave face.

"I didn't expect you to be... Uhm, the lyrical type Sir." She said.

"I didn't expect you to vomit for three days straight."

"Apologies Sir. It just keeps coming. All the rolling."

"I know. I have made a decision for you. You will not be part of the boarding party today. We have no use for a sick fighter."

"No! I can do it," Annabelle said, anxious what would happen if she broke her promise to help out.

"You are not going. No discussion." James took another drag from the pipe, squinted at the sunrise and rolled his eyes. "You can read, aye?"

"Uhm, yes, but I don't..."

"You will be surgeon today," James said

"No way! I don't know how. I wouldn't even..."

"Can you read?"

She paused. “Yes, but...”

“Can you read?” James repeated

“Yes...”

“Good. Then you can read all the little instruction notes in the medicine chest. Most men aboard here can’t read. Also, as you are aware, we don’t have a proper surgeon on board, and the carpenter who is supposed to fill in as surgeon is needed for the boarding party. So, it’s going to be you. And don’t worry yet, we probably won’t need a surgeon today at all.”

“If you say so.” Annabelle said reluctantly.

“I say so. You know where the medicine chest is. Head below and we’ll find you if we need you.”

Annabelle nodded to James and went towards the companionway hatch, in front of the captain’s cabin. She was halfway down the ladder when she saw Captain Davies emerge from his cabin. He stood on the deck like a cliff, impervious to all the motion and waves. His stumpy stature and huge belly gave him the ballast to stand upright unsupported. The massive tattoo on the right side of his neck was long since faded. Only an ash like smudge remained where he once proudly paraded an elaborate compass rose.

Some of the crew looked away when Captain Davies came out on the deck. He had narrowly won the vote to be captain by promising endless riches and threatened the crew if he didn’t get the captain’s role. James was the runner up and therefore elected quartermaster and thus second in command. Annabelle watched the captain address James as they strode towards the fore end of the ship with steady sea-gaits.

“Well...” the captain said. “What is the news? Have they shown any signs of surrender or parley yet?”

“No Cap’n. Their sails are at full, and they’ve pulled in three of their cannons from the gun ports; they are probably loading them right now.”

“Only three? They are low on men then. A fair job for us, says I.”

“Let’s not get too assertive Cap’n. By now, they know our intentions and have had time to set up a defense.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah... My point is: They are a slow and fat merchant ship; low on men and clearly not professionals, aye?”

“I don’t know Cap’n. Professionals are predictable. It’s the amateurs you need to worry about. They can hurt you on purpose *and* by accident” James retorted. Annabelle overheard and cracked a smirk as she observed from halfway down the hatch. She had not seen a single soul onboard the merchant ship yet. It had such a big nameplate, she thought, spanning the entire width of the stern. How much space did one need to write “The Price” anyway?

A black flag yanked its way up the mast and flapped with fury. The men sang louder and louder with rum-wrought enthusiasm. After a quick glance at the crew and their prey, Captain Davies looked back at the man steering the ship and gave the first order of the attack.

“Sailing Master, ram the stern!” he shouted. Some of the crew looked at each other with confusion.

“Cap’n. What are you doing?” James protested. We’ll break off our bow spirit. We can’t repair that at sea.”

“I don’t care. We’re taking their ship afterwards,” Davies said and signaled his confirmation to the helmsman. Annabelle looked back as the order commenced. Moments later, the bow spirit touched the stern of the Price, made a brief crackling noise, and snapped right off right at the middle.

“We got her! Now, get the hooks.” the captain hollered. Two of the stronger sailors picked up three-pointed grappling hooks and gave them a couple of spins. “Come on you scamps. Throw!”, Davies continued impatiently. Both hooks launched almost at the same time, and both landed on the bridge of the ship in front of them. Now it was just a matter of pulling in the slack and fastening the ropes on their own ship. The sailors wasted no time doing this, and within moments, El Lion Dorado was firmly attached to the stern of The Price. The rest of the boarding party gathered in the foremost part of the deck eager to climb aboard The Price and embezzle whatever they could. Annabelle saw them from the hatch, pushing each other forwards, swords rattling, fists high, roars ferocious. Captain Davies stared fanatically at The Price, stiffened his stance and took rapid breaths through his nose. His satisfaction with the assault so far was only spoiled by his quartermaster having questioned his orders. Annabelle saw as Davies grabbed hold of James’ shirt and pulled him in.

“If you disobey me again, I will have you flogged. You hear me Quartermaster?” Davies looked back, and said nothing.

As the first pirate grabbed one of the ropes to climb aboard their presumed victim, a loud clunk reverberated from inside the stern of The Price. A moment later, the big nameplate on the

stern of the merchant ship fell down, exposing a big opening in the ship. Even from her hatch, Annabelle could see right inside the rear cabin of The Price. Her eyes opened wide as she saw a group of people pulling on ropes; ropes attached to pulleys that were finally affixed to three different cannons. As the three cannons were being pushed out of the hole pointing directly down on the group of pirates crammed onto the front of their own main deck, Annabelle could see small embers being placed on the top of the barrels.

“Get away from there!” Annabelle shouted in desperation as the three cannons let out roaring blows and filled the foredeck of the pirate ship with thick smoke. The shockwave tore through her spine as she clenched her eyes shut and ducked below the hatch. The singing stopped. Thin streams of blood spurted out from the plume of smoke encapsulating the front of the ship. The dozen or so grown men produced a cacophony of squeals like wounded pigs in a slaughterhouse. Annabelle barely heard the muffled sounds and voices over the ringing in her ears as she peered her head back up from the hatch. As the smoke lifted, about half the men were laying on the deck. Some were completely still, others rolled around in agony as small drops of blood were dripping out from all over their bodies. One pirate still standing on his legs looked with disbelief as blood oozed from his chest and his right arm. Another rolled around on deck with no recognizable features left on his face. He attempted to shout for help, but all that came out of his mouth were gurgling sounds as his lower jaw was completely shot off and blood had begun to gush down his throat, drowning him. Annabelle saw Captain Davies stumble for a moment and touch his chest. James was on his back, trying to get his left boot off.

“Onwards!” Captain Davies shouted at the crew. “They need time to reload. Get up on those ropes and take her”

“Are you senseless man?” James said “We hardly have any men left. We need to cut these ropes and run like monkeys.”

“We have enough men; at least five or six of us are not wounded. No quailing man. Move!” the captain barked and kicked him in the side before dropping to his knees himself.

As the men started to climb the two ropes up to the stern of The Price, Annabelle locked eyes with James as he lay on the deck like a maimed animal. His mouth gaping, panting. Eyes wide and wet. Blood poured out of his boot.

Annabelle vaulted out of the hatch and dashed towards the fore of the ship, only to stumble mid-ships and fall on the deck. She saw the other crew reload. Instead of cannonballs, they were packing balls of sail canvas into the barrels of the big guns. Annabelle quickly realized why when she saw the fore deck riddled with nails.

She got back up and rushed forwards into the sweet smell of black powder and burned flesh. Arriving at James, Captain Davies and two dead sailors lay near him, Annabelle grabbed hold of James and tried to get him up on his good foot.

“Can you get up?” Annabelle said.

“I’m wounded” was all James could reply, as the loading rods from The Price’s cannons were ramming another charge of powder and nails down their barrels.

“You have to get up Sir. They are about to fire on us again” Annabelle said loudly. “Get your arm around my shoulder. We’ll go below deck.”

“Kid, get over here and help me,” Captain Davies interrupted with blood spitting out of his mouth. “I’m ordering you kid, stop helping the quartermaster and get over here.” She stared into his raging eyes, paused for an instant and turned her back on him.

James got his arm around Annabelle’s bony shoulders and held on as she wrestled to lift him up. As the pair limped towards the aft of the ship, the pirate riddled with wounds all over, drew his pistol and aimed it at the cannons inside The Price. He promptly got the attention of one of the cannon crews that fired a round directly at him. In an instant all tension left his muscles and he collapsed on the deck. Some of the nails missed him and ripped into James’ other leg, causing him to drop to the deck again.

“No! Don’t fall. Come on, get up! We - you can’t stay here. They will shoot at us again.” Annabelle said, catching a glimpse towards the front again. Davies was on all fours attempting to slither aft.

“You traitor kid! I will keel haul you for this!”

The boarding pirates were well on their way up the ropes when two cannons unleashed at them. One shot completely missed as the waves kept moving the ships up and down. The other strafed the arms of one bandit climbing the other rope. He let out a scream and lost his grip on the rope, falling straight down into the sea, never to be seen again. The boarding party was reduced from twelve to four.

“You have to move James! If you don’t we are both going to die.” Annabelle said. James clasped his teeth in pain, and tried to stand on his right foot. It could barely support him. From behind them, Annabelle could hear the crew in The Price shouting and giving orders to each other.

“Those two moving aft there,” one of them commanded. Annabelle knew they meant them. Her breath grew ever shorter and her legs tired from carrying James. Just ten more steps and we will have some cover down below, Annabelle thought. At the same time James began to slowly close his eyes, and Annabelle could feel him loosening the shoulder grip.

“No, no, no! Do not give up. No-no-no! We’re almost there. I can’t carry you by myself. Come on, wake up. Wake the fuck up James!” Annabelle screamed with a broken voice.

“Take aim” She heard from behind. Just three or four more steps now to the hatch.

“Come on, you have to help me James; you’re too heavy” Annabelle yelled and slapped him across his cheek, bringing his wide and shocked eyes back to reality at least for an instance.

“Two steps. Just give me two lousy steps” Annabelle screamed as they were almost at the entrance.

“Fire!”

This was the end, Annabelle knew. They were too far from the hatch. The shot would hit them within the blink of an eye. Her heart plummeted and she thought about her mother and father. All they wanted was for her to marry. For her own good, they had said before she fled. She recalled never having told them goodbye. If she could only see them again and apologize for everything, she thought.

In a final hopeless effort, Annabelle mustered all her strength and threw both of them towards the hatch opening. They landed halfway in and could see the three-four meters down to the cargo deck. Annabelle grabbed the ladder with one hand and James with the other, barely enough to pull them into the opening, head first. Plummeting down, they bruised and banged into each other and the ladder before finally slamming down onto deck so hard dust whirled up around them. A deafening blast flew over the main deck bursting splinters all around the hatch above.

“James? Are you dead?” Annabelle mumbled between coughs and grunts.

“Ahh... Aye?”

“What do we do now?”

“My legs,” James answered; trying to lay still.

“Let me see. Your right leg looks fine. It’s just a scratch actually. Your left foot is – well, not so good. I think we need to stop the bleeding first. Should I do that?”

“Yes, anything. God!”

Annabelle looked around for anything to bandage the wounds with; sailcloth, a torn hammock, anything. But there was nothing nearby, and blood kept gushing out of James’ leg.

“My shirt” she said and began to remove it before stopping halfway and looking at James.

“Can you keep a secret?”