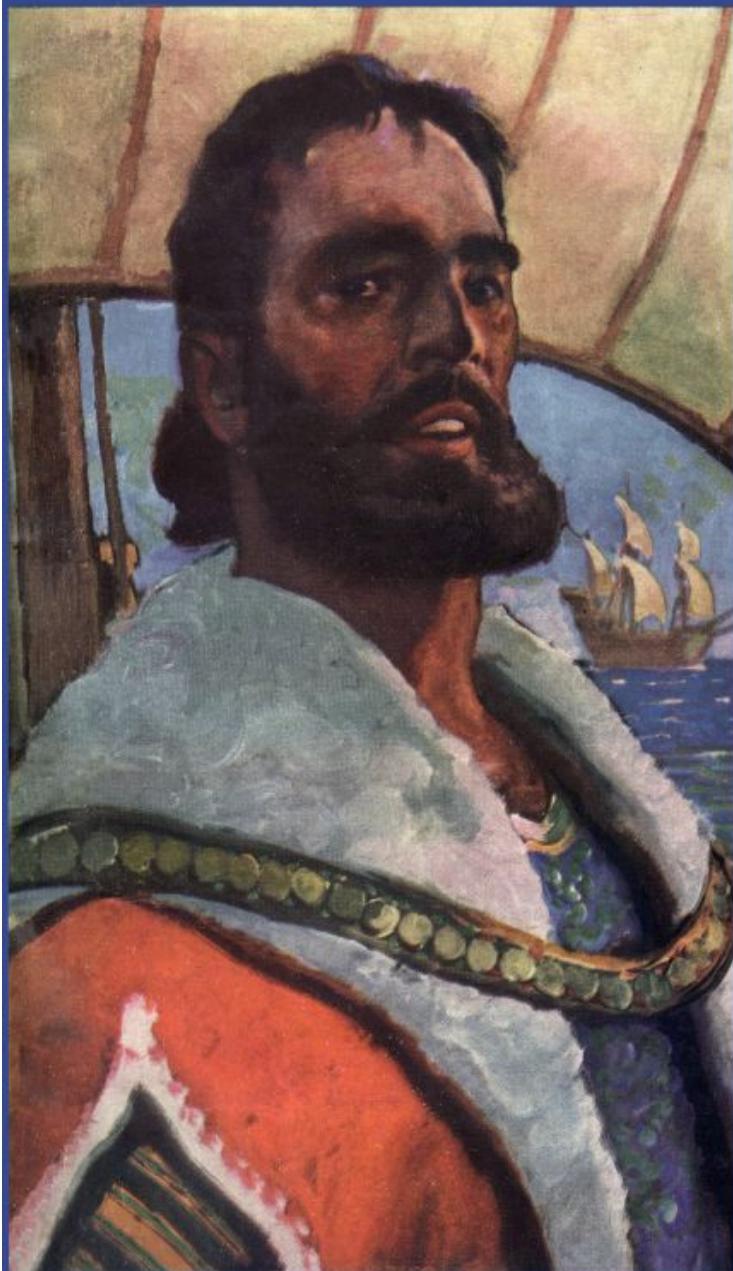


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The Dead Strike Back

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

and CAPTAIN L. B. WILLIAMS

Captain L. B. Williams is a pseudonym of Henry Bedford-Jones.

Illustrated by Frederic Anderson.

First published *Blue Book Magazine*, February 1938.

This fourteenth story in the Ships and Men series presents a pirate, a merchant, two British bowmen, a pretty lady and a new kind of ship—all in a most colorful story.

If you hang around a certain club in Hollywood long enough, you'll run into writers and diplomats and foreign correspondents and clairvoyants and what-not. The monthly stage shows draw a lot of what-not, because anyone with an act is tickled pink to put it on at the club, in the hope it will catch a producer's eye and step into the screen. It has to be good, too. . . .

One night a Dutchman with a broken nose and a wide grin and a title blew in with a couple of correspondents who introduced him all around. In no time at all he was popular. He had plenty of money, and he wanted to put on an act for the fun of it. Let us call him Jan Rubens and leave off his title.

He put on his act. It was a puppet-show, of all things, called "The Merchant of Venus," and it created a mild riot. Rubens gave a monologue as the show went on, and this helped the riot.

After the show we crowded about the bar, and Rubens held us spellbound. These puppets constituted his hobby; he did not go in for the usual sort of puppet-show either, but had all kinds of adjuncts.

"I like to teach something by the dolls," he said, beaming at everybody. "Every one of my acts teaches something, about men or history or whatever you like to name."

"One thing you can't teach about with puppets," I said, "is ships."

He chortled and waved his cigar.

"Hollanders, the greatest seamen in the world, not teach about ships? You make fun of me, my good friend. Of course I can. With puppets, too. Did you ever hear of the cog?"

Cog-wheel, cog in a wheel—yes, we had heard of cogs. Rubens beamed, chuckled, and puffed at his cigar. Not that kind of a cog at all, said he amiably.

"A long time ago, a very long time, you know," he said, gesturing with his cigar, "Bruges and its seaport, Sluys, were the centers of commerce for all western Europe, the way Venice was in the east. And in all the world nothing was known like Sluys, or Bruges either; the two were only seven miles apart in those days. Why, at brisk seasons seven and eight hundred ships a day cleared out of Sluys—a *day!*"

"Yeah," said somebody. "But what kind of ships?"

"Cogs, for the greater part," Rubens answered promptly. "The cog, my good friends, was a portly ship with a great square sail, and an enormously high forecastle and poop. It was not pretty. It was awkward; it was ungainly; it was a poor sailor: but it could carry a world of freight. It was the great cargo ship of northern Europe. King Edward of England embarked an

army of fifty thousand in one day, men and horses—because he had cogs to ship them in. Well! Who started this cog? Where did it come from?”

“I’ll bite,” some one offered. “Who?”

“That is what my play will show you,” said Rubens triumphantly. “Look! All the commerce of western Europe centered here. And off these coasts were the birds who preyed on that commerce—pirates: Moors and Genoese, English and German, these and others lay in wait. Well, well! Today Bruges is a city of the dead; but six hundred years ago it was to Europe what New York is to America. Shall we go and see? A private show, eh?”

We were all eager enough for another taste of his magic, and trooped into the club theater. His had been the last act of the evening, and all his apparatus was in place.

The lights were turned on, and the curtain was rung up. A dozen or more of us gathered in the front seats, and Rubens disappeared into his perch above the puppet-stage.

“This, my friends, is not like other plays,” his voice came to us, sonorous and vibrant. “I tell you this as we go along, yes; but first there is a panorama. You must realize what sort of city this was, with its canals coming up from the seaport of Sluys, its harbor, its multitude of shipping! For it was a free and open port, open to all men alike on the sole condition of peace; and any man who might break this peace was straightway hanged.”



The peculiar bronze timbre of the Dutchman's voice, no less than the expert manipulation of his puppets, was gripping. It had a hypnotic effect. Further, he had a sort of moving background and scenery that was new to us—panorama was perhaps the name for it, but it kept on the move through his entire show.

None of us cared about his cog at first; we did before he finished. Here was a wine of wizardry that thrilled us—not in the voice alone, or the moving, speaking puppets, but in the perfect timing of motion to the story that unfolded. Now the puppets spoke, now their master; he used a rolling monotone as subtle and as powerful as the throbbing background of

kettledrums to music. Further, his scenery or panoramic setting was as exquisite in detail and lighting as could be desired.

Bruges in its olden glory flashed before us: The great Waterhalle astride the canal, where all ships were unloaded that came up from Sluys; the churches and streets, the vast bazaars of merchandise, the churches and streets and the taverns, famed for their excellence. The people too, all kinds of them, painted and puppets, who moved with a gabble of talk. Suddenly the scene halted before the rich counting-house of a great merchant, the greatest merchant in Bruges.

“*Bras-de-fer!* Iron-arm!” he said, a testy graybeard with deep voice. “The most damned pirate in Christendom! Iron-arm, the accursed Norman—”

They were discussing piracies off the coast. The scene ran on: A road, carts, wagons; the great canal that ran down to Sluys. And here was Sluys itself, walled and moated and bursting with foreigners and merchandise, so that booths were put up outside the walls. But the eye passed on to the wondrous harbor of this town. If the town were marvelous with its people drawn from all nations and races, the harbor was an astounding sight.

Here lay so mighty a fleet that it seemed half the world must lie in leaguer before these walls. Up to the very walls, indeed, were ships; with the ebb tide they lay aground, careened over, in so soft and firm a bed of sand that they were as well off as though afloat.

Galleys from Italy and Spain, wine-ships from Bordeaux and the Garonne, sloops and busses from the German ports, pinks and flutes from the English coasts, whalers and decked galleys from Norway. And out beyond them all, by the sandbanks, a huge gray shape like nothing ever before seen on land or sea; a monstrous ship, ungainly and massively towering of stern and bow, all of a gray hue.

This misshapen wight had provoked the hilarity of seamen and townfolk alike. Crews lined the rails; burghers and merchants thronged the walls; boats went out and rowed about her, with mirth and comment and jest. From the French coast, it was said, though nothing so monstrous was known to any of the French pilots here. Her crew had stayed aboard; they spoke French, at least. Her master alone had gone ashore, with bales of goods. A bronzed, foreign-looking man with a patch over one eye and oddly assorted garments; but he spoke good Spanish and Flemish and French. Some said he had gone up to Bruges; others, that he was bartering in the town here. People thought less about him than about the monstrous ship out yonder; the *Gray Cockerel* she was named in French.

Captain Dubois had indeed gone on to Bruges, with his bales and a leather chest that rode ever close to him. Well ahead of him had sped tales of the *Gray Cockerel*, and there was talk of nothing else. Jests flew fast and wide; seamen from stout busses and swift handy galleys heaped derision on the ungainly thing. Some guttural German shipmaster found her name harsh on his tongue, and called her the “*cog*.” The name stuck. It was ugly and blunt and awkward, like the ship herself. Amid gales of laughter, it spread over the city.

Coming into Bruges of an afternoon, Dubois went straight to the office of Messer Leonello the great merchant, near the Grand Place on the canal. In his youth, Messer Leonello had come out of Italy into Flanders. He was a citizen now, and a burgher, and had a Flemish name; but men still called him Messer Leonello. He had a thin gray beard, an eye like steel, and was a most vigorous and hearty man. He was, indeed, newly married; and if there were any softness in his heart, which men doubted, it went toward his wife.

Captain Dubois saluted the clerks courteously and brought in his bales and his chest. Messer Leonello came forth, greeted him, and eyed the bales askant.

"I don't buy cloth by the ell," he said harshly.

Dubois laughed a little.

"Indeed? These are mere samples for your convenience. Perhaps you'll buy jewels by the yard? The leather chest may accommodate you, good messer."

One of the clerks whispered. Oh, the master of the cog, eh? The gaze of Messer Leonello swept his visitor curiously; then he bowed with gravity.

"Will you come into my private office?"

Dubois entered, and the little chest was brought in. The merchant took one glance at the jewels and trinkets therein, and repressed a gasp. He took the paper Captain Dubois handed him, the list of goods aboard the *Gray Cockerel*, and stupefaction came upon him. Goods of the richest, from silk to cut Genoa velvet, in enormous quantities.

"This is no matter of hours, but of days," he said slowly. "Your goods must come ashore; we must bargain carefully. The town is so filled that you can get no inn-room. May I offer you accommodations in my own house? It will be an honor."

Dubois, with his queer silent laugh, accepted. Then he showed that his left arm was in a sling.

"The yard fell, killed a man, broke my arm," he said. "I may be a trouble to you—"

"I have servants," Messer Leonello said curtly. "They are yours."

So Dubois was lodged in the merchant's house, and the merchant's wife made him welcome. When his one eye fell upon the lovely Eva, it glittered, and a flush came into the dark thin cheeks; when he saw how her gaze touched upon her graybeard husband, he laughed in his silent way, and became very merry. That evening he told many a strange tale of foreign lands, and presented Eva with a little case in which were three enormous matched emeralds.

So courteous was his speech that the girl, stammering refusal, scarce knew how to decline. Messer Leonello bade her accept the gift, and his eyes glinted with avarice, as he thanked the good captain handsomely.

With morning, Dubois slept late, shaved and dressed carefully in new garments of fine gray wool, and finding the merchant gone to his office, talked with Eva. As they talked, he took the patch from his eye, showing a lean brown hawklike face.

"But your eye is sound!" she exclaimed; and he laughed heartily.

"Certainly it is. I made a vow to St. James of Compostello that during a whole year I would wear an eye-patch, unless I were alone with the most beautiful woman in the world. This is the first time the patch has been removed, dear lady."

She blushed, but showed no anger, and Dubois talked on. Without the patch, he was an eager, handsome man, very gay and of a blithe heart; no mere trader, indeed, but a man of high knightly air and bearing, with all the magic of the wide world at his tongue's end. When he departed for the counting-house, she was in a glow, and her deep blue eyes were all set on wonder and delight; but when the eye-patch was on again, Dubois was a very different person in looks and manner.

Unloading the cog, getting the goods up to the city, was a slow business. No man save port officials was allowed aboard the cog; nor did any of her crew come ashore. Master's orders, they said to the lighter-men, and that was an end to it. They seemed to hold Captain Dubois in

stern respect and awe. They were a hard lot, too, the stories ran: men of all nations, apparently, weaponed and armed even while at their work.

Then, after the goods came up to Messer Leonello's warehouses, they had to be examined and appraised; and the little leather chest of gems and trinkets made slow business in itself. Dubois was unhurried. He spent much time with the merchant, and more time with Dame Eva, so that her eyes came to light up when he appeared, and color grew in her cheeks at his word.

As for Dubois, what had begun in pleasant gallantry grew into most deadly earnest. Pity for this lovely girl, tied to an unloved graybeard of iron heart, passed into something deeper as he came to know her better. She had a radiance and a quiet tender bravery that drew his admiration and compelled his respect. Too, she had a delicate clear soul untouched by any stain, so that her blue eyes looked out upon the world with sunny faith, like the eyes of an angel who sees no evil, or refuses to recognize it.

Dubois loved her, and knew that he loved her, and shrank back aghast. He knew, also, the dark and terrible depths of his own evil heart, and this was torment unutterable. For him there was no redemption on this earth—and none beyond, when he reflected on the matter. . . .

Now, there were two English archers carousing in a tavern of Bruges—Long Wat and Tom o' Devon. They had served a year under the Count of Flanders, and had started home with full pockets; but the lasses of Bruges and the good Spanish wine tempted them to fall from grace, and the fall was not by any means light.

Upon a day, they saw Captain Dubois walking with Messer Leonello, and blinked. Long Wat nudged Tom in the ribs; and Tom o' Devon nodded and stared. When they were a trifle sobered, Long Wat made inquiries here and there. Being very blunt and honest men, master bowmen both, they came early one morning to the counting-house and asked private speech with Messer Leonello, and were taken into his office and the door closed. They nudged one another; and Long Wat, fingering his hat, took up the word.

"Master, two years ago we sailed from Southampton with Sir John Calverly's company in many small craft; and a storm came up, and pirates fell upon us. They laid our craft aboard, and the chief of those pirates was one they called Bras-de-fer, or Iron-arm, because one arm ended in a hook of iron. He fought like a devil, and killed good Sir John with a foul blow; and we took oath that if we lived, we would some day put a shaft through that villain. Our other craft rallied, and he drew off, and we're alive; and by our Lady, he's here in this city and calls himself Captain Dubois and is your friend; so we came to give you warning of him."

Messer Leonello's shaggy gray brows drew into a line over his keen eyes.

"How do you know this man is Iron-arm?"

"He looks like him," said Long Wat. "Dressed different, but has a profile not to be missed twice, a high nose and a twist to his lip, and his left arm in a sling to hide the iron spike he wears instead of a hand."

"You're honest men," said Messer Leonello slowly; and he laid out gold. "Here's a rose noble for each of you, with my thanks. Let me know where you may be found, in case your evidence is needed against this rascal."

They complied. "But mind," said Long Wat, "we've sworn to put a shaft through him for the memory of good Sir John; so if it comes to weapons, give us the first chance."

To which Messer Leonello assented very gladly.

Instead of laying information against his guest, he had a very curious conversation with Captain Dubois in the privacy of his office, that same day. The great amount of rich goods coming ashore from the cog, no less than the quantity of jewels, came to a figure higher than any one merchant could handle, he said; therefore he had formed a syndicate of merchants to take care of these goods.

“My colleagues,” he went on, “think it odd that you should own so vast stores of goods, instead of handling them on consignment for English merchants. It has even been hinted that you might be acting for some one else—perhaps for sea marauders.”

“What?” exclaimed Dubois. “You suggest that I might be acting for pirates, that these goods might have been gained by base piracy? Well, well—and would that make any difference to the purchase of them?”

“No,” said Messer Leonello. “But it might cause a discount for cash—eh? And it might lead to future business of a mutually profitable nature.”

“I see that we understand one another,” said Dubois, with a thin smile. “Suppose that some enterprising captain of freebooters, with several galleys to swell his business, collected large quantities of plunder and fetched them to Sluys—let us say, twice a year. The facts of the matter wouldn’t be generally known, of course.”

“Naturally,” said the merchant, his avid eyes keen. “Nor could his piratical galleys show up with the goods. But this odd ship of yours might do so. In such case, what’s to prevent other pirates from pouncing on this ship of yours and seizing the plunder?”

Captain Dubois chuckled. “Why, the ship herself! I built her, planned her, put her into the water, for just such a purpose. With the size of her, she has incredible cargo-space. With the enormous poop and forecastle and thick bulwarks, she overtops any galley made; they can’t pour men aboard her. With a stout crew, a catapult in the bows, and a mangonel aft, she can fight off a dozen pirate galleys. D’ye see?”

Messer Leonello stared at him, and clutched with thin fingers at the table.

“By the saints! I see more than that,” he said slowly. “Why should not I send out such trading-ships myself, which are proof against pirate galleys?”

Captain Dubois laughed. “You’d have to build ’em. Who’d do it for you? Not I. Not your Flemish shipyards. It’d take them years to make the experiments, the plans, the model ships, to figure strains and stresses, weight and displacement. It took me years to make her.” He slapped the merchant on the shoulder and turned to the door. “No, no, my good friend! The secret of the *Gray Cockerel* is mine, and is safe with me.”

Messer Leonello sighed. “You’re right. Don’t forget, the port captain of Sluys is dining with us tonight. *Au revoir!*”

Left alone, however, the merchant fingered his thin gray beard, with eyes that were very bright and fiercely calculating and eager. Ships reasonably safe from sea-marauders spelled fortune for a merchant, if one but had a model on which to build such ships. What was more, an astute man who went about obtaining that model in the right way, might well find a more immediate fortune within his grasp. And it was clear why no one was allowed aboard the *Gray Cockerel*: Captain Dubois wanted no shipyard men prying into his secrets and obtaining measurements of his ship.



“How do you know this man is Iron-arm?”

“But,” said Messer Leonello softly, “there’s always a way! In fact, there are usually several ways.”

He sent a clerk on an errand, and the clerk brought back Long Wat, reasonably sober, who sat in talk with Messer Leonello for a long time, and at length drew a long face.

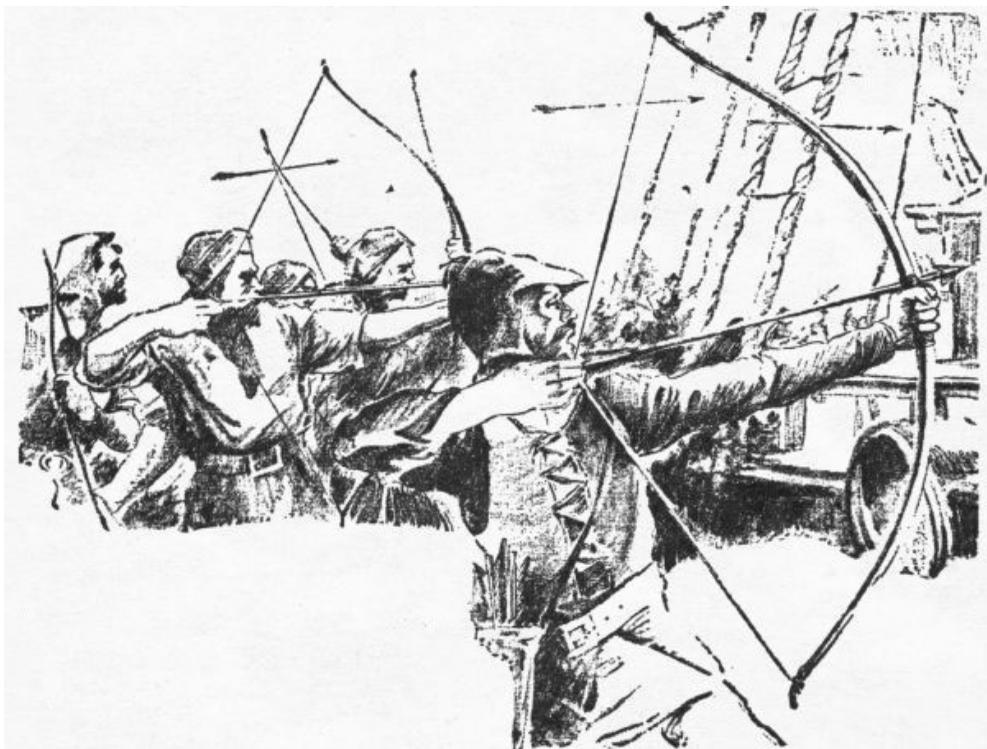
“By Our Lady, messer, you read me a tough riddle! The laws are strict, and devilish severe; any man who bares weapon or looses shaft in Sluys harbor is straightway hanged, and no talk about it. That Captain of Sluys is no man to tempt, either.”

“No; but he’s my very good friend.” And the Italian smiled slowly. “Suppose you get your dozen men together and select the proper boat. Here’s money, to make everything ready. Then await word from me. There’s no hurry, remember. The right moment may be slow in coming; when it comes, don’t fail me or you’ll repent it.”

“No danger, messer!” said Long Wat, and departed joyfully.

That evening the Captain of Sluys, who had been aboard the cog as his duty demanded, complimented Captain Dubois highly. Never had he seen so stout a ship, quoth he, nor so well manned. Indeed, her outward looks of awkwardness belied her inner excellence. Messer Leonello said little, but his quick eyes darted and lingered shrewdly; a stab of color came into his gray cheeks when he surprised occasional glances between Captain Dubois and his lovely wife.

Dame Eva had a strong desire to see that ship, and so had Messer Leonello, who craved that they might go aboard her.



“Take that for good Sir Hugh!” yelled Tom o’Devon. “The dead strike back!”

“Why, so you shall!” said Dubois heartily. “Later, when the freight’s out and the water and stores shipped, and she’s been made all clean and fresh to behold, we’ll go aboard her, and my hospitality may repay a fraction of yours.”

“It may indeed,” said the merchant with his dark smile. “And I’m sure, my dear Eva, you’ll have great pleasure of the visit.”

The bartering and bargaining went on, day after day; the rich goods were gradually disposed of; the jewels sank lower in the leather chest, and in their place grew hard round money and bills upon bankers and merchants abroad. Until, as Messer Leonello said with a jesting laugh, the *Gray Cockerel* would prove an empty prize, but a rich one, for any pirates who might master her.

“If any could, they’re welcome!” Dubois replied cheerfully.

In these days, he tried to see little of Eva, but could not; and they were greatly together. The love between them became deeper and firmer, though he fought against this also.

“I must tell you this,” he said to her one day, desperation in his eyes. “It has come to frankness between us; I love you, but you are another man’s wife. I love you, yet I respect you with all my heart and soul. And you must not think twice of me, for I am no good man. I am the opposite, a pirate and a thief and a recreant knight.”

She looked at him, and smiled.

“I do not think people are ever fit and ready for heaven each day of their lives,” she said gently. “What of it? So much the greater chance for repentance and for good works. I could not love any evil man; and if I hold you in regard, it is because I know you are not evil now. The past is of no account.”

“It is of great account,” he said hoarsely. “Do you know the story of Iron-arm the pirate? He was once a Norman knight, but he went from better to worse—”

She smiled again. “If you were Bras-de-fer himself, what is that to me? Because I loved him, he would be no longer Iron-arm, but himself once again. No, my dear, don’t try to shake our friendship down. This is the one beautiful thing that has ever come into my life. I say no ill of my husband; but my marriage was a matter of buying and selling, and not of joyous happiness. As I think you know well, I would not dishonor either my husband or my love; thus, for the little while you are here, let life be beautiful.”

Dubois questioned himself, how would this thing end. She, in her innocence, thought she could be wed to one man and love another, in all goodness. Perhaps she could, being little short of an angel; but it was otherwise with men. Suppose he wakened her from this childish and immature dream-life of hers—suppose he carried her away in the *Gray Cockerel*. Would this flower-woman droop and fade, or wax strong and blooming?



“By my soul,” said he, looking into her eyes, “you are right about it. If the man you love was ever a pirate and a rogue, he is so no more; I swear it! The wealth he has thus won goes to his men, and they go their ways. He’ll have none of it, and none of them, henceforth. Instead, there are ways of honesty and good emprise open to him. With this ship of his, he can do great things, for your husband has shown him the way.”

Her eyes were starry and very beautiful to see, as she put out her hand to him.

“My dear, I understand; and you make me very happy,” she said softly. Dubois pressed her fingers. Then, hearing a step outside, he clapped the patch on his eye.

“By God, I’ll open all of life to you, and make you more than happy!” he said quickly.

And yet he knew he could not. He knew that if he yielded to this temptation, the best part of their love would be smashed and broken.

Messer Leonello came in, and smiled upon them thinly, noting the glorious starry eyes of Dame Eva and the alert gayety of Captain Dubois. Presently he went his way again without comment; it was not in his nature to believe that love could exist, without being a criminal love. Eva somehow sensed this.

"I'm afraid!" she said, lifting startled gaze to Dubois. "He suspects something; he has a horrible way of knowing things without being told. And he'd never understand."

"No, he'd never understand," echoed Captain Dubois with a grim smile. "But we've done no wrong, my dear, and we'll do no wrong under this roof, so be of good cheer. He doesn't suspect anything—how should he? Forget it."

Dubois struggled with himself, but could reach no decision. His own future seemed clear: He would sail the *Gray Cockerel* and make an honest living with her, and a fortune to boot; that is, if Eva sailed with him. If she sailed not, then devil take the future! But he must seize her away, carry her off, cause an irrevocable break.

At times it looked simple and logical. Other times, the prospect was impossible; he was afraid for her; and the thought of hurting her, even for the moment, was intolerably tormenting. Yet he must come to it, for the day of his departure was drawing close. The traffic in goods and jewels was about done.

During this while, he had not neglected occasional visits to the cog. His men were well content to stay aboard; carouse would come soon enough elsewhere. Secretly, he had one of the cabins made ready for a lady, sending aboard rich silks and gear that was honestly bought. He could not do otherwise, if Eva was to use it. But he had no suspicion that every move he made was watched and reported to Messer Leonello. . . .

Upon a sparkling summer's day the accounts were settled, and evening saw all finished. With next morning, Dubois was departing; and with noon Messer Leonello and Dame Eva would come aboard, to view the cog and to enjoy his hospitality ere she sailed.

On press of business, the merchant went out that evening, and Dubois saw his lady alone, for the last time. He looked into her eyes and almost did his heart fail him; for he had made his decision now.

"It will not be easy to sail the seas honestly, and alone," he said. "They're too wide for a lonely man, my dear, or for a lonely future."

She smiled a little. "What's easy is not worth while. You need no help; you have all strength within you. Yet it will be hard to think of you—"

Her voice failed, and her eyes fell.

"Why, then, sail with me, always!" said Dubois huskily.

"I will, my dear," she said, not dreaming that he meant his words literally, or that decision tore his heart. "I will, always; you'll have my prayers; you'll have me near you—the best of me, while the worst of me stays here with duty."

Captain Dubois turned away, and put the eye-patch in place again.

With morning, the merchant and Eva saw him off. Messer Leonello pressed his hand warmly, promising to follow to Sluys within an hour and to come aboard in his own barge, that would take them back to shore again.

"You'll have to take your ship outside the port," he went on, "or else you'll not be able to sail later against the tide. Do so; it won't trouble us, for there's no sea running today. And another thing! It is said that the good wishes of men about to take the sea, bring good luck.

I'm sending with you a cask of Italian wine from my own cellar, as a gift to your men. Let them drink to my health, and that of my lady, and drink well, so that when we come aboard, all hands will be merry."

For this kindness, Captain Dubois thanked him with right good heart, and so departed. . . .

When they two were about to follow, Messer Leonello smiled upon Eva and bade her wear the three great emeralds Captain Dubois had given her.

"It would do him honor thus to show his gift," said he. "And I beg you, put on that new sarcenet-trimmed dress which so richly sets off your beauty."

So she did. All the way to Sluys, Messer Leonello beamed upon her, and never since their wedding-day had she known him so kindly and intent upon her pleasure.

When they came to the port, the Captain of Sluys met them, and spoke apart shortly with Messer Leonello, and then escorted them to the merchant's wharf houses. Here at the landing-stairs waited a barge, which Messer Leonello had rented, with a dozen men at the long sweeps. Long Wat had the stroke, with Tom o' Devon behind him; and the others were Englishmen also, straight-eyed, hard-bitten master bowmen. At their feet, over the bottom of the barge, a large tarpaulin was laid.

Eva settled herself on soft cushions, under the gilded canopy in the stern. Messer Leonello, beside her, took the tiller, and the barge swept out with oars dipping.

Wide as the harbor was in those days, before it was silted up, the merchant had no little trouble avoiding the ships, so thickly did they lie on every hand, by the hundred; a forest of masts pierced the sky; and as the tide was on the ebb, the outer sandbanks were solid with careening hulls. To the girl, all this was a marvel to behold—strange men and foreign tongues, ships from half Europe, even two galleys filled with Moorish men from Seville, their dark faces alight with mirth and gaiety.

On and on the barge threaded its way, coming at length to open water. There, outside the bounds of the port, the cog was at anchor. The gray enormous mass of her was gayly decked with flags and pennons; as they approached, Messer Leonello eyed her with sharp and calculating gaze—the huge square stern, high-crowned with poop, the high side bulwarks, the rising tall forecastle. Ugly, awkward, uncouth—but what a ship wherewith to set all the pirates of the world at naught!

Her ladder was out, and Dubois waved them welcome as they came in under the high side. Two of the rowers made fast the ladder; and laughing at the adventure, Dame Eva fought her way upward. Dubois caught her two hands, lifted her, and swung her in to the deck below; though he had but one arm for the work, it was enough.

And if their lips met for an instant, there in the sunlight, Messer Leonello could not know of it as he jerkily toiled his way upward.

Dubois met him gayly.

"Will your barge return for you, or wait? If the latter, let the men come up."

"Nay, let the rogues stay," said the merchant. "They have their orders, and are well enough off."

"As you like. We've just broached your cask."

The crew, grouped in the waist about the open cask of wine, shouted lusty greeting. Messer Leonello surveyed them narrowly; a hard lot, a bad lot, by their looks. They were quaffing the good Italian wine right heartily.

“Will you come to the poop for the view?” asked Captain Dubois. The merchant assented, but the girl laughed and shook her head, as she eyed the high ladders.

“I’m still out of breath from the climb,” she responded. “Let me wait here, I beg!”

Dubois shrugged, and accompanied the merchant to the poop, pointing out to him the various features of the cog. Dubois’ arm was still in its sling, the patch still over his eye.

When they came down, Dame Eva was among the group of sailors, one of whom was just taking back a huge silver flagon from her hand. Laughing, her eyes sparkling, she turned to Dubois.

“I was joining in the toast to your health, good captain; but I could not drink the half of that huge flagon. My dear husband, I didn’t know you had such glorious wine in the cellar! It’s magnificent.”

“No, *no!*” A hoarse cry broke from Messer Leonello, as he thrust forward. “No! It’s impossible—you didn’t drink of that wine—”

“Bah! Why not?” Dubois laughed heartily. “Wine never did anyone harm. But come along and see the cabins; the table’s laid, and my cooks are busy in the stern cabin.”

“Eh?” Messer Leonello, in sudden agitation, swung on him. “I’d like to see the cabin you’ve furnished for a lady, yes!”

“For a lady?” Dubois eyed him narrowly. “What mean you?”

“Rumor, gossip—God knows!” The Italian turned away. He cast one terrible and inexplicable look at his wife, and wiped sweat from his face, though the sea air was cool enough. “What’s done is done, and there’s no help for it.”

“Say you so?” Dubois laughed harshly, moving aft toward the poop entrance. “If I had a mind, now, I could carry you and your good lady away to sea and hold you both to ransom—eh? What could you do about that, Messer Leonello, and how cure it?”

“Easily enough,” said the Italian, throwing a glance forward. There was confusion among the men there; one of them had fallen; the others were grouped about him.

“What? How, then?” And Dubois laughed again, clapping him on the shoulder. “Come, man! How to save yourself from villainous hands?”

“Why, like this!” So speaking, Messer Leonello put a whistle to his lips, and blew a long shrill blast.

Dubois stared at him curiously. Some of the men swung around, looking. Others were crying out, a sudden fear in their voices. Another of the men had pitched forward as though drunk. Messer Leonello went to his wife, and took her hands, and looked into her eyes. His face was gray and drawn. His own eyes were filled with a strange agony.

“God forgive me, and you, my dear!” he said quietly. “I had not intended this; it is too late. Once that wine passed your lips, there was no help for it, indeed. Give me your pardon, I beseech you—”

She shrank a little, not comprehending, but terrorized by the look in his face. Other of the men were bawling out something; they were staggering, clutching at their throats, lifting their voices frantically. Captain Dubois, in wild alarm and perplexity, stared at them, then broke into a run and started for them. Midway, he whipped around, as men came over the rail.

For at that whistle-blast, the rowers in the boat had leaped into life. The tarpaulin was jerked away, to reveal long yew bows and quivered arrows. Long Wat, snatching up a bow,

deftly strung it, caught up shafts, and leaped for the ladder, with Tom o' Devon at his heels and the rest trailing.

They came over the bulwark. Some of them leaped to the deck; some stood there on the bulwark, notching their shafts. The voice of Long Wat blared forth shrilly:

"For Sir Hugh! Here, ye damned dogs, the dead strike back at ye!"

The bowstring twanged and hummed. Captain Dubois groaned deeply, and caught at the clothyard shaft, driven to the very goose-feathers through his body. He staggered back against the farther bulwark, and another bowstring twanged, and the second shaft went through his body and pinned him to the oaken bulwark.

"Take that for good Sir Hugh!" yelled Tom o' Devon. "*The dead strike back!*"

No one heard, or cared, that Eva had uttered one screaming cry of grief, and breaking from her husband, rushed across the deck to Dubois. For now men died fast.

"Poisoned! The wine was poisoned!" Too late the cry, too late the swift snatching at arms. Long shafts were hurtling, fast as those dozen bowmen could notch shaft and let fly; hurtling and whistling death across the decks at the staggering, yelling crew.

Some few of these, despite wine and shafts, darted forward. A few men came running from the rear cabins. They died, most of them, as they came. Two or three reached the group of bowmen; and swords flashed, and knives bit; and two of those Englishmen rolled in the scuppers. That was all. Death twanged and whistled until there were no marks left, and the crew of the *Gray Cockerel* lay stretched about the wine-cask or sprawled on the red decks.

Messer Leonello moved to where Captain Dubois hung pinned to the bulwark with eyes already glazing, the black patch gone now. He looked down at his wife; she had fallen to the deck, quivering as those fallen men had quivered about the wine-cask. Then he spat into the face of the dying Dubois, and spoke with a snarl of hatred.

"Thrice-damned dog! Even so, she's better off than gone overseas with you and leaving me shamed. Take the blame to your own soul, for I wash my hands of it."

"*Judas!*" said Dubois, very faintly.

His eyes flew open. He made a sudden, spasmodic effort, and tore his arm free of the sling. Steel glittered; the spike he wore in place of hand drove out, squarely to the breast of Messer Leonello. And with that one last effort, he died.

The Italian staggered. That sharp, hard thrust had torn his mantle away, revealing the chain-mail beneath. Unhurt, he gathered the mantle around him, turned to meet the wondering Englishmen, who knew not how his wife had died; and his gaze lifted along the decks. He caught sight of a barge approaching, and a smile touched his bearded lips.

"Ready, men! The Captain of Sluys is coming aboard, and you're outside the harbor bounds and in no danger," said he. "And mind, there's reward enough for the killing of these pirates to send you all back to England rich men. You did well."

Long Wat met his gaze, looked down at the sweet dead face on the deck, and looked up again with a low oath.

"I'm not so sure of that," said he. "But our vow's fulfilled, and plague on your money!"

The lights went up. A stage, the puppet-show, the beaming features of the broken-nosed Dutchman—we all of us came suddenly and awkwardly back to the present, and to where we were.

“And that was the beginning of the cog, the great cargo craft of northern Europe!” said Rubens, as he joined us. “Messer Leonello founded a trading company, built ships, died a man of tremendous wealth and power—”

“And went to hell, if your story’s true,” said somebody with an oath.

It was a tribute; and Rubens took it as such. The utter mastery of his little show had left us all shaken. Still, there was one point that remained vague.

“Rubens! One thing I didn’t get: Did Dubois intend to run away with the girl or not? What decision had he reached?”

Murmurs of assent showed that others had the same doubt. Rubens beamed around at us, and chuckled softly.

“My good friends, I thank you; this is a compliment to my art, and I am very proud of it. You see, gentlemen, all great art leaves something to be desired. Frustration, the agony of the heroic soul, is the theme of great epics. This little epic of mine brings to life the people of a past day and age; it teaches you something about ships, maybe, and it leaves you asking a question.”

“Well, answer it!” I blurted. “Did Dubois intend to carry off the girl?”

Rubens spread his hands wide in an eloquent gesture.

“My dear sir—I do not know. History and legend fail to say. You must answer that question yourself, after the dictate of your own heart. The show is over; shall we have a little drink all around—just a tiny drink?”

[The end of *The Dead Strike Back* by Henry Bedford-Jones]