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opening extract from

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published by

Oxford University Press

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CHAPTER ONE

My story must begin when I boarded the *Charming Molly* at Bristol. Before that there's little to tell. My name is Jack, surnamed 'Holborn' after the parish where I was found: for I had neither father nor mother who'd cared enough to leave me a name of their own.

When I was old enough to stand without the aid of my hands, employment was found for them with a stony-fisted cobbler who did nothing but prate about my good fortune in being with him—and curse his own lack of it in having me. When I was old enough to run, I left him. But now, looking back on it, he must have been a virtuous man, who did his charitable duty according to his lights. It was ill-luck that those lights never shone on me.

So I came to Bristol which I judged to be the best place for leaving this hard-hearted, scornful land, where money alone in your purse serves you for honour, justice, and pity; and a good heart in your breast serves you for nothing but to break.

It must have been my birthday, for God made me a present of a good black night so's I was able to board the

Charming Molly as easily as if I'd paid my passage. I pitched on her because she was of a goodish size, smartly rigged, and most conveniently moored. This last was the strongest consideration, travellers in my situation having not much time to make a careful choice. But her figurehead took my fancy, as indeed did her name; and in my wisdom I thought nothing evil could befall a vessel so gallantly called. Where she was bound, I knew not, but hoped it was for savage parts where men went bare-foot—my cobbler having left me with a horror of shoes.

I stowed away very comfortably in the hold which was full of barrels and sacks and the perfume of bilge which stank not at all to high heaven (as the saying goes), but kept where it was: for such a stink has no business with the angels. I took a full sack for my pillow and an empty one for my blanket and lay down by the broad mizzen-mast where it met the keel. I meant to stay awake and listen for the crew's returning for news of when we were sailing, but weariness and the vessel's gentle rocking sent me off into a deep sleep from which I awoke to find we were at sea.

I could hear the rigging creak and groan like leather on the last, and now and again came the sharp slap of a sail emptying, then taking a fresh bellyful of wind. such light as cracked the blackness round the edge of the hatch served only to tell me it was day and I still saw mainly with my hands—which led me very painfully astray . . . We were rolling a good deal, and, though my arms and legs were steady, my stomach began to follow the motion of the waves. This is called seasickness and is the most horrible thing in the world, and I lay in the stinking blackness of the hold and prayed to die. I heard the

sailors above swearing and shouting and singing; and I cursed them for their good spirits. Loudest of all I heard the voice of the captain striving to rasp the C*harming Molly* along with his windy tongue. As he came and went along the deck, I tried to give that voice a face and form; for I conceived myself to be very soon before him and accounting for my unlawful presence. By its loudness, tone, and vigour, I judged it to come from a man very tall and broad, with fists like boots a face like a hammer. And for all I know, he might have been ten feet tall, and broad to match: for I never set eyes on that luckless man, even though, sometimes, he was but an arm's length away . . .

All the while the swell of the sea was growing steadily worse, and my sickness with it, till I could do no more than moan for the mercy of a quick end and have done with all my suffering. I heard the captain shouting to make all fast, to haul in the foresail and topsails; and, though I could not see the sky, it must have grown very dark, for the cracks of daylight turned dim—and of a menacing grey. The sailor sang no more, and all there was left between us and silence was the voice of the captain, shouting. It sounded very bold out there, all by itself preparing to do battle with the wind and the sea and the sky, for all the world as if the odds was even.

Then the storm—which had lain in wait for us like a wild beast—sprang. They say that a storm at sea is the most terrifying of all disasters. And so it is. If I hadn't been mortally seasick all the while, I'd Surely died of fright. Waves turned to rock and thundered on our sides to be let in, while icy water poured down through our upper seams—though which was upper and which was lower in that dark a shipwright would have been hard put to know: for I'll swear there were whole

minutes when the C*harming Molly* showed her very keel to heaven!

For a good half of the tempest, my stomach must have thrown up every meal I'd had in my life: for a worse half, I prayed for I don't know what: and for the worst half of all (a storm cares nothing for arithmetic and has as many halves as it chooses) I lay nearly dead of a blow from that thankless sack I'd freed to make me a pillow.

When I came to myself again, I was wet and weak and aching both inside and out. The motion of the ship had subsided and I thought God had grown less angry with the world. I heard steps above me once more, and the sailors singing again.

'There she goes,' I heard the captain say, 'like a great black tiger in the sky. D'you see her, mister? Long tail and a great paw dripping down into the sea? Murdering beast!' The storm had passed us by.

We continued on our way for an hour or more, during which time I brooded on how best to make myself known to the captain and crew. I'd recovered enough to be hungry and thirsty, and I longed for a sight of the sea and sky. Though I'd little enough to tell, the way of saying it somehow stuck in my throat. With no name but that of a parish, I was a poor addition to any ship's company. So I thought awhile on my vanished mother and wondered if she still lived. This was not a new thought, for many a time at the cobbler's it had come . . .

I used to fancy myself to be of noble blood, snatched for some dark cause, and would look—sonlike—at such elegant ladies who called. Some smiled, some complained, but none looked back motherlike. I thought I had a birthmark once, just

above my knee: but it wore away with too much washing—as did the fondest of my dreams. I'd never have abandoned the cobbler if those dreams hadn't abandoned me first.

Still, somewhere I'd had a mother, and that was for certain-sure, and wherever in the world she was, I asked her now for her blessing on her forgotten son's enterprise. In another minute, I'd have got my courage and gone up on deck. But I waited for that minute in which I was most surely blessed.

A confused shouting broke out above. Men began running violently across the deck with feet like thunder. A ship had been sighted away to the starboard bow. It seemed she was not above half a mile off and sorely torn by the storm. Her masts were snapped and her rigging carried off, and she was desperately low in the water. She was flying no flag—there was nothing left to fly one from. But good or bad, English or otherwise, it was plain to the sailors above she was not long for this world.

The captain's harsh voice drove the men from pity to action and I felt us tilt sharply as we changed course to starboard. I heard the crack of rope against canvas, which can sometimes be as sharp as musket-fire; and I heard the grunt of sails as they took the wind and we leaped forward joyously on our errand of mercy.

Then our canvas was hauled in and our pace began to drop as we drew dose. Presently I could hear the sea slopping the sides of that other vessel in a weary kind of way, as if to say, 'I've done with you. Why don't you go to the bottom?' Then I heard grappling ropes flung from ship to ship and made fast. I heard men clambering aboard: fifteen, twenty, even thirty I counted before I began to think there was something amiss.

For none of them spoke a word. Just the thud-thud as their feet landed on the deck, then nothing. Had they been so battered and beaten by the storm that they'd lost the power of thanks, or speech?

A great uneasiness seemed to lie on the ship, and the men of the *Churning Molly* fell as silent as the strangers. It was a very bitter stillness as half a hundred hearts grew cold when they saw what they'd rescued.

'Well, for God's sake!' shouted a single voice—

By way of answer there came a crackling, spiteful roar as between thirty and forty muskets and pistols were discharged into the bellies, brains, hearts, and lungs of the rescuers. A great many fell at once, in a clumsy, lumpish manner, tumbling among legs and feet not quick enough to avoid them. Then those who were not hit began running in a despairing kind of way, scudding from side to side, hopping on a turn, till too great a hurry brought its own calamitous reward.

At the beginning, there was a tremendous amount of screaming and shouting and raging to God: then this got less as the need diminished and the murdered sailors understood there was to be nothing for them but dispatch. A few remaining voices cried out women's names with melancholy affection till a loud, full period was put to them, too. Five or six pistol shots concluded the whole, each being followed by its customary grunt of collapse.

A remarkable lad would have gone up in the midst of all this and maybe survived to tell the tale. Maybe. He would have fought with teeth and nails and feet and done some damage before he was stopped.

A less remarkable lad stayed where he was, nine parts out

of his mind with terror—and the tenth, wishing himself anywhere else in the world. Every patch of wet his hands slipped into, he conceived to be blood: though it's certain very little dripped through from the deck into the hold. Indeed, the leaking remains were very quickly posted into the sea—sometimes two and three at a time, so it was hard to say how many there had once been.

I think maybe forty, of whom not one, not one! I understood to've survived this last calamity that came out of the storm. The ship had been taken by pirates.