

12. Red Sam's bad bet

The March wind blew still from the south and the days ran by. Each night the Captain retired to his cabin with a prayer for fair wind, and each morning it again blew foul. Tom Keyes spent his days in Plymouth Town with all the other passengers who could afford inn-fare. Those who couldn't ate into their private provisions for the voyage and wondered how they would survive on salt pork and ship biscuit when all else was gone. The mate and his crew were

busy enough, replenishing water and beer every day so that each morning they were ready to weigh if only the wind would serve.

Busy, yes, but not entirely so. On more than one night, Red Sam returned from Plymouth Town with a song and a stagger, his head still full of stingo. The first time he made such a ruckus that Richie Davis cried out the return of the Spanish Armada. But soon they all heard Red Sam's singing, his voice floating across the water from the boat bringing him back aboard:

'Twill make a man indentures make

'Twill make a fool seem wise

'Twill make a Puritan sociate

And leave to be precise,

'Twill make him dance about a cross

And eke to run the ring, too

Or anything he once thought gross,

Such virtue hath old stingo

After that first night they grew used to hearing Sam's song. Every night was different, and every night the same. He sang of the ale of Southwarke; he sang of the ale of Chepe; he sang the tinker's treasure, the poor's man pleasure; he sang the peddler's jewel, the beggar's simple joy that makes the wise a fool. Every ale-house song or ditty seemed to have found a place in Red Sam's malt-sogged brain, and as he had a goodly memory, it all came back when his tongue was loosed. It was much amusement for the passengers, but irritation to the crew whose closest approach to the ale-house was carrying Red Sam home.

One night he'd been rowed back late and trundled to his cot in the finest voice, praising English ale: "she's

hazel-nut brown, the true merry-go-down, for it slides so merrily down, my lads, it slides so merrily down....'

The next morning came far too early for him after such a nut-brown night. He'd been roused out by the morning watch and came on deck looking worse than the night before. He now was squatted on deck, staring rather stupidly at several new tackles and the many lengths of rope still to be hitched to the rings and shortened. It was chill and his hands were redder than his beard, closer indeed to the cheery red of his Monmouth cap; but his eyes were redder still. After a moment, he became uncomfortably aware that he was worked under the watchful eyes of two remarkably small sailors -- Will and Maggie, that is -- who sat idly at their ease on the ratlines. Their eyes were watchful and solicitous of him -- *too* watchful and *too* solicitous. On a normal day, he would have chased them away without a second thought. But this morning his head hurt too much for even a first thought, never mind a second; and no matter how drunk he had been last night, he was sober enough now to know it.

He knew he could hardly hide how he looked and far far less how he felt, so he tried to ignore his audience and bend to his task. He had finished the next to last hitch when Will suddenly cried out. "That's not right! You left out a turn!" Will's shout had begun well enough, with a creditable imitation of a sailor's cry, but his voice broke unexpectedly in mid-phrase and ended an unfortunate octave higher.

Sam looked up and frowned. "And how would a young lubber like you know the difference, Master Will?"

"Because I do!" came the retort.

"And what say my Lady Withering," replied Sam, recovering a piece of his usual good nature despite the merry-go-down, hazel nut-brown, fresh-brewed English stingo). "Was not the hitch the same?"

"I"was not," shrugged Maggie. "I"was not the knot you knotted last."

Sam smiled finally. "And how would the Lady know the difference between a knot and hitch?"

Maggie's turned grave. "'Tis Master Will who so decrees. If my Lord Micklewood say a knot is not, then not it is -- or I know naught!"

Red Sam laughed in spite of himself. "Then naught you know, I swear! Get you down from your balcony, Will Micklewood, and get to work! If you're so sure, then prove it here or soon you'll be telling me how to set my sails in a topsail breeze!"

Will jumped down on the deck and cocked his head. "But if I do get it right, *then* will you let us?"

It was suddenly no longer a game. For the past three days Will and Maggie had both been badgering him to let them gaze a final time on the shops and sights of an English town, just for a few hours, of course. But not merely *let* them go, but *help* them!

They weren't the only ones asking such a favor. Henry King had come by a dozen shillings -- or so he claimed -- and offered them all if Sam would help him to shore. Others had done much the same, but Sam had had no trouble turning them all away since he knew perfectly well that not of them would return to the ship, no matter how much they claimed they would.

But this was different somehow, or at least so he told himself, for he actually believed Will when he promised to

return to the ship, perhaps because he'd seen how Will seemed to be thriving aboard the ship and seemed to more than a bit of the sailor about him. He stared at the stays, the shrouds and the running rigging to see which ropes ran where and why – and he hadn't even been sick in the storm when the turnkey Jackson, who was supposed to look after the Bridewellians, had vomited a green lava like some deathly volcano over Jonathan's clean deck. Jackson had been so sick for so long that the Captain had sent him below and told Sam to let his charges come on deck instead. Red Sam had seen then how the others looked to Will as their leader. No, thought Red Sam, Will had the makings of a sailor man.

But above all, there was the challenge itself. The first hitch he'd been using was the usual one and was tricky enough itself for a beginner. But the second was a variation on the first and was of Sam's own devising and rarely used. Sam was sure that Will couldn't have seen it before – yet now was boasting he could do both hitches on his own, just like that. Impossible! Or at least so Red Sam felt certain, although the song of nut-brown ale still rang in his head, and the short night and early hour perhaps affected him more than he was willing to admit.

Whatever the reason, Red Sam looked Will in the eye and accepted the challenge. "All right, lad, here it is: you do what I just did, both hitches, exactly as I did 'em, no more and no less - and just as taut when you're done or it don't count. Agreed?" Will looked up unflinching and nodded. "And swear that nobody ever taught you these before this very minute and that you've never seen 'em done. Swear it!"

"I swear," replied Will quietly.

“And one more thing: swear that if you win, the two of you will be back by sunset, even if you have swim from one side of the Sound to the other!

Will nodded again and repeated: “We’ll be back. I swear it.”

Sam couldn't believe he was doing what he was, but thrust out his arm anyway. “Shake on it then, lad.” Will pushed up a sleeve and grabbed Sam's leathery paw. “All right then,” snapped the mate. “Get to work!”

Will frowned as he gathered the hemp line before him, striving to remember Sam's expert moves. A loop with the left: that's how it started. Then over and under; around like this -- *no!* -- around like *that!* He felt Sam's incredulous stare as Will worked. But in few more seconds, with some starts and stops, the first hitch was done. Will turned to Maggie with a questioning look which she returned with exasperated rolling eyes that said “why-would-you-ever-think-I-know-if-you've-done-it-right?”.

Will presented the first hitch to Sam who said nothing; but nodded for Will to go on to the second. Will began the second hitch. It started like the first, Will was certain of that, and he finished that part with a flourish. But the next part was different. *Why* was it different? What was the point? Stumped for a moment, Will started to loop the rope with his left hand; he paused and then began again - and immediately he heard two sharp breaths. Red Sam's was a too-eager breath of relief; Maggie's was a warning because she'd been watching Sam.

Will stopped and closed his eyes to picture the finished hitch as Sam had just done it. He imagined it as it ought to be in order to do what it must have been *meant* to do....

“Of course!” he cried as he saw the answer, saw it as clearly as though Red Sam himself had taught him. His eyes flashed open. He reversed the loop, ran it the other way round, tucked it through and back around, made the final turns and yanked all tight. With a confident grin, he held it up for inspection – but Red Sam just whipped the cap off his still pounding head and threw it on the deck in disgust.

Maggie smiled all too sweetly at the mate. "Have the boat ready by ten, please sir," she purred, "if quite convenient."