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opening extract from

Pirates Galore

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published by

Catnip Publishing

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Chapter 1

The Giant Rat of Sumatra pokes its nose off the coast of California, and things begin to happen



My story begins on the night an owl blundered into the belfry and rang the church bells. The town awoke with a sense of doom. It was an omen. Something evil was in the air.

Through drifts of fog, an exhausted sailing ship came creaking into the harbour. After a long voyage, it was down to its last puff of wind and its last cask of fresh water.

Under its needle nose of a bowsprit clung a dreadful figurehead–a giant rat. The creature, painted mustard yellow, had been carved out of a mahogany log felled in the jungles of Sumatra. The rat, big as a tiger, had once glared at the world through bold and cunning emerald eyes. But the gems had been pried out by thieves, leaving the giant rat to wander the seas like a blind man. The ivory teeth had yellowed, but remained bared and sharp as crooked nails–a rat eager to sink its jaws into the throat of the unwary.

The ship had come halfway across the world to this sleepy bay on the Mexican coast of California. What was she doing in San Diego? *The Giant Rat of Sumatra* was a pirate ship, a bold outlaw accustomed to plying her trade from Sumatra to the China Sea.

Standing calmly at the ship's rail, I sniffed the air for some dry scent of the earth out there in the dark. It seemed an eternity since I had set foot on land. I'd already had enough of the sea to last me until my voice finally changed. I was twelve years and ten months old and the ship's cabin boy.

I turned to catch sight of the ship's master as he came sliding down the ratlines. The man took a leap like a tall, big-boned acrobat to the bowsprit. There he peered

through the rags of fog and shouted orders in midair. "Steersman! An inch to starboard, if you'll be so kind! This channel is tight as a priest's collar! Aye, that's better, shipmates! Steady!"

He was a large man, but I had noticed how light on his feet he was. Drenched by hours bareheaded in the fog, his coarse black hair glistened like needles. He was as apt to be lending a hand pumping water in the bilge as at his sextant fixing the course. He regarded no job aboard ship as beneath him.

It was clear to me that the ship's master was no stranger to this strange port of call. He knew that a vast bed of seaweed lay near the entrance: He skirted it. He appeared as familiar with the bottom of the bay as with the deep creases in his own hands, weathered under foreign suns.

"God bless my eyesight!" he exclaimed with immense pleasure. The captain had a loud, hearty laugh when he felt like laughing, as he did now. "We've brought our pigs to a fine market, sahibs!" It was a Hindi term of respect he was fond of tossing about the decks. "That's San Diego itself hidin' in the fog dead ahead and about to welcome Captain Gallows back. Aye, I've come home after all these years!" He made a sharp chopping motion with his hand. "Drop the hook!"

With a rattling of its rusty chain, the anchor dropped and found the bottom. The ship swung around like a dog pulled tight on its leash.

As I watched him, I could tell that it amused Captain

Gallows to sail under such a foreboding name. He flung out orders in a grab bag of languages while he strode toward his quarters. "Jimmy Pukapuka, be so kind as to fetch up a bucket of whale oil and refill the warning lights. In the fog, we shall want to glow like a ghost, amigo!"

"Aye, Cap'n."

"Calcutta, open our last keg of water. And run up our flag!"

"What flag, Cap'n?" replied the second officer, as broadly muscled as a bull.

"Anything but the skull and crossbones. Mr. Ginger! Post a man on watch! Everyone else turn in. Sleep well, shipmates, for tomorrow you will become gentlemen! Cabin boy! We do have a cabin boy, don't we? I recall fishing one out of the sea months ago. Where is that shipwrecked cabin boy?"

"Here, sir."

"Polish my English boots! I don't intend going ashore tomorrow looking like a beggar."

The deck had almost cleared when I sat myself against a deckhouse to polish the boots. Jimmy Pukapuka, a burly Pacific Islander with swirling tattoos on his cheeks, had carried up a full bucket of whale oil. He was soon finished refilling the port and starboard lanterns, with oil left over in the bucket.

"Catch a wink, Shipwreck, boy," he remarked, hanging up the oil bucket and vanishing below decks to his bunk.

It was almost inevitable that the crewmen would call

me Shipwreck. I had, after all, been dredged up out of the sea. Boston born, I had been taken aboard a smelly whaling ship by my stepfather, an angry man and a harsh ship's officer. He told me that eleven years was quite old enough to earn my own keep. And a sea voyage would toughen me up for a short-tempered world.

After more'n a year and a half, a short-tempered storm off the Philippines had blown the ship into matchsticks. I had found myself clinging like a barnacle to a splintered oak beam. At the other end, cursing to the skies, hung the one-armed chief mate.

The two of us were plucked from the sea by a fast, nimble ship with the figurehead of a great carved rat. Spouting seawater and sputtering, I remember looking around for my stepfather.

"There is no one alive left floating in this storm," the ship's young captain had told me and briskly turned away as one accustomed to death at sea. I recall raising myself to an elbow, as if to check the raging storm for my relative, and then I fell back, exhausted.

It was days later that I fully grasped my situation. I was alive, but just barely, with nothing of my own but the shirt and breeches that had dried to my salt-crusted skin. What would happen to me? My stepfather, with his disapproving grey eyes, was forever gone. I relieved my grief with a dutiful shrug from time to time. As the weeks passed I realized that I no longer truly missed the man. I felt unburdened.

But what would happen to me, now grown to twelve years and ten months? I'd find that out, day by day. The world was full of surprises, I was discovering, for hadn't I already landed on my feet? The young captain had put me quickly to work running errands as ship's cabin boy. The turbaned second officer, whom everyone called Calcutta, had found me a blue coat with brass buttons that fitted except for the sleeves.

"Made in London, that coat was!" he had exclaimed with a certain pride in the quality of the ship's appointments. I had rolled up the cuffs and gone about my duties.

The other survivor, the one-armed man, was all battered face and thundering voice and four-cornered oaths. An experienced mariner, he was pressed into service when the former chief mate vanished one night off the Sandwich Islands. Whether the officer had slipped into the sea or was given an unfriendly kick was a subject of below decks gossip.

When I first discovered that I owed my life to a band of murderous pirates, of common sea scum, I was wary and tried to keep a safe distance. But as I came to know the crew, cut-throat by cut-throat, my forebodings diminished. While the men struck me as profoundly ignorant, except for knowing the points of the compass and the direction of the wind, they showed no more greed than I'd seen about the streets of Boston. I wondered if more than two or three of them would qualify as genuine cut-throats.

For their part, the pirates were bedazzled that a twelve-year-old cabin boy could read and write as cunningly as the captain himself. To them, I was a wonder! On occasions I wrote a letter home for Chop Chop, the top-sailman, big as a water buffalo. Or for Trot, the wispy-haired sailmaker. I sensed that the man hadn't a soul to write to, but the pretence had brought a sparkle to his watery eyes. "Look ye, address it to Miss Emilie Trot in Cardiff!" he had insisted in a loud, boasting voice. He was beginning to believe his own lie, it seemed to me, but there was no harm in it and I had scribbled away.

I put away these thoughts and finished polishing the maroon boots. What long legs the captain walked on! The man had the carefree air of a gypsy. All he lacked was a gold ring dangling from his ear.

He'd earned some fame, Calcutta told me, by his sharp nose for the richest cargoes afloat in the Far East–other pirate ships. Maybe it eased his conscience to prey almost entirely on his own kind, I thought–though he seemed prepared to make exceptions.

Now, like a homing pigeon, he had brought his ship to Mexican waters. What would he do tomorrow? Step ashore like a conqueror returning home in maroon English boots?

Finally I left his footgear standing and crossed to the open rail. Peering through the drifting fog, I again hoped to glimpse a treetop or a headland. Maybe San Diego would be the port to find another ship, one bound for

New England, thousands of miles away. All I wanted now was to find some way home.

I reached into my pocket for a sea biscuit, months stale and hard as a bone. I began to gnaw on it. Was this what my stepfather had meant by toughening me up? A near drowning and now sea biscuits! I felt toughened up more than necessary.

Out of a swirl of fog, a heavy hand landed on my shoulder and dug in like a claw.

"What you gazin' at, Shipwreck?"

I looked up sharply. I knew the voice well enough, now set at a whisper at my ear. This was the man who had survived the sinking with me–One-Arm Ginger. Now a ship's officer, Mr. Ginger might not be next to God aboard *The Giant Rat of Sumatra,* but he was next to the captain himself.

"Scurry aft," he commanded. "Lower the flyboat. Not a sound, mind you. It's private business."

"The flyboat? It's hardly big enough for two, sir."

"How am I to row ashore with one arm, I ask ye? Fetch the oars!"

"I've the captain's boots to finish shining."

"You can polish later. Step along before the fog lifts."

I jammed the biscuit in my coat pocket. What strange errand was the chief mate up to, sneaking ashore in the fog?

With the sleeve of his blue coat hanging loose and empty as a gutted fish, the man seated himself opposite

me in the nutshell of a boat. I began to row.

"Land's sittin' that way, me lad," the barrel-chested mate said, poking a thick finger through the fog. "Can't you smell the hide houses? It's La Playa, around the bend from the town, stinking just the same as I remember it. It must be five years ago I jumped ship." He cackled softly. "Too lawless for San Diego, is La Playa. Smell it! Aye, it's the stink of cowhides our clever captain can't get out of his high and mighty nose, if you ask me. He's got a score to settle here, from the smoulder I seen in his eyes. Row, Row, lad."