

WHEN THE BOW BREAKS

Steven Brust

It always means trouble when there are elves in the midshipman's berth. For my part, I'd rather take my chances on the winds even if it means losing a few days now and then lying to, waiting for the blow to pass or the spell-box to crank. But I don't own her, so it isn't my choice, and the Company can't imagine a worse disaster than an unnecessary delay.

And, for them, that makes sense: Cargoes are insured, as are ships; and seamen, even officers, can be found by walking into any

Bordertown dockside tavern; but, “Lost time on a voyage, Captain Sherman, means fewer voyages, and no ship has yet survived the Mad River for much more than four years, which means our profits are dependent on making as many voyages as possible with each ship. The cost to build a ship...” That was from Mr. Reinholdt himself, the President and founder. When I learned that he had been raised in a Navy family, when there had been navies in this part of the world, it answered a lot of nagging questions. In any case, I had listened patiently while Mr. Reinholdt explained the economics of trading vessels, and when he’d finally run down, I’d known just how to answer him: “Yes, sir,” I had said.

So it makes sense that they would want elves trained in as officers, eventually to reach the rank of Pilot (but never Captain), to speed the ship along. Sail fast, take chances, and hire elves as mids so future generations of sailors will be able to do the same after you’ve gone down. And that means elves in the midshipman’s berth, and that means trouble.

“Mr. Porter,” I called. “What was that ruckus?”

My first lieutenant jumped up to the quarterdeck and touched a perfunctory finger to her forehead. “Cocoa and Irwin, sir. Irwin came on deck without his mask, and accused Cocoa of hiding it. Words were exchanged. I’ve sent them both up to the tops.”

I studied the bare masts, all sheets furled; Irwin was racing up the rigging to the maintop like a monkey and had already reached the devil’s elbow; Cocoa was climbing toward the foretop with a sullen elvish ease. There was certainly more to the story; no doubt Irwin had threatened Cocoa with violence and Cocoa had threatened Irwin with a curse; but if Porter had told me the rest, I’d have been obliged to take notice. Keeping the sails in trim requires careful attention and a good pilot; keeping the crew in trim requires careful attention and a good first lieutenant. “Very well, Mr. Porter.”

“And a half nine,” called the leadsman, voice muffled by his

mask.

It was six bells on the forenoon watch. The *Madcap* was three days out from Bordertown to Fairyferry with a cargo of iron-goods that had been the very devil to stow properly, but we'd so far been running the whole way with the screw, making a perfectly respectable eleven knots, dry and sound. The day was overcast, with a three-knot wind from the east southeast, and the river smooth and sweet. We were a day shy of the Six Nuns, where the Mad River starts to bend back on herself, where spell-boxes like to fail, and where pirates think it's a good idea to take a Company ship while she's trying to avoid running aground while shifting from screw to sail. In my twenty-six years on the river I'd had twelve encounters with pirates and four of them had come near the Nuns. The worst had been when I was First of the *Lucky*; I'd been one of nine of her crew to escape back upriver in the gig. I'd returned, expecting to be given my papers and to find myself looking for a dockyard job, but instead the Company had given me the *Madcap*, fresh from the yards. The ways of the Company are stranger than the ways of the river. That was four years and twenty-seven runs ago.

“By the mark eight,” called the leadsman.

And the ways of the river are strange enough. Near Bordertown, where the sailing was easy (even easier if you take the Canal to the sea, but forget that), no human dared drink the water for reasons everyone knows, and about the point you can stop worrying about getting spray in your mouth, she begins to bend, and grows rocks and embarrassing shallows, and somewhere in there your spell-box dies and you have to work the wind. Then, after the relief of the Three Lakes (really just wide areas of the river) the river picks up speed, ox-bows, and rushes you to Fairyferry as if she can't wait to get rid of you. I'd been born and raised along her banks, near Thorny, where the river narrows to three-quarters of a mile and where the current usually ran at four knots or more. Further down, she widens again, but becomes much

more shallow, until by Carson there is no channel for a boat with a four-foot draught, and the current slows to two knots. The old timers, when they'd even talk about it, said it was impossible for a river to behave that way, that it defied all the laws. They said that it hadn't been like that before, and then they'd waggle two fingers upriver, in the direction of Faerie. But I'd never known the river before, and I'd never known any other river to compare it to, so it didn't bother me.

Company ships never came down as far as Thorny (though I felt confident that the *Madcap* could make it there and back if she had to), so anything we had needed from Bordertown—iron-goods, tools, or the occasional store-bought shirt or dress—had required a four-day wagon ride up to Fairyferry. We didn't do it often, but when we did we'd see the big Company ships, square-rigged, full of men who could climb up and down the rigging with no more thought than I'd give to running through a wheat field, and always there was the captain wearing a bright blue jacket, white gloves, and a blue and white hat. I could never decide which was the finer sight—the ship, or the captain.

“By the deep nine,” called the leadsman.

I turned my attention back to the problem of the midshipman's berth. I didn't have anything against Cocoa. Whatever his actual age, he seemed like a fine lad of about fourteen, and he was always perfectly respectful to the officers, and wasn't even overly pompous with the crew; and he still had the sweet elvin voice, unruined, as yet, by screaming from the quarterdeck the way Pancho's had been. As always, it was only the other mids who had trouble with him, or he with them. I had three choices: talk to Hansen, the senior mid, have Porter talk to Hansen, or ignore it.

The *Madcap* gave the tiniest lurch, like a hiccough, then settled back onto her course. I turned to the helmsman, just behind me on the tiny raised area that, out of courtesy and tradition, we called the

poop deck. I said, “Well, Mr. Wade?”

“Sir?” he said.

“How does she steer?”

“Smooth and honest, sir.”

Wade hadn’t noticed anything. Well, there hadn’t been much to notice. But there had been something, the tiniest jump, almost as if the spell-box had coughed, but not quite. And I hadn’t really felt it, it was more as if I’d seen a tiny shiver run through the masts. Could it have been my imagination? Yes, possibly. But I had never before imagined odd behavior in my ship.

“By the deep nine,” called the leadsman, and added, “Safe water.”

I untied my mask and tucked it into my shirt. “Safe water, Mr. Porter,” I said.

“Aye, sir,” he said. And, “Stow masks.”

“Aye, sir,” said the bosun, and called loudly, “Stow masks!” There was grateful muttering as masks came off and were shoved into pockets. The elves, of course, had no need of the masks; but the Company required them for all hands, and, for whatever reason, I’ve yet to meet an elf, either before the mast or on the quarterdeck, who objected to wearing one.

There were a few fishermen in the water now, who waved to us in the hopes that we might want to buy fish; and we might have, but the spell-box was still working and I had no desire to heave to.

There was an elf who had served with me when I was a midshipman aboard the *Pistoleer*, which went down in Spiny Lake a year after my transfer. She’d called herself Jersey, and we’d hated each other the entire time. No harmless pranks, either, or even efforts to get the other in trouble—no, we’d each made at least one attempt on the other’s life while in the rigging, and come close to it on shore a number of times. When Jersey passed for lieutenant and

was assigned back to our ship, I thought my life would be Hell; but she turned into a perfectly fine officer, and we got along splendidly. Jersey was eventually made Pilot of the *Redwater*, and had come to the party when I was given the *Madcap*. Two months later the *Redwater* ran into a white squall on Long Lake, running on sail only, and went down with all hands.

Let the song begin in the ear of the heart, and emerge from the mouth of the soul, Or—

If the soil is dead, where ought it to be buried? Or—

Rise to that which contains nothing, call it a surface, and declare yourself above it. Or—

Live in the realm of form until substance asserts itself. Or—

Consider a spherical emptiness of uniform density, then turn it inside out. Or—

Have something to drink, then wake up.

“Excuse me, sir,” said Pancho. “Six Nuns in sight.”

It was the next day, two bells on the morning watch, and I was having breakfast in my cabin. I had already spoken to Porter, who had had the last dog watch, and she had felt nothing of whatever had woken me in the middle of the night. I was puzzling over that, and over the fact that the *Madcap* was currently the oldest active Company ship, and I was finishing my second cup of coffee.

“Very well,” I said. I followed him up on the deck and studied the great shanks of jagged grey rock sticking out from the western shore, as if they’d been put there just to make river travel more entertaining. It was a gloomy, overcast day of the sort that made me glad I didn’t believe in omens. And I don’t. Really.

“What do you think of this wind, Mr. Pancho?”

“Not much, sir,” he said. “I think it’ll back in the next hour or so; probably about the time our spell-box fails. Shall I try a working? I think I can get us two or maybe even three points.”

“Not yet,” I said. “I want to keep you on the job until we get past the Nuns, if possible. The spell-box hasn’t coughed yet, so let’s make some distance. But if we clear Roger’s Point—” I tapped the rail with my knuckles—“we’ll prepare to make sail and raise screw, and then your working would be most welcome.”

“Yes, sir.”

“One other thing.”

“Sir?”

“Did anything odd happen during the last dog watch?”

He hesitated. “I think so, sir. But I’m not certain. Something woke me up. I thought we’d fallen off until I remembered we were running on the screw. I came up and checked, and everything was fine. I...”

“Yes, Mr. Pancho?”

“I’m just not certain, sir. I had decided it was all in my head until you asked about it.”

“Very well, Mr. Pancho. Thank you. Let’s stay alert, and we’ll see if it happens again. That’s all for now.”

“Yes, sir.” The pilot saluted and went back to his station between the starboard cat and the helm.

The *Madcap* wasn’t the largest ship in the Company’s fleet, nor the fastest. But she could sail with spell or wind, if conditions permitted, and she could carry a crew of thirty-three officers and men and enough cargo to turn a nice profit for the Company (and me) each time she went out, and she had teeth enough to have a fighting chance—so to speak—against anything she couldn’t outrun. She was dry, and when running large she was as sweet as

any craft on the river; no trace of grip, and she'd ridden out one blow on Long Lake that had dismasted one Company ship and run another onto the mudbanks of Alehouse Point and broken her back. I knew her as I'd never known another ship—or person, for that matter—and after four years of running cargo up and down the river I saw no reason why she wouldn't be able to set the record—not for speed, but for longevity of service. With the way the river treated ships, that was a record I'd be proud to hold.

The river slapped her bow as Pancho, shouting orders to Wade, guided her as close to the eastern shore as he dared, the leadsman's calls coming more frequently now. I noticed Porter looking an inquiry at me, and I knew what was on her mind. I studied the banks of the Mad River, wishing I could see past the bends, then turned back to her and nodded.

"Let's clear for action," I said. I wanted, as always, to make some self-deprecating remark about being unreasonably frightened, but, however much one might hate it, there is some truth to the idea that the safety of the ship depends, in part, on respect for the Captain, so I clamped my jaws firmly shut as the order was relayed and the hands tore down cabins and stowed bulkheads.

Perhaps I was unreasonably frightened. But I had liked and admired Kowalczyk, captain of the *Lucky*, and I remembered the amazed look on her face when the middle of her body had been ripped out by chainshot, and I remembered the sound of the mizzenmast cracking over the thunder of the guns, and I remembered the bitter, bitter cold of the river as I was pulled, half stunned and bleeding from unfelt splinter wounds on my neck and shoulder, into the bow of the gig, accompanied by the hoots and jeers of the pirates.

I had known a couple of pirates in my time. Many of them used to work for the Company, and I knew how easy it was to hate the Company after working for it. I wasn't any too fond of it myself. But I could never take the extra step—going from hating

the Company to hating everyone who still worked for it. And if that wasn't enough, I could never hate the ships enough to fire into one. But I suppose it is inevitable that if you're going to move freight on the river, there will be those who will try to steal it. In any case, whatever sympathy I might once have had for them vanished forever listening to those catcalls as I was pulled into the gig.

I don't know if any decision of Kowalczyk's could have changed the outcome, but I did know that I would always pass the Nuns with the decks swept clear, the guns loaded and run out, and the hands ready—and if we passed Roger's Point without seeing an enemy, we would fire at boulders on the riverbank, just for practice.

Some say there is no magic without ritual. Certainly, there is no ritual without repetition. Any act, often enough repeated, can be ritualized. Any activity, even drinking, can, perhaps, be magical.

What is magic, and what is just the way it goes?

At all events, when she was no longer thirsty, she finally stopped drinking. This may be considered the end of the ritual, though she certainly didn't see it that way; she just wanted to do something else instead.

“If you please, sir,” said Porter. “Clean sweep fore and aft, and all hands at stations.”

“Very well, Mr. Porter. Load the guns with exploding roundshot and run them out.”

“Aye, sir.”

The six big guns, “Huck Finn,” “Moby Dick,” and “Hamlet,” on the starboard side, and, “Great Expectations,” “Emma,” and “Don Juan” on the port side, were run out and snugged in; next to them were spellrods in case the caps failed, and burning match in case the spellrod failed, and each gun had a crew of four to serve

her.

The *Madcap* passed the Nuns and began to steer back to the middle of the river as she came into the bend. I strained my eyes forward... nothing. Not so much as a fishing boat. There would be one more blind bend before Roger's Point.

Once again the *Madcap* gave the tiniest, faintest lurch, then resumed. We made the middle of the river. I looked around. Porter hadn't noticed it, but Pancho was looking at me, and from "Hamlet," so was Cocoa, though he returned his attention to his gun as soon as I looked at him. I also caught glances directed my way from Jojo and Shannon, two of the elvish foretopmen. But as far as I could tell, no human except me had noticed anything.

Well, of course I'd notice—I was her Captain. I knew everything about her from the way a box of roundshot was wedged in between the two forty-pound anvils in her hold, to how many coats of blue and white paint she had on her, to the size of rope used to keep the studdingsails furled, to the note the backstay would sing when a strong wind carried her on a bowline, to the way she'd sniff and whine trying to make headway when reduced to staysails, to—well, I knew everything about her, so of course I'd notice.

"Excuse me, Captain."

I turned around, and the engineer was there, touching two fingers to her forehead.

"Yes, Mr. Chen?"

"One cough from the spell-box, sir."

"Will we make the next stretch, Mr. Chen?"

"I wouldn't care to bet either way, sir."

"Very well."

I noticed Porter watching me; she quickly averted her eyes. I

said, "Carry on," and tapped the rail again.

The spell-box coughed twice more, but we made it, and the river was empty except for three or four fishermen. The river was clear to Roger's Point, three quarters of a mile ahead—I'd have liked more time, but this would do.

"Topsails and topgallants, Mr. Porter," I said. "Sheet them home, then stand by the screw."

The foretopmen, most of them elves, raced up to the tops while the forecastlemen left their guns unattended to stand by the capstan. I continued watching downriver, and sometimes upriver, and followed their progress by the sound of the orders, until at last I could feel the sheets bite, and Porter said, "All ready, sir;" and at almost the same moment the ship shuddered as the spell-box failed and the screw died.

"Ship the screw, Mr. Porter."

"Shipping, sir."

It was only then that I thought to check on the mids, but all three of them were attending to duty; Hansen at the capstan directing the raising of the screw, Cocoa by now back at his gun, Irwin still directing his.

"The Captain is a kindly man, he feeds us
river water, boys.

Round, turn it round, and haul her up fine.

And when we're good and rightly cocked
he leads us to the slaughter, boys,

Round, turn it round, and haul her up fine.

Round, turn it round, a-sailing on the river,
boys

Round, turn it round, and haul her up fine.”

They weren’t actually weighing the anchor, but one song is as good as another. The breeze was still holding good, but—“Mr. Pancho!”

“Sir?”

“Prepare that working now. If you can keep the breeze anywhere abaft the beam, that will be fine; we’re going to have our work cut out for us in any case as the river bends, so let’s make it as easy as possible on the crew, all right?”

“Aye, sir. I’ll do my best.”

“I’m sure you will, Mr. Pancho. And while you do that, I think the rest of us will blow up some rocks.”

To humans, they say, water from the Mad River is intoxicating and addictive. To elves, we are told, it is harmless. Its effects on others are unstated, and no one has done any scientific tests to determine what other effects it might have. Most would laugh at the idea of scientific tests on a river that runs out of Faerie. The idea, many would claim, is patently absurd. They’re probably right. Science has to do with predictability, and Faerie is the quintessence of unpredictability.

Science has to do with known causes producing known results. If a breeze, to pick an example at random, is blowing from this angle on that size of sail made from this material held at that angle, it should exert exactly this much force in that direction.

Magic is subtler. If the captain of a ship in the Borderlands decides, for some reason, to call himself Ahab, he is inviting the fates to take his leg. If sailors, particularly elves, try to whistle up a wind, they may well succeed.

And if an entire crew insists upon treating a ship that sails upon the

Mad River as if it were a living being...

Having had her fill of drinking, she decided to see what else she could do.

We were a day past Roger's Point now, had easily weathered the Corkscrew and added studdingsails as the breeze diminished. It was a day of bright sunshine that made the river sparkle and gusty breezes that went straight into the lungs and made the eyes bright and everything seemed alive and awake. Ahead of us was Dorothy, first of what we called the Three Lakes—places where the river became wide and slow. Dorothy was the kindest of the three, having no badly placed mud banks, rocks or shallows—just the little island (some called it Toto) that was easily avoided. If we were to have problems, this wasn't a bad place for it. And we were due for problems. I had been on watch that night; whatever caused the odd lurch in the ship had caused it five more times, and by now everyone was aware that something was up. They didn't know what, but I'd caught some of the elves glancing covertly at the lifeboats.

“Uh... Captain?”

“Yes, Mr. Wade?”

He touched three fingers to his forehead. “The helm is... well, sir, she's behaving funny.”

I took the helm. Then I took a deep breath. Yes. This was like the other jerks she'd given, only more sustained.

I noticed that Wade was looking at me, probably hoping for confirmation that he wasn't crazy. “Yes,” I said. “She is behaving a little odd.” Then, “Heave the log, Mr. Porter.”

Trim was good; she could maybe even handle a little more sail in this breeze, and there was no reason why she should be fighting the helm, but fighting her she was. I corrected the helm.

She came back into line. I checked the heading to be sure and she turned half a point into the wind.

“Nine knots and a hair, if you please,” said Porter.

I caught Wade’s eye; he seemed frightened. I smiled as I corrected her heading again and said, “We may have picked up—” and the helm was yanked from my hand. There was a horrid, wrenching pain in my right shoulder as I was thrown onto the deck and for an instant the world spun.

I tried to speak, but the breath had been knocked out of me when I landed, and I must have actually blacked out for a moment, because then Porter was at the helm, yelling for hands to reduce sail.

I tried to stand, made it as far as my knees, took a deep breath, and was about to yell for the stays to be cut, when the lookout called, “On deck, there! Ship downriver.”

The thought that flashed through my mind was, “We’ve had it,” but that didn’t do any good.

What would do some good? Well, at least the pirate, if that’s what he was, was downriver, but that didn’t help because, even without the wind, the current was bringing us—

“Best bower away,” I called. I was surprised to find that I was standing, and astonished at how calm my voice sounded.

“Best bower away,” echoed Porter.

I discovered that my right arm wasn’t working, though I don’t remember it hurting at that moment, but I managed to open the telescope with my left. It showed the other ship clearly: square-rigged, on the starboard tack, guns run out. Looked like one row of thirty-four pounders.

“All hands to reduce sail,” I said. “Give us the forestaysail and take everything else in. Everything. We should still have time to clear for action.” I would have tapped the rail, but the telescope

was in my left hand, and my right arm wasn't working. The anchor fell from the starboard cat and the cable ran out.

"Aye, sir. Forestaysail only." Porter gave the necessary orders.

I studied the other ship. I could see her quarterdeck clearly, including what I assumed was the Captain, looking at me. At least two of the officers were elves, which meant—

"Mr. Pancho."

"Sir?"

"Prepare yourself. I believe the wind is about to change."

He looked worried. He was a decent windmaster, but I'd mostly taken him on because he was an excellent pilot, and he knew the river like I knew the ship. "Aye, sir. I'll do my best."

"If you can't keep the wind in his teeth, see if you can manage a calm."

"Aye, sir," he said again, but he didn't seem hopeful.

The anchor grabbed, held, and turned us so the swells struck her port side. This was more or less what I'd wanted, so I tried to look like it.

The wind died entirely, and the *Madcap*, for reasons for her own, turned until she was aimed downriver, at the pirate.

She moved.

Not as one normally thinks of moving: the painful extension of limbs, guided by intention, with the object of arriving at another place. Nor, exactly, as a drunk might move: with a conflict between the intention and the execution. And certainly not as one moves who has lost his senses: the surrender to gravity and inertia. Nor even as an inanimate object moves: entirely subject to whatever external forces propel it. Perhaps, one might say, as a newborn baby moves:

with vigor, strength, energy, and no notion of how the parts of its body are connected to each other, and certainly no notion of how its mind can direct them

The analogy of the ship to a newborn baby is apt, but it breaks down quickly. A newborn baby is not made of wood that can crack, supported by beams that can break, and held upright by a tenuous balance of tons of iron in its hold and tons of sail high above it, with pressures of current pushing in one direction, a rudder in another, and a bare eight feet of keel to keep it all balanced above the water.

This is why newborn babies have a longer life expectancy than square-rigged ships in the Mad River.

Nevertheless, she moved.

I saw the first hint of panic in Pancho's face, which, as much as anything else, held my own panic down. I put it together, of course. I'm sure I'm not the first captain to have realized what was going on; more than thirty Company ships had gone down in this river, and not all of them had been the victim of pirates or bad judgment. Other captains must have realized it. Maybe Jersey had known, before the river had closed over her head. I remember hearing the line, "Each man kills the thing he loves," which I'd thought a dubious proposition, but if it had been, "Each man is killed by the thing he loves," it would have been entirely appropriate.

She swung again, this time showing the pirate her starboard bow.

"Don't fight her, Mr. Wade," I said. "Let go the helm and see where she runs. Mr. Pancho, attend to your working, please. Mr. Porter, are we cleared for action?"

"Not quite, sir," she said.

"Very well. As soon as we are, we can go to quarters." I

studied the pirate again. It couldn't approach unless they could make a wind. And, while they might be able to hit us with a ball from this distance, they were unlikely to make the attempt—too much chance of hulling her, and they got nothing if she went down. No, their strategy, as always, would be to close while firing chain-shot at the rigging, then sweep the deck with grape, then board and take her. And for that, they needed wind, and that would take at least a little time.

"I'm going below to get a sling on this arm." As I spoke, the arm started to hurt again. I suspected I had dislocated it. "Have the guns loaded with exploding roundshot and run them out. No one is to attempt to maneuver the ship. Mr. Cocoa, perhaps you would be good enough to help me with my arm."

The mid, his eyes wild with the same beginnings of panic I'd seen in Pancho, squeaked a little, then said, "Aye, sir." I noticed Irwin shoot him a look of pure hatred, which, under the circumstances, was almost funny.

We went below. The rule is: one hand for the ship, one for yourself. With only one useful hand, I gave it to the ship, even though there was almost no motion. I walked into my cabin, shut the door and said, "I lied, Mr. Cocoa."

"Sir?" he sounded less like an elf and more like a kid. If he was anything like Jersey, he had demonstrated no respect for captain or officers while in the midshipman's berth, but great respect when in their presence, which was one of the things I'd hated about her. I'll never understand elves.

"Sit down, Mr. Cocoa."

The cabin had been cleared, so I sat on my cot and pointed to my chest. "Sit down," I repeated. He did. I said, "I lied about putting a sling on my arm. I wanted to talk to you."

"To me, sir?" he squeaked.

The ship lurched—hard this time, and the tray of wine glasses above us swung like a pendulum, and I heard her timbers complain. The pirate was almost irrelevant; if we couldn't come up with something, the pirate would be welcome to fish for cargo at the bottom of Lake Dorothy. I stopped noticing the pain in my arm.

“You know what's happened as well as I, or Mr. Pancho, or the other elves aboard, don't you?”

“Uh... I think so, sir.”

“Have you ever heard of anything like this happening before?”

“No, sir.”

She bucked, hard, and for an instant I thought her back was going to break, but she settled without her stern going under. I heard a wind pick up and bit back a curse.

“Do you have any ideas?”

“Me? No, sir.”

“Then we'll have to go with mine.”

“Sir?”

I told him what I wanted. He said, “Sir, respectfully, I *can't*. It's forbidden.”

“I know. But it's that, or we all go down.” He started to shake his head. I said, “If it works, Mr. Cocoa, I'll give you an appointment as acting second lieutenant for the duration of this voyage, and petition the Company to make it permanent. And I'll point out that, if this works, I think the Company will be inclined to give me just about anything I ask for.”

His mouth opened and closed. I said, “You must decide quickly, Mr. Cocoa. The wind has come up, and the ship is near to killing herself.”

He still hesitated. I said, "I'm not making this an order, Mr. Cocoa, because I won't require you to violate your laws, but, even if you don't consider your own life, and the life of the crew, think of the ship. Think of the ship, Mr. Cocoa."

He looked me in the eye, and, it seemed, aged considerably in those few instants. "Yes sir," he said in a strong voice. "I'll try it, sir."

"Very good, Mr. Cocoa. Then let's get to it. There's not a moment—" The ship cut me off by leaping half out of the water and I thought we were too late; but she came down fair enough. There was a thud over my head which had to be a crossjack from the mizzenmast hitting the deck; could have been worse.

I led him forward and back up to the deck. I was conscious of the looks I got, and I knew the crew was wondering why I wasn't on the quarterdeck where I belonged. We climbed up to the forecastle, and I nodded to Cocoa. "You first," I said.

He walked out onto the bowsprit as if there was nothing to it, and I suppose for him there wasn't. I took a quick look around. We had our stern facing the pirate—no guns would bear from this position, and he was within a couple of thousand yards. The wind wasn't perfect for him—it was a light staysail breeze—but it would do, and I suspected Pancho was about done in from the effort of keeping it from backing for them.

Cocoa was already up to the figurehead (the *Madcap's* figurehead is a happy boy with a yellow face and a blue cap tilted on its head), and for an instant, in my mind, I superimposed their images. I jumped up and, saying farewell to the dignity of a Captain, straddled the bowsprit and began making my way along it, using my one good hand to pull myself up to the forestay, then pulling my leg over it, repeating the process with the foretopmast stay and the jib line, and then I was there. Cocoa was in front of me, holding the figurehead the way a boy might hold onto his father's neck when riding pickaback. I squeezed up as close as I

could and closed my eyes.

“Come on, honey,” I said into the ear of the figurehead. “It’s all right. We have you. We love you. We’ll take care of you.” Then I stopped speaking, but kept saying it, over and over in my mind.

And, next to me, into its other ear, Cocoa began softly singing an Elvish lullaby.

How I hung on, I don’t know, but I was awakened by the sound of cannon, and further awakened by a horrible stabbing pain as I instinctively tried to grab onto the bowsprit with both hands. I blinked, and retreated back onto the forecandle as quickly as I could, yelling, “Helmsman, bring her into the wind. Mainsails and topgallants, and standby to come about. All starboard guns, stand by to fire as they bear.”

By the time I was finished speaking I was on the forecandle, running toward the quarterdeck as fast as I could, Cocoa next to me. “Get to your gun, Lieutenant,” I said.

“Aye aye, Captain,” he said.

The battle was an anticlimax. The shots that had woken me up had been aimed at our rigging, and had done nothing more than put a few scratches on the mainmast, whereas our first broadside hulled her in two places below the waterline, which was sufficient to convince the pirate, now that we were functioning again, to leave and wait for a better chance. By this time they had control of the wind, so we had no chance to chase her even if we’d been inclined to. By the time I reached the quarterdeck she was already running before the wind and with the current, and I said, “Mr. Porter, I want to make it into Port Dorthytown before she wakes up.”

“Before who wakes up, sir?”

I stared at her. Yes, she really didn’t understand. “Never mind, Mr. Porter. I’ll explain later. We’ll be pulling in, and I’ll see

about getting my arm attended to, and then we're going to have to teach our ship how to sail without destroying herself. Oh, and I've promoted Mr. Cocoa to acting second, see that he's given a new berth."

"Teach our—?"

"Later, Mr. Porter. Slip the cable. We can afford a new anchor, and we can't afford the time."

"Aye, sir."

She turned and gave the order, and it occurred to me that, with the ship four years old, I could probably buy her cheap—the Company wouldn't have to know. Hell, I could set up competition with them, and we wouldn't have to worry so much about speed.

Although, come to think of it, I'd still need elves in the Midshipman's berth.

"And a half nine," called the leadsman.

The ship headed for Port Dorthytown as sweet as a baby.