

Bon Voyage

Before Hamilton and I set out on the final journey we took several practice voyages, and each one was disastrous in regard to seamanship and companionship. If I hadn't been so spellbound by the thought of ten thousand dollars in cash, I would have fled with the rats the moment the rust-colored sails were hoisted, because it was obvious that we didn't so much arrive at our destinations as aim and crash into them like kamikaze yachtsmen.

On our first practice run we couldn't even get out of the harbor without shaming ourselves in front of the entire boating community. We were in high spirits when we set off so we had the Beaver in full sail—the main and mizzen and jib smartly trimmed for all to see as we lumbered toward the channel through the reef which outlined the harbor. I was down in the main cabin opening a couple of cold beers for a mid-morning toast when a crash and a sudden pitch to starboard had me panicked. I could hear the brittle staghorn coral snapping off against our bow as the sail dragged us up and onto a reef. I dropped the beers and scrambled up the ladder to the main deck. Instead of steering between the port and starboard buoys marking the deep channel through the reef, Hamilton steered to the outside of the port marker. Now he stood at the wheel and scowled at me as if I had charted the course.

“Don't just stand there,” he barked, “lower the sails!”

I hurried to get them down before we did any further damage to the hull. For all I knew we would sink. As I lowered the main, the keel struck a solid wall of coral heads and we heaved forward and came to a

grinding stop. I flopped awkwardly onto the deck. “Idiot!” Hamilton shouted. “Get up. You’re making a fool of us.”

“Don’t blame me!” I snapped.

“Don’t you dare talk back to the captain!” he snapped. “Now get to work.” Then he went below and didn’t return.

“Remember the money,” I muttered angrily to myself. “The money. The money.” While I secured the sails, I began to realize why he ducked out of sight. Boats passed out of the harbor and into the harbor and each one slowed to remark on my sailing gaffe and give me advice. It was clear that we had to sit there like wooden carrion until, if we were lucky, high tide would float us off.

Four hours later, it did. Hamilton returned from below and I raised the sails. “Take the wheel,” Hamilton ordered, “and head for the Buck Island beach. I’m going to check the hull.”

Buck Island was a small island just off the northeast coast of St. Croix. Before the racial trouble started, hundreds of tourists sunbathed there, and it was especially popular with scuba divers, who could follow an underwater park trail through the coral on the east side. Now, it was mostly deserted.

I aimed for the sandy west side. The wind was behind me and the mainsail was full out. The boat cruised along. Down below I could hear Hamilton knocking about, lifting boards and looking for leaks.

It occurred to me that I knew nothing about survival at sea. The only commonsense facts I knew were to get in a life raft, have protection from the sun and plenty of fresh water, and drink your own urine when you run out of fresh water because saltwater will certainly kill you. My father had thought to teach me this after he had been in a sailing accident and stranded on a life raft for two days.

When Hamilton emerged he said the hull was fine, then checked the trim of the sails. He frowned at me as he pulled the main in a bit and tightened the jib. I just kept moving the wheel a little to the left and a little to the right, pretending that my small adjustments actually made a difference. Hamilton stretched out on the deck and closed his eyes. “Wake me when we get there,” he said. I just stared at the huge mainsail and kept the wind behind us. I didn’t want it to start luffing or Hamilton would hop up and get after me. In the few days we had spent outfitting the Beaver — checking the ropes, repairing sails, sealing the deck — he treated me like Billy Budd. I couldn’t do anything right, and he just glowered at me like Claggart when I made a stupid mistake.

I was thinking about what it was going to be like spending a month on board with only him when suddenly I noticed we were rapidly closing in on the island, and we were still under full sail. “Hamilton!” I shouted. “Get up.” I spun the wheel hard to port and began to lower the main. But it was too late. Our momentum took us directly toward the beach. We ran aground, softly, onto the sand. Only the bow was stuck, like a knife in a rum cake.

A few locals ran toward us, laughing and shaking their heads in disbelief. We were the Keystone Kops of the sea. I waved back to them and grinned. Hamilton was furious. “This is an outrage!” he said. “You’ve made a fool of us again!”

“Then keelhaul me!” I barked back.

“Don’t tempt me,” Hamilton said coldly. “Keelhauling is still legal in the British navy.” Then he ducked down the hatch and in a minute the motor started and he shifted the boat into reverse. The sea beneath our stern bubbled up but the screw didn’t generate enough torque to pull us out.

Finally, one of the idle tourist boats edged up alongside our stern and the captain tossed me a lanyard. I tied it to a cleat and he towed us

off the beach. “Thanks,” I shouted when we had been set loose. I untied the lanyard and let it drop to the water.

“Anytime,” the skipper called back, and I could make out his sly smile as he deftly coiled the rope.

Two days later we left St. Croix for good. We set out at night in calm water with our lights off and followed the channel markers north out of the harbor, past Buck Island, and farther, toward St. John and Virgin Gorda. When I turned to say good-bye to St. Croix I could see two warehouses burning down at the docks. The white exodus was even more frantic now. Already those who could see the writing on the wall were torching their own property for the insurance money before it became worthless. The flames illuminated a small city of wooden crates that had already been packed with personal goods and prepared for shipping.

But I was filled with joy and triumph, and the fires to me were the flames of Troy still burning as Odysseus pushed off for Ithaca. I was ready for adventure. It was not lost on me that so many writers had gone to sea, and for them, setting off to cross the water was the same as setting down to fill the pages with their adventures.

Before leaving I had gone to a used bookstore and selected every title I could find which had something to do with the sea. I had Billy Budd, Martin Eden, Treasure Island, Heart of Darkness, The Odyssey, Robinson Crusoe, and the Mutiny on the Bounty trilogy. I was armed with books the way the navy goes to sea armed to the teeth. I figured these books would have to live with me as cabin companions since Hamilton was so snappish. But I didn’t mind. I wanted to write while sailing, and I was more than willing to come under the spell of books.

All through the first night, Hamilton took the wheel because only he knew where the hash was buried. At dawn I was asleep in the aft cabin when suddenly I was thrown out of my bunk and onto the floor. I

could hear Hamilton cursing on deck. The ropes were slapping the mast and the boom was tangled in the stanchion ropes. I slipped on my Top-Siders and went up. By then Hamilton had the gaff and boom under control and I pulled down the jib.

“What happened?” I yelled into the wind.

“Riptide,” he hollered back. “Not to worry.”

Riptide my ass, I thought. I figured he had fallen asleep but wouldn’t admit it. I looked around. We had rolled up against a menacing chain of sharp rocks that stuck out of the ocean like a shark’s lower jaw.

Hamilton started the engine and as we backed away I could see we were in a beautiful spot. It seemed to me to be the most wonderful sight I had ever seen. The rising sun was buttering the clouds, the sea was royal blue, and dolphins darted in and out of the water, weaving between the rocks with absolute grace. Finally, I thought, something good has happened. Maybe our luck will change.

Off the starboard side, now about a hundred yards away, was a small, uninhabited island no more than five acres. It was made of immense granite slabs each one the size of a train car and all piled up as if derailed. In each crack grew a gnarly sea grape tree deformed from leeward winds. And at the water’s edge was a perfect melon slice of a beach all protected by the outer chain of sharp rocks. “It’s called Little Dog Island,” Hamilton said. “I got us here, now you get the dinghy and go ashore. Somewhere beneath that stand of trees you’ll find a tarp covered with sand. Under that is the hash. Start bringing it on board—but don’t get it wet.”

“Fine,” I said. But inside I was dancing around to a pirate jig. “Yo-ho-ho,” I sang in my belly, imagining myself as Long John Silver about to put to shore. “Fifteen men on the dead man’s chest! Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum. Drink and devil had done the rest. Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum!”

I never would have made a good pirate like Billy Bones or Black Dog. I didn't have the stamina. I dug up the canvas bags— each weighing fifty pounds— dragged them through the sand, loaded four at a time into the dinghy, rowed through the choppy surf and out through the rocks to the Beaver, tied up, precariously balanced on the dinghy gunnels while heaving each sack on deck. I did this ten times in a row, until finally, when I had finished lugging the two thousand pounds of hash on board and had hauled up the dinghy and secured it to its cradle, I dropped down onto the deck and lay there as if I had fallen from the top of the mast. I was exhausted.

Hamilton had been packing the bags in the fo'c'sle, in his cabin, and in mine, and wasn't nearly as tired. "Grog time!" he hollered from down below, and rang a brass bell. I forced myself to stand and staggered down the ladder into the main cabin and over to the galley door. "Here you go, sailor," he said, suddenly full of good captainly cheer, then poured me a tumbler of rum and locked the bottle away. I drank it straight back and asked for more. "British navy rules," he replied. "Only one grog per day per man."

"Are you serious?" I asked.

"Sailor, this is serious business," he replied, underlining each word with his tone. "I can't have any drunks on board."

"Aye, aye, captain," I said sarcastically. I never did get drunk, but I got after the hash like a mouse at cheese. I nibbled on it each day— a gram here and a gram there. Hamilton took his hash in tea— the British way, I assumed. He shaved his down to a powder with a straight edge razor then dipped a heaping spoonful into a cup of hot water and stirred it up with sugar.

Stoned out of our minds, we navigated through the long madhouse days of the voyage as if crossing the ocean in a floating sanitarium. I spent hours sitting cross-legged on deck with the ship's log on my lap

recording the day's events as if I were drifting around in Baudelaire's Artificial Paradise. The ship was a strange floating cell. A blue cell. Blue sky. Blue ocean. We weren't locked in, but there was nowhere to go, and aside from the weather, each day unfolded very much the same. Bright, blinding blue.

What changed was the drama on board. Hamilton was insane. Or so I thought. He wouldn't talk to me, except to order me around or humiliate me in some way. He stopped wearing clothes. He constantly paced the deck in the nude, staring out at the horizon line and stroking his beard. He must have been thinking about something, because the moods on his face were as shifty as the clouds overhead. He whispered things I couldn't make out. He counted numbers on his fingers as if he were making lists. For hours, he practiced tying and untying knots. At times he looked at me as if he had never seen me before.

We had two bunks, a toilet, a galley, no radio, plenty of books, a deck of cards, a chess set, and two thousand pounds of hash. After we had loaded the hash at Little Dog Island I began snooping around the boat, just to see what else I could find. I lifted the cushioned lid of a galley bench and inside were all sorts of sailing gear: flags for half a dozen countries, a rusty flare gun (which made me think of Rik's forehead), a fire extinguisher, rain slickers, and a book the size of a dictionary. It was clothbound in green linen, and embossed in gold on the cover was the name of the ship. I set it on the galley table and opened the cover. It was blank. Dozens of pages had been ripped out. The remaining pages were wrinkled and stained from water damage. It smelled salty, and a bit like diesel fuel. I loved it, and immediately thought it was up to me to record my boat's history, like so many other sea writers had done. I turned the page, smoothed it out with my hand, and got started.