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Opening extract from

The Great Galloon

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The Great Galloon creaked and snapped as it pulled at its anchors, hundreds of feet above the frozen sea. Its sails were furled; its great boiler pumped hot air into the gigantic balloon that kept it in the sky, and onboard was a flurry of activity such as Stanley Crumplehorn had never seen before.

Rushing along the decks, on his way from his own cabin to the ballroom, he ducked as a walking stick flew through the air an inch from his head.

'Sorry, dear!' cried Mrs Wouldbegood, the wizened and wrinkly owner of the stick, who was fighting off a bearded man with a cutlass.

'No problem,' called Stanley, as he leapt down a low flight of stairs that led to the main deck. A box of crockery came smashing to the ground as he passed and Stanley heard Mrs Wouldbegood roaring, 'That's

the best dinner service, you piratical dog!' before he dropped down a hatchway and into the relative darkness of the wooden corridor below. As he landed on the boards, he heard a clattering behind him. He turned to look down the wide passageway, and saw a tangle of wheels and tongues hurtling towards him. It was a small cart, being pulled by four big, slobbery hounds, and driven by the stripy-jumpered cabin boy, Clamdigger. He was grasping the reins in one hand, while flapping the other at a scruffy-looking man behind him. Stanley jumped to one side and pressed himself against the wall. As the panting dogs passed him, he stuck out an arm just in time for Clamdigger to grab it with his spare hand and haul Stanley aboard.

'Heading for the officers' mess?' called Clamdigger, over the sounds of slavering and panting, and the cursing of his would-be assailant.

'Just as far as the ballroom,' said Stanley, desperately trying to keep upright the large vase of flowers he was carrying, while avoiding the fracas. 'How are things going, do you think?' Stanley called out.

'Fine, fine. Nearly finished the decorations, and Ms Huntley has made all her preparations. Should go off without a hitch, as long as the best man arrives on time.' He said all this while driving expertly and keeping the scruffy man at arm's length.

‘The best man?’ asked Stanley, looking up at the gangly boy.

‘Yes – the Captain’s brother. He’s on his way right now.’

As Clamdigger said this, the filthy man who had been trying to throttle him gave a startled cry. He let go of Clamdigger’s throat and leapt from the back of the cart, crying, ‘There’s two of ’em! We’re undone, lads!!’ as he rolled along the wooden floor.

‘He doesn’t seem too pleased,’ said Stanley, smiling, as Clamdigger brought the cart to a skittering halt.

‘Who?’ said the boy, settling the dogs with a reassuring pat.

‘That man who was trying to throttle you,’ said Stanley, pointing at the man running back the way he had come.

‘Serves him right, I suppose. Although you can’t help feeling sorry for them, with both the Captain and his brother to deal with. Anyway – here we are. The ballroom. See you later, Stanley.’ With a flick of the reins and a yelp from the hounds, Clamdigger carried on his way.

Stanley watched him go, then turned to face a pair of high wooden doors, inlaid with iron. With a sense of relish, he pushed them open.

The scene was like a cross between a ballet and a riot. Far away, at the other end of the Galloon’s gigantic

ballroom, he could see a band of white-coated waiters duelling with a group of ruffians, while simultaneously laying the tables. In the middle of the room, a man on top of a teetering stepladder was cleaning a chandelier whilst avoiding the blows of a huge hammer, wielded by a troll-like creature. As Stanley watched, the monster's weapon made contact with the chandelier itself, dislodging a precious crystal, which dropped towards the floor. But far below, a woman in leather trousers and a cocked hat put out a hand at precisely the correct moment to catch the crystal, without so much as looking up from the book she was reading.

'Do you take this lady, Isabella Croucher, to be your lawful . . .' she read, as she flung the crystal back into the air. Up the ladder, the cleaner caught it effortlessly, flicked his ladder around on its axis, and sent the troll sliding across the dancefloor, where it came to rest in a pile of gold-coloured chairs.

'Thank you, Ms Huntley!' cried the cleaner, at which the leather-clad lady raised a calm hand and carried on reading to herself.

'I, Navigator Huntley, by the power vested in me by you, my Captain and friend, declare you man and wife . . .' she muttered, and carried on pacing.

Stanley set off across the floor, jinking to avoid flying furniture, as he made his way towards the distant top table. Despite the fracas going on all around, things

were getting done. The tables were laid, and an army of sweepers was crossing the hall to and fro, gathering up indignant marauders along with the dust and debris. The chairs were being laid out by a human chain, which neatly flung each one over the heads of the attackers as if they weren't even there.

Stanley could see the raiders were getting more and more frustrated, partly at their lack of success, and partly at the nonchalant way they were being fought off – as if they were no more irritating than a swarm of midges. Stanley stopped as a man swinging a curved sword stepped backwards across his tracks. The man was grunting and sweating with the effort of holding off a smartly clad butler, who himself was entirely unruffled.

The butler was using a chair to push the swordsman backwards, whilst calmly dictating to his assistant. 'And then we shall need the choir to be ready as the Captain and his bride walk back up the aisle . . . Oh, look, another chair ruined.'

Seeming finally to notice the fuming swordsman, the butler said sternly, 'This just isn't on! We have barely enough chairs for guests as it is. Now, *please* . . .'

He flung the shattered chair away.

'Be . . .'

He picked the man up and held him aloft on one arm as if he were a tray of teacups.

‘More . . .’

He spun the man round and round.

‘Careful!’

And he flung him almost carelessly away, where he landed with an ‘Oof’ on the unconscious troll like creature, who hugged him close and began to suck his topknot like a dummy.

‘Now,’ said the butler, ‘young Stanley Crumplehorn, please get a move on. Those flowers should be on top table by now. Stop gawping, boy, scurry on!’

Stanley didn’t mind being spoken to like this by Snivens the butler, who was a kindly man at heart, so he merely tugged his forelock and began to run again. Now he was nearing the top table, where a group of people was huddled together as if discussing something important. An arm flew out of the huddle and grabbed one of the invaders by the hair. It twisted him round like a clockwork toy, and a different person’s leg gave him a kick up the backside, which sent him tottering away with a howl. Stanley laughed, which caused the huddle to break up. The first person to turn to Stanley was a tall, beautiful woman with kindly eyes and a glitzy tiara.

‘Aha! The flowers,’ said the Dowager Countess of Hammerstein, bending down to Stanley’s height. ‘Thank you, Stanley, my darling. I thought for a moment we were going to have a crisis on our hands!’

Saying this, she put out an elegant foot and sent a brutish-looking man tumbling under a table. She took the flowers from Stanley's hands and handed them to a pale girl in a purple dress.

'On top table, I think, Cloudier, dear,' said the Countess.

'Yes ' m,' said Cloudier, moving away with the flowers. She pulled them out of the vase, which she threw towards a wild looking woman brandishing a cutlass. Confused, the woman threw out both arms to catch the vase, causing her to drop the cutlass on her foot.

Cloudier winked at Stanley, causing him to blush, which only made him blush harder.

As the wild-looking woman hopped past, Stanley saw that the man in the middle of the huddle had been the man who all this fuss was for – the most important man onboard, the man who owned the whole Galloon, and on whom they all relied: Captain Meredith Anstruther.

'Well, Stanley!' said the Captain, effortlessly grasping a black-clad pirate in each enormous hand.

'What a day, eh? What a day! Makes the heart glad. Thank you for bringing the flowers; the Countess was beginning to worry!'

With this, he gave a sideways look to the glamorous woman now arranging the flowers on the table, who

rolled her eyes and smiled. The Captain seemed to forget what he was doing for a moment, then dropped the two pirates into a convenient dustbin and closed the lid.

'Now young . . . err . . . man,' he said, with a merest glance at the short, blunt horn on Stanley's head. 'I hear word that my brother is approaching. Let us hail him at the boatswain's chair.'

'Yes, sir!' said Stanley quietly. Stanley was not usually one for calling people 'sir', but the Captain was different. He was physically enormous, with shoulders like a pair of upturned jollyboats, and a broad, red-brown face. He wore on his ponytailed head a hat that would have looked ridiculous on anybody else, but gave him an air of majesty. It was a dusty, black, three-cornered thing from a former age, with gold piping and a tail of black ribbon, which somehow made him look even more formidable. Stanley followed as the Captain turned and walked away.

'Ermm – Captain?' he called, realising immediately how weedy his voice sounded after the Captain's profound rumble. 'This isn't the way to the chair, is it? We have to go back through the . . .'

'Back through the ballroom, along top corridor, up hatchway alpha fifteen, past the kennels, up the for'ard stairs, round the north bulwarks, over the ropings, under the foreb'loon capstans, and out past the jakes.

I know. That's the way to go alright – when you're not with *me*. But today, young man – you are!'

With this, the Captain looked around and gave a stealthy shove against a golden candelabra. With a creak that spoke of years of disuse, a door that had seemed to be part of the panelling opened up before them. As the Captain stepped inside, he beckoned for Stanley to do the same.

'Is it safe?' asked Stanley, before he could stop himself.

'Safe? Safe?' rumbled the Captain, as his eyes creased with laughter. 'I built this whole vessel with my own two hands, my boy! You'll trust it if you trust me!'

Immediately, Stanley squeezed inside the small space, feeling the Captain's massive presence, with his familiar smell of waxed cloth and chalk dust, as both reassuring and slightly overwhelming.

'Well. I am very pleased. Very pleased indeed,' said the Captain, looking down at Stanley from under his massive hat. Then, pausing only to slam the door shut on the necktie of a marauder who chose that moment to leap at them, the Captain pulled a lever that formed the back of the candelabra. The wooden floor of their little closet quivered, and then Stanley felt the blood rush from his face as it shot upwards, propelling them into the darkness.

He could hear the trundling of a mechanism, and

he could see the walls rattling by – this was obviously a secret route that only the Captain knew about. Later on he would come back to the ballroom and examine that candelabra minutely, but never make it do anything other than hold a candle. For now though, he was simply enjoying the ride.

'Where does this lead to?' he said after a few moments.

'Up and out!' said the Captain, and he smiled a broad smile. In all his time onboard the Galloon, Stanley had never seen the Captain smile like this. His usual smiles, when they came at all, seemed to be more about being polite or making someone feel better, than about smiling because he couldn't help it. But now his wide face split in two as they raced together up the narrow chute.

Looking up, past the Captain, Stanley saw the top of the chute coming closer. He just had time to notice that it was covered by a wooden grill, before the Captain kicked out at another lever as they shot past. The grill opened just as they reached it, and Stanley and the Captain were popped out of the top of the chute like a cork from a bottle. Stanley gasped as the Captain gripped him tightly, and then felt his eyes water as the cold air hit.

They carried on flying up into the bright nothingness of a clear day, and as he looked down, Stanley saw

the deck of the Galloon stretched out beneath them. It was so big that he couldn't see the sea, hundreds of metres below, but his stomach flipped nevertheless. Ropes and pulleys began to flit by. This was the network that connected the Galloon – a gigantic ship-like vessel the size of a city – to the balloon that kept it in the air, and the sails that allowed it to remain under the Captain's control. Stanley looked up and saw that the captain was still smiling, but now with a slightly more manic look in his eye.

'Hold on,' he boomed. 'I'm going to need both hands!'

Still whistling upwards through the air, Stanley managed to hook both hands under the Captain's great shiny leather belt, and wrapped his feet around one thick boot.

'Good lad, Stanley! This is the life, eh?' yelled the Captain, and Stanley felt a thrill at the idea of sharing this adventure with such a man.

With his hands free, and with their weight now returning, the Captain reached out and grabbed one of the many ropes that hung nearby. They fell, as Stanley knew they must, but rather than straight down, they swung out and across the deck of the Galloon, towards the mighty main mast, twelve oak tree trunks lashed in a bundle, from which all the sails hung.

Before they slammed into it, however, the Captain

let go, and they were flying again. Then he grabbed another rope, and they began to fall straight down. Their fall was checked by a bucket flying upwards, a bucket which, Stanley just had time to notice, held two terrified-looking raiders. But he didn't have time to feel sorry for them in their plight, as the Captain, now growling like a bear, plucked Stanley out of his fall, and onto a frail-looking ladder. And frail it was, as the Captain's steel-capped boots smashed the rung they were on, then the one below that, and they fell again, crashing through the rungs in a fall barely controlled by the Captain clinging gamely onto the uprights, with hands that were soon emitting a faint burning smell.

'Nearly there!' were the Captain's strangled words as their descent began to slow and, daring to look down, Stanley saw the deck approaching at a rate that was almost slow enough not to kill them. With a last gasp of effort, the Captain threw out his arms, which flung the pair of them backwards off the ladder. Stanley's stomach flipped yet again as they flopped against the taught fabric of a sail, and slid slowly deckwards. They dropped the last few feet, and the Captain's boots slammed solidly into the planks. There was a moment of pause, then Stanley unhooked his hands, took a step back, and looked up at the Captain. He was still beaming like a schoolboy, despite the smoke rising from the palms of his upturned hands.