

A Debt Repaid

A fat man with one arm answered the insistent ringing of his doorbell. When he opened the door the delivery driver said, "Package for Jason Miller, please sign here." Jason clamped the long, unwieldy parcel under his remaining arm and took it into his study. He snipped the heavy tape, unravelled the creased brown paper and revealed a surgically severed human arm. With a grim smile, he nodded knowingly to himself and picked up the novel he had been reading.

After a few minutes he put the book down, closed his eyes and recalled the strange history of this bizarre package. A year earlier he had cashed in some ISA's to finance a trip he had been dreaming about for a long time. He paid for a suite with balcony and an all-inclusive package on the Nirvana, a luxury cruise ship with an exciting itinerary embracing several South Pacific islands. He remembered vividly the bustling dockside scene in Brisbane as he boarded this sea-going colossus. His quiet bachelor existence had not prepared him for the orgiastic culinary excesses of cruise life. He'd always loved his food and his corpulent frame bore witness to many years of over-indulgence. So could he resist the 24/7 availability of a cornucopia of delicious food? No he could not. For three weeks he followed a regime of eating every two of his waking hours. A Full English was followed mid-morning by a copious intake of pastries. An hour or so later he consumed a three course lunch. He ploughed his way through a generous afternoon tea with lashings of clotted cream and jam on his scones. He guzzled several pre-dinner canapés before attacking a five course tasting menu. He mused later that he had personally despatched down his gullet enough lobster thermidor to feed a busload of hungry navvies. Nor could he resist the delicious bacon rolls which were delivered to the ship's night club around midnight.

Three weeks into the voyage he weighed himself, discovering that he had added fifteen kilos to his already substantial bulk. He asked the ship's laundry team to let out all his trousers. He dressed for comfort in the largest Hawaiian shirts sold by the on-board shop and the voluminous shorts beloved by many of his American co-passengers.

His food intake was in no way depleted by his trips ashore to Vanuatu, Tonga and Fiji. He gorged himself on the traditional feasts laid on for the tourists. He devoured huge portions of suckling pig, cooked in underground ovens. He felt

an affinity with these Pacific islanders as many of the men were as large and meaty as himself.

Jason didn't socialise much but did find a kindred spirit in Simon Lloyd the young ship's doctor. Their relationship was based on their shared love of chess. The ship's passengers became used to the sight, each evening after dinner, of these contrasting figures with their heads bent over a chessboard. Simon's small slim figure was dwarfed by Jason's gargantuan frame. The passengers coined the unoriginal but apt soubriquet of 'Little and Large' to describe this strange pair.

Then disaster struck. The Nirvana was sailing from Tonga to Samoa when it passed close to the epicentre of a huge undersea volcanic eruption. The seismic shock released more energy than the most powerful nuclear bomb ever created. The monstrous tsunami it created swept all before it. A ninety foot wave caught the Nirvana broadside and the ship heeled over. In the ensuing panic after the 'Abandon Ship' command had been given, Jason found himself in the same lifeboat as his chess-playing partner, Doctor Lloyd.

As is the modern norm, this was no tiny vessel. It had, in fact, capacity for one hundred and fifty souls. In the chaos as the liner foundered far fewer than this number made it aboard. As the only ship's officer among the survivors, Doctor Lloyd took command. His initial assessment established that thirty-seven people were on the craft. He was the youngest, with Jason only a decade or so older. There was no-one else under seventy and the oldest person was ninety-two. The doctor knew the lifeboat held one hundred and fifty heat-sealed vacuum packed food rations and 1.5 litres of water per person as stipulated by SOLAS (Safety of Life at Sea) regulations. The manual he found explained that each ration pack was designed to keep a single castaway alive for eight days. A quick mental calculation confirmed that dividing the food and water supplies between the thirty-seven would give them over thirty days before serious malnutrition and dehydration would become life-threatening.

As he shared these encouraging statistics with his fellow passengers an air of palpable relief swept through the boat. Indeed, for many it was seen as an exciting adventure. Surely in this day and age they would be rescued long before their supplies ran out. The sea was eerily calm, the weather was clement and they had confidence in their young skipper. But as the days became weeks optimism turned to despair. At forty days the last of their

smoke flares sputtered out after a vain final attempt to alert a plane soaring high above them.

Then the castaways began to die. Old age and a sedentary, self-indulgent lifestyle caught up with all of them barring the super-fit young doctor and Jason with his ample reserves of flesh. But the good doctor knew he could not survive much longer without food. As he was rushing to leave the cruise ship and make for the lifeboats, he had had the presence of mind to grab his capacious medical bag full of drugs and instruments. One day as he sweltered under the lifeboat's canopy in a fevered state he saw Jason's still bloated physique and hallucinated that his brawny arm was a joint of beef.

He had plenty of morphine in his bag, razor sharp scalpels and an unquenchable will to live.....but he also espoused the civilised code which demanded the no debt should remain unpaid.

1,000 words