

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Chronicles of Captain Blood

Rafael Sabatini

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About the Book

One-time doctor and fugitive from the Monmouth rebellion, Peter Blood escaped from slavery to become the terror of the Caribbean. Winning invaluable treasures, rescuing his crew from almost certain death and saving an English settlement are all in a day's work for fiction's boldest adventurer

See also: *The Fortunes of Captain Blood*

About the Author

Rafael Sabatini, creator of some of the world's best-loved heroes, was born in Italy in 1875 and educated in both Portugal and Switzerland. He eventually settled in England in 1892, by which time he was fluent in a total of five languages. He chose to write in English, claiming that 'all the best stories are written in English'.

His writing career was launched in the 1890s with a collection of short stories, and it was not until 1902 that his first novel was published. His fame, however, came with *Scaramouche*, the much-loved story of the French Revolution, which became an international bestseller. *Captain Blood* followed soon after, which resulted in a renewed enthusiasm for his earlier work.

For many years a prolific writer, he was forced to abandon writing in the 1940s through illness and he eventually died in 1950.

Sabatini is best-remembered for his heroic characters and high-spirited novels, many of which have been adapted into classic films, including *Scaramouche*, *Captain Blood* and *The Sea Hawk* starring Errol Flynn.

Also by Rafael Sabatini

FICTION:

ANTHONY WILDING

THE BANNER OF THE BULL

BARDELYS THE MAGNIFICENT

BELLARION

THE BLACK SWAN

CAPTAIN BLOOD

THE CAROLINIAN

CHIVALRY

COLUMBUS

FORTUNE'S FOOL

THE FORTUNES OF CAPTAIN BLOOD

THE GAMESTER

THE GATES OF DOOM

THE HOUNDS OF GOD

THE JUSTICE OF THE DUKE

THE LION'S SKIN

THE LOST KING

LOVE-AT-ARMS

THE MARQUIS OF CARABAS

THE MINION

THE NUPTIALS OF CORBAL

THE ROMANTIC PRINCE

SCARAMOUCHE

SCARAMOUCHE THE KING-MAKER

THE SEA HAWK
THE SHAME OF MOTLEY
THE SNARE
ST MARTIN'S SUMMER
THE STALKING-HORSE
THE STROLLING SAINT
THE SWORD OF ISLAM
THE TAVERN KNIGHT
THE TRAMPLING OF THE LILIES
TURBULENT TALES
VENETIAN MASQUE

NON-FICTION:

HEROIC LIVES
THE HISTORICAL NIGHTS' ENTERTAINMENT
KING IN PRUSSIA
THE LIFE OF CESARE BORGIA
TORQUEMADA AND THE SPANISH INQUISITION

*The Chronicles of
Captain Blood*

Rafael Sabatini

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Introductory Note

The Odyssey of Captain Blood, given to the world some years ago, was derived from various sources, disclosed in the course of its compilation. Of these the most important is the log of the "Arabella," kept by the young Somersetshire shipmaster Jeremy Pitt. This log amounts to just such a chronicle of Blood's activities upon the Caribbean as that which Esquemeling, in similar case, has left of the exploits of that other great buccaneer, Sir Henry Morgan.

The compilation of the Odyssey, whilst it exhausted all other available collateral sources of information, was very far from exhausting the material left by Pitt. From that log of his were taken only those episodes which bore more or less directly upon the main outline of Blood's story, which it was then proposed to relate and elucidate. The selection presented obvious difficulties; and omissions, reluctantly made, were compelled by the necessity of presenting a straightforward and consecutive narrative.

It has since been felt, however, that some of the episodes then omitted might well be assembled in a supplementary volume which may shed additional light upon the methods and habits of the buccaneering fraternity in general and of Captain Blood in particular.

It will be remembered by those who have read the volume entitled "Captain Blood: His Odyssey," and it may briefly be repeated here for the information of those who have not, that Peter Blood was the son of an Irish medicus, who had desired that his son should follow in his own

honourable and humane profession. Complying with this parental wish, Peter Blood had received, at the early age of twenty, the degree of baccalaureus medicinae at Trinity College, Dublin. He showed, however, little disposition to practice the peaceful art for which he had brilliantly qualified. Perhaps a roving strain derived from his Somersetshire mother, in whose veins ran the blood of the Frobishers, was responsible for his restiveness. Losing his father some three months after taking his degree, he set out to see the world, preferring to open himself a career with the sword of the adventurer rather than with the scalpel of the surgeon.

After some vague wanderings on the continent of Europe we find him in the service of the Dutch, then at war with France. Again it may have been the Frobisher blood and a consequent predilection for the sea which made him elect to serve upon that element. He enjoyed the advantage of holding a commission under the great De Ruyter, and he fought in the Mediterranean engagement in which that famous Dutch Admiral lost his life. What he learnt under him Pitt's chronicle shows him applying in his later days when he had become the most formidable buccaneer leader on the Caribbean.

After the Peace of Nimeguen and until the beginning of 1685, when he reappears in England, little is known of his fortunes, beyond the facts that he spent two years in a Spanish prison - where we must suppose that he acquired the fluent and impeccable Castilian which afterwards served him so often and so well - and that later he was for a while in the service of France, which similarly accounts for his knowledge of the French language.

In January of 1685 we find him at last, at the age of thirty-two, settling down in Bridgewater to practise the profession for which he had been trained. But for the Monmouth Rebellion, in whose vortex he was quite innocently caught up some six months later, this might

have been the end of his career as an adventurer. And but for the fact that what came to him, utterly uninvited by him, was not in its ultimate manifestation unacceptable, we should have to regard him as one of the victims of the ironical malignity of Fortune aided and abetted, as it ever is, by the stupidity and injustice of man.

In his quality as a surgeon he was summoned on the morning after the battle of Sedgmoor to the bedside of a wounded gentleman who had been out with Monmouth. The dignity of his calling did not permit him to weigh legal quibbles or consider the position in which he might place himself in the eyes of a rigid and relentless law. All that counted with him was that a human being required his medical assistance, and he went to give it.

Surprised in the performance of that humanitarian duty by a party of dragoons who were hunting fugitives from the battle, he was arrested together with his patient. His patient being convicted of high-treason, for having been in arms against his king, Peter Blood suffered with him the same conviction under the statute which ordains that who succours or comforts a traitor is himself a traitor.

He was tried at Taunton before Judge Jeffreys in the course of the Bloody Assize, and sentenced to death.

Afterwards the sentence was commuted to transportation, not out of any spirit of mercy, but because it was discovered that to put to death the thousands that were implicated in the Monmouth Rebellion was to destroy valuable human merchandise which could be converted into money in the colonies. Slaves were required for work in the plantations, and the wealthy planters overseas who were willing to pay handsomely for the negroes rounded up in Africa by slavers would be no less ready to purchase white men. Accordingly, these unfortunate rebels under sentence of death were awarded in batches to this lady or that gentleman of the Court to be turned by them to profitable account.

Peter Blood was in one of these batches, which included also Jeremy Pitt and some others who were later to be associated with him in an even closer bond than that of their present common misfortune.

This batch was shipped to Barbadoes, and sold there. And then, at last, Fate eased by a little her cruel grip of Peter Blood. When it was discovered that he was a man of medicine, and because in Barbadoes medical men of ability were urgently required, his purchaser perceived how he could turn this slave to better account than by merely sending him to the sugar plantations. He was allowed to practise as a doctor. And since the pursuit of this demanded a certain liberty of action, this liberty, within definite limits, was accorded him. He employed it to plan an escape in association with a number of his fellow slaves.

The attempt was practically frustrated, when the arrival of a Spanish ship of war at Bridgetown and the circumstances attending it suddenly disclosed to the ready wits and resolute will of Peter Blood a better way of putting it into execution.

The Spaniards, having subjected Bridgetown to bombardment, had effected a landing there and had taken possession of the place, holding it to ransom. To accomplish this, and having nothing to fear from a town which had been completely subdued, they had left their fine ship, the "Cinco Llagas" out of Cadiz, at anchor in the bay with not more than a half-score of men aboard to guard her. Nor did these keep careful watch. Persuaded, like their brethren ashore, that there was nothing to be apprehended from the defeated English colonists, they had abandoned themselves that night, again like their brethren ashore, to a jovial carousal.

This was Blood's opportunity. With a score of plantation slaves to whom none gave a thought at such a time, he quietly boarded the "Cinco Llagas," overpowered the watch and took possession of her.

In the morning, when the gluttoned Spaniards were returning in boats laden with the plunder of Bridgetown, Peter Blood turned their own guns upon them, smashed their boats with round shot, and sailed away with his crew of rebels-convict to turn their reconquered liberty to such account as Fate might indicate.

Chapter 1

The Blank Shot

CAPTAIN EASTERLING, WHOSE LONG duel with Peter Blood finds an important place in the chronicles which Jeremy Pitt has left us, must be regarded as the instrument chosen by Fate to shape the destiny of those rebels-convict who fled from Barbadoes in the captured "Cinco Llagas."

The lives of men are at the mercy of the slenderest chances. A whole destiny may be influenced by no more than the set of the wind at a given moment. And Peter Blood's, at a time when it was still fluid, was certainly fashioned by the October hurricane which blew Captain Easterling's ten-gun sloop into Cayona Bay, where the "Cinco Llagas" had been riding idly at anchor for close upon a month.

Blood and his associates had run to this buccaneer stronghold of Tortuga, assured of finding shelter there whilst they deliberated upon their future courses. They had chosen it because it was the one haven in the Caribbean where they could count upon being unmolested and where no questions would be asked of them. No English settlement would harbour them because of their antecedents. The hand of Spain would naturally be against them not only because they were English, but, further, because they were in possession of a Spanish ship. They could trust themselves to no ordinary French colony

because of the recent agreement between the Governments of France and England for the apprehension and interchange of any persons escaping from penal settlements. There remained the Dutch, who were neutral. But Blood regarded neutrality as the most incalculable of all conditions, since it implies liberty of action in any direction. Therefore he steered clear of the Dutch as of the others and made for Tortuga, which, belonging to the French West India Company, was nominally French, but nominally only. Actually it was of no nationality, unless the Brethren of the Coast, as the buccaneering fraternity was called, could be deemed to constitute a nation. At least it can be said that no law ran in Tortuga that was at issue with the laws governing that great brotherhood. It suited the French Government to give the protection of its flag to these lawless men, so that in return they might serve French interests by acting as a curb upon Spanish greed and aggressiveness in the West Indies.

At Tortuga, therefore, the escaped rebels-convict dwelt in peace aboard the "Cinco Llagas" until Easterling came to disturb that peace and force them into action and into plans for their future, which, without him, they might have continued to postpone.

This Easterling - as nasty a scoundrel as ever sailed the Caribbean - carried under hatches some tons of cacao of which he had lightened a Dutch merchantman homing from the Antilles. The exploit, he realised, had not covered him with glory, for glory in that pirate's eyes was measurable by profit; and the meagre profit in this instance was not likely to increase him in the poor esteem in which he knew himself to be held by the Brethren of the Coast. Had he suspected the Dutchman of being no more richly laden he would have let her pass unchallenged. But having engaged and boarded her, he had thought it incumbent upon him and his duty to his crew of rascals to relieve her of what she carried. That she should have carried nothing of more

value than cacao was a contingency for which he blamed the evil fortune which of late had dogged him - an evil fortune which was making it increasingly difficult for him to find men to sail with him.

Considering these things, and dreaming of great enterprises, he brought his sloop "Bonaventure" into the shelter of the rock-bound harbour of Tortuga, a port designed by very Nature for a stronghold. Walls of rock, rising sheer, and towering like mountains, protect it upon either side and shape it into a miniature gulf. It is only to be approached by two channels demanding skilful pilotage. These were commanded by the Mountain Fort, a massive fortress with which man had supplemented the work of Nature. Within the shelter of this harbour, the French and English buccaneers who made it their lair might deride the might of the King of Spain, whom they regarded as their natural enemy, since it was his persecution of them when they had been peaceful boucan-hunters which had driven them to the grim trade of sea-rovers.

Within that harbour Easterling dismissed his dreams to gaze upon a curious reality. It took the shape of a great red-hulled ship riding proudly at anchor among the lesser craft, like a swan amid a gaggle of geese. When he had come near enough to read the name "Cinco Llagas" boldly painted in letters of gold above her counter, and under this the port of origin, Cadiz, he rubbed his eyes so that he might read again. Thereafter he sought in conjecture an explanation of the presence of that magnificent ship of Spain in this pirates' nest of Tortuga. A thing of beauty she was, from gilded beak-head, above which the brass cannons glinted in the morning sun, to towering sterncastle, and a thing of power as announced by the forty guns which Easterling's practised eye computed her to carry behind her closed ports.

The "Bonaventure" cast anchor within in a cable's length of the great ship, in ten fathoms, close under the

shadow of the Mountain Fort on the harbour's western side, and Easterling went ashore to seek the explanation of this mystery.

In the market-place beyond the mole he mingled with the heterogeneous crowd that converted the quays of Cayona into an image of Babel. There were bustling traders of many nations, chiefly English, French and Dutch; planters and seamen of various degrees; buccaneers who were still genuine boucan-hunters and buccaneers who were frankly pirates; lumbermen, beachcombers, Indians, fruit-selling half-castes, negro slaves, and all the other types of the human family that daily loafed or trafficked there. He found presently a couple of well-informed rogues very ready with the singular tale of how that noble vessel out of Cadiz came to ride so peacefully at anchor in Cayona Bay, manned by a parcel of escaped plantation slaves.

To such a man as Easterling, it was an amusing and even an impressive tale. He desired more particular knowledge of the men who had engaged in such an enterprise. He learned that they numbered not above a score and that they were all political offenders - rebels who in England had been out with Monmouth, preserved from the gallows because of the need of slaves in the West Indian plantations. He learned all that was known of their leader, Peter Blood: that he was by trade a man of medicine, and the rest.

It was understood that, because of this, and with a view to resuming his profession, Blood desired to take ship for Europe at the first occasion and that most of his followers would accompany him. But one or two wilder spirits, men who had been trained to the sea, were likely to remain behind and join the Brotherhood of the Coast.

All this Easterling learned in the market-place behind the mole, whence his fine, bold eyes continued to con the great red ship.

With such a vessel as that under his feet there was no limit to the things he might achieve. He began to see visions. The fame of Henry Morgan, with whom once he had sailed and under whom he had served his apprenticeship to piracy, should become a pale thing beside his own. These poor escaped convicts must be ready enough to sell a ship which had served its purpose by them, and they should not be exorbitant in their notions of her value. The cacao aboard the "Bonaventure" should more than suffice to pay for her.

Captain Easterling smiled as he stroked his crisp black beard. It had required his own keen wits to perceive at once an opportunity to which all others had been blind during that long month in which the vessel had been anchored there. It was for him to profit by his perceptions.

He made his way through the rudely-built little town by the road white with coral dust - so white under the blazing sun that a man's eyes ached to behold it and sought instinctively the dark patches made by the shadows of the limp exiguous palms by which it was bordered.

He went so purposefully that he disregarded the hails greeting him from the doorway of the tavern of The King of France, nor paused to crush a cup with the gaudy buccaneers who filled the place with their noisy mirth. The Captain's business that morning was with Monsieur d'Ogeron, the courtly, middle-aged Governor of Tortuga, who in representing the French West India Company seemed to represent France herself, and who, with the airs of a minister of state, conducted affairs of questionable probity but of unquestionable profit to his company.

In the fair, white, green-shuttered house, pleasantly set amid fragrant pimento trees and other aromatic shrubs, Captain Easterling was received with dignified friendliness by the slight, elegant Frenchman who brought to the wilds of Tortuga a faint perfume of the elegancies of Versailles. Coming from the white glare outside into the cool spacious

room, to which was admitted only such light as filtered between the slats of the closed shutters, the Captain found himself almost in darkness until his eyes had adjusted themselves.

The Governor offered him a chair and gave him his attention.

In the matter of the cacao there was no difficulty. Monsieur d'Ogeron cared not whence it came. That he had no illusions on the subject was shown by the price per quintal at which he announced himself prepared to purchase. It was a price representing rather less than half the value of the merchandise. Monsieur d'Ogeron was a diligent servant of the French West India Company.

Easterling haggled vainly, grumbled, accepted, and passed to the major matter. He desired to acquire the Spanish ship in the bay. Would Monsieur d'Ogeron undertake the purchase for him from the fugitive convicts who, he understood, were in possession of her.

Monsieur d'Ogeron took time to reply. "It is possible," he said at last, "that they may not wish to sell."

"Not sell? A God's name what use is the ship to those poor ragamuffins?"

"I mention only a possibility," said Monsieur d'Ogeron. "Come to me again this evening, and you shall have your answer."

When Easterling returned as bidden, Monsieur d'Ogeron was not alone. As the Governor rose to receive his visitor, there rose with him a tall, spare man in the early thirties from whose shaven face, swarthy as a gipsy's, a pair of eyes looked out that were startlingly blue, level, and penetrating. If Monsieur d'Ogeron in dress and air suggested Versailles, his companion as markedly suggested the Alameda. He was very richly dressed in black in the Spanish fashion, with an abundance of silver lace and a foam of fine point at throat and wrists, and he wore a heavy black periwig whose curls descended to his shoulders.

Monsieur d'Ogeron presented him: "Here, Captain, is Mr Peter Blood to answer you in person."

Easterling was almost disconcerted, so different was the man's appearance from anything that he could have imagined. And now this singular escaped convict was bowing with the grace of a courtier, and the buccaneer was reflecting that these fine Spanish clothes would have been filched from the locker of the commander of the "Cinco Llagas." He remembered something else.

"Ah yes. To be sure. The physician," he said, and laughed for no apparent reason.

Mr Blood began to speak. He had a pleasant voice whose metallic quality was softened by a drawling Irish accent. But what he said made Captain Easterling impatient. It was not his intention to sell the "Cinco Llagas."

Aggressively before the elegant Mr Blood stood now the buccaneer, a huge, hairy, dangerous-looking man, in coarse shirt and leather breeches, his cropped head swathed in a red-and-yellow kerchief. Aggressively he demanded Blood's reasons for retaining a ship that could be of no use to him and his fellow convicts.

Blood's voice was softly courteous in reply, which but increased Easterling's contempt of him. Captain Easterling heard himself assured that he was mistaken in his assumptions. It was probable that the fugitives from Barbadoes would employ the vessel to return to Europe, so as to make their way to France or Holland.

"Maybe we're not quite as ye're supposing us, Captain. One of my companions is a shipmaster, and three others have served, in various ways, in the King's Navy."

"Bah!" Easterling's contempt exploded loudly. "The notion's crazy. What of the perils of the sea, man? Perils of capture? How will ye face those with your paltry crew? Have ye considered that?"

Still Captain Blood preserved his pleasant temper. "What we lack in men we make up in weight of metal. Whilst I may not be able to navigate a ship across the ocean, I certainly know how to fight a ship at need. I learnt it under de Ruyter."

The famous name gave pause to Easterling's scorn. "Under de Ruyter?"

"I held a commission with him some years ago."

Easterling was plainly dumbfounded. "I thought it's a doctor ye was."

"I am that, too," said the Irishman simply.

The buccaneer expressed disgusted amazement in a speech liberally festooned with oaths. And then Monsieur d'Ogeron made an end of the interview. "So that you see, Captain Easterling, there is no more to be said in the matter."

Since, apparently, there was not, Captain Easterling sourly took his leave. But on his disgruntled way back to the mole he thought that although there was no more to be said there was a good deal to be done. Having already looked upon the majestic "Cinco Llagas" as his own, he was by no means disposed to forgo the prospect of possession.

Monsieur d'Ogeron also appeared to think that there was still at least a word to be added, and he added it after Easterling's departure. "That," he said quietly, "is a nasty and a dangerous man. You will do well to bear it in mind, Monsieur Blood."

Blood treated the matter lightly. "The warning was hardly necessary. The fellow's person would have announced the blackguard to me even if I had not known him for a pirate."

A shadow that was almost suggestive of annoyance flitted across the delicate features of the Governor of Tortuga.

"Oh, but a filibuster is not of necessity a blackguard, nor is the career of a filibuster one for your contempt,

Monsieur Blood. There are those among the buccaneers who do good service to your country and to mine by setting a restraint upon the rapacity of Spain, a rapacity which is responsible for their existence. But for the buccaneers, in these waters, where neither France nor England can maintain a fleet, the Spanish dominion would be as absolute as it is inhuman. You will remember that your country honoured Henry Morgan with a knighthood and the deputy-governorship of Jamaica. And he was an even worse pirate, if it is possible, than your Sir Francis Drake, or Hawkins or Frobisher, or several others I could name, whose memory your country also honours."

Followed upon this from Monsieur d'Ogeron, who derived considerable revenues from the percentages he levied by way of harbour dues on all prizes brought into Tortuga, solemn counsels that Mr Blood should follow in the footsteps of those heroes. Being outlawed as he was, in possession of a fine ship and the nucleus of an able following, and being, as he had proved, a man of unusual resource, Monsieur d'Ogeron did not doubt that he would prosper finely as a filibuster.

Mr Blood didn't doubt it himself. He never doubted himself. But he did not on that account incline to the notion. Nor, probably, but for that which ensued, would he ever have so inclined, however much the majority of his followers might have sought to persuade him.

Among these, Hagthorpe, Pitt, and the giant Wolverstone, who had lost an eye at Sedgmoor, were perhaps the most persistent. It was all very well for Blood, they told him, to plan a return to Europe. He was master of a peaceful art in the pursuit of which he might earn a livelihood in France or Flanders. But they were men of the sea, and knew no other trade. Dyke, who had been a petty officer in the Navy before he embarked on politics and rebellion, held similar views, and Ogle, the gunner, demanded to know of Heaven and Hell and Mr Blood what

guns they thought the British Admiralty would entrust to a man who had been out with Monmouth.

Things were reaching a stage in which Peter Blood could see no alternative to that of parting from these men whom a common misfortune had endeared to him. It was in this pass that Fate employed the tool she had forged in Captain Easterling.

One morning, three days after his interview with Mr Blood at the Governor's house, the Captain came alongside the "Cinco Llagas" in the cockboat from his sloop. As he heaved his massive bulk into the waist of the ship, his bold, dark eyes were everywhere at once. The "Cinco Llagas" was not only well found, but irreproachably kept. Her decks were scoured, her cordage stowed, and everything in place. The muskets were ranged in the rack about the mainmast, and the brasswork on the scuttle-butts shone like gold in the bright sunshine. Not such lubberly fellows, after all, these escaped rebels-convict who composed Mr Blood's crew.

And there was Mr Blood himself in his black and silver, looking like a Grande of Spain, doffing a black hat with a sweep of claret ostrich plume about it, and bowing until the wings of his periwig met across his face like the pendulous ears of a spaniel. With him stood Nathaniel Hagthorpe, a pleasant gentleman of Mr Blood's own age, whose steady eye and clear-cut face announced the man of breeding; Jeremy Pitt, the flaxen-haired young Somerset shipmaster; the short, sturdy Nicholas Dyke, who had been a petty officer and had served under King James when he was Duke of York. There was nothing of the ragamuffin about these, as Easterling had so readily imagined. Even the burly, rough-voiced Wolverstone had crowded his muscular bulk into Spanish fripperies for the occasion.

Having presented them, Mr Blood invited the captain of the "Bonaventure" to the great cabin in the stern, which for

spaciousness and richness of furniture surpassed any cabin Captain Easterling had ever entered.

A negro servant in a white jacket - a lad hired here in Tortuga - brought, besides the usual rum and sugar and fresh limes, a bottle of golden Canary which had been in the ship's original equipment and which Mr Blood recommended with solicitude to his unbidden guest.

Remembering Monsieur d'Ogeron's warning that Captain Easterling was dangerous, Mr Blood deemed it wise to use him with all civility, if only so that being at his ease he should disclose in what he might be dangerous now.

They occupied the elegantly cushioned seats about the table of black oak, and Captain Easterling praised the Canary liberally so as to justify the liberality with which he consumed it. Thereafter he came to business by asking if Mr Blood, upon reflection, had not perhaps changed his mind about selling the ship.

"If so be that you have," he added, with a glance at Blood's four companions, "considering among how many the purchase money will be divided, you'll find me generous."

If by this he had hoped to make an impression upon those four, their stolid countenances disappointed him.

Mr Blood shook his head. "It's wasting your time, ye are, Captain. Whatever else we decide, we keep the 'Cinco Llagas.'"

"Whatever you decide?" The great black brows went up on that shallow brow. "Ye're none so decided than as ye was about this voyage to Europe? Why, then, I'll come at once to the business I'd propose if ye wouldn't sell. It is that with this ship ye join the 'Bonaventure' in a venture - a bonaventure," and he laughed noisily at his own jest with a flash of white teeth behind the great black beard.

"You honour us. But we haven't a mind to piracy."

Easterling gave no sign of offence. He waved a great ham of a hand as if to dismiss the notion.

“It ain’t piracy I’m proposing.”

“What then?”

“I can trust you?” - Easterling asked, and his eyes included the four of them.

“Ye’re not obliged to. And it’s odds ye’ll waste your time in any case.”

It was not encouraging. Nevertheless, Easterling proceeded. It might be known to them that he had sailed with Morgan. He had been with Morgan in the great march across the Isthmus of Panama. Now it was notorious that when the spoil came to be divided after the sack of that Spanish city it was found to be far below the reasonable expectations of the buccaneers. There were murmurs that Morgan had not dealt fairly with his men; that he had abstracted before the division a substantial portion of the treasure taken. Those murmurs, Easterling could tell them, were well founded. There were pearls and jewels from San Felipe of fabulous value, which Morgan had secretly appropriated for himself. But as the rumours grew and reached his ears, he became afraid of a search that should convict him. And so, midway on the journey across the Isthmus, he one night buried the treasure he had filched.

“Only one man knew this,” said Captain Easterling to his attentive listeners - for the tale was of a quality that at all times commands attention. “The man who helped him in a labour he couldn’t ha’ done alone. I be that man.”

He paused a moment to let the impressive fact sink home, and then resumed.

The business he proposed was that the fugitives on the “Cinco Llagas” should join him in an expedition to Darien to recover the treasure, sharing equally in it with his own men and on the scale usual among the Brethren of the Coast.

“If I put the value of what Morgan buried at five hundred thousand pieces of eight, I am being modest.”

It was a sum to set his audience staring. Even Blood stared, but not quite with the expression of the others.

"Sure, now, it's very odd," said he thoughtfully.

"What is odd, Mr Blood?"

Mr Blood's answer took the form of another question.

"How many do you number aboard the 'Bonaventure'?"

"Something less than two hundred men."

"And the twenty men who are with me make such a difference that you deem it worth while to bring us this proposal?"

Easterling laughed outright, a deep, guttural laugh. "I see that ye don't understand at all." His voice bore a familiar echo of Mr Blood's Irish intonation. "It's not the men I lack so much as a stout ship in which to guard the treasure when we have it. In a bottom such as this we'd be as snug as in a fort, and I'd snap my fingers at any Spanish galleon that attempted to molest me."

"Faith, now I understand," said Wolverstone, and Pitt and Dyke and Hagthorpe nodded with him. But the glittering blue eye of Peter Blood continued to stare unwinkingly upon the bulky pirate.

"As Wolverstone says, it's understandable. But a tenth of the prize, which, by heads, is all that would come to the 'Cinco Llagas,' is far from adequate in the circumstances."

Easterling blew out his cheeks and waved his great hand in a gesture of bonhomie. "What share would you propose?"

"That's to be considered. But it would not be less than one-fifth."

The buccaneer's face remained impassive. He bowed his gaudily swathed head. "Bring these friends of yours to dine tomorrow aboard the 'Bonaventure,' and we'll draw up the articles."

For a moment Blood seemed to hesitate. Then in courteous terms he accepted the invitation.