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**Pirates own book, or authentic narratives of the lives,  
exploits, and executions of the most celebrated sea  
robbers**

**ELLS, CHARLES**

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The Life of Benito de Soto.

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THE LIFE OF  
**BENITO DE SOTO,**

THE PIRATE OF THE MORNING STAR.

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THE following narrative of the career of a desperate pirate who was executed in Gibraltar in the month of January, 1830, is one of two letters from the pen of the author of "the Military Sketch-Book." The writer says Benito de Soto "had been a prisoner in the garrison for nineteen months, during which time the British Government spared neither pains nor expense to establish a full train of evidence against him. The affair had caused the greatest excitement here, as well as at Cadiz, owing to the development of the atrocities which marked the character of this man, and the diabolical gang of which he was the leader. Nothing else is talked of; and a thousand horrors are added to his guilt, which, although he was guilty enough, he has no right to bear. The following is all the authentic information I could collect concerning him. I have drawn it from his trial, from the confession of his accomplices, from the keepers of his prison, and not a little from his own lips. It will be found more interesting than all the tales and sketches furnished in the 'Annuals,' magazines, and other vehicles of invention, from the simple fact—that it is truth and not fiction."

Benito de Soto was a native of a small village near Courna; he was bred a mariner, and was in the guiltless exercise of his calling at Buenos Ayres, in the year 1827. A vessel was there being fitted out for a voyage to the coast of Africa, for the smuggling of slaves; and as she required a strong crew, a great number of sailors were engaged, amongst whom was Soto. The Portuguese of South

America have yet a privilege of dealing in slaves on a certain part of the African coast, but it was the intention of the captain of this vessel to exceed the limits of his trade, and to run farther down, so as to take his cargo of human beings from a part of the country which was proscribed, in the certainty of being there enabled to purchase slaves at a much lower rate than he could in the regular way; or, perhaps, to take away by force as many as he could stow away into his ship. He therefore required a considerable number of hands for the enterprise; and in such a traffic, it may be easily conceived, that the morals of the crew could not be a subject of much consideration with the employer. French, Spanish, Portuguese, and others, were entered on board, most of them renegadoes, and they set sail on their evil voyage, with every hope of infamous success.

Those who deal in evil, carry along with them the springs of their own destruction, upon which they will tread, in spite of every caution, and their imagined security is but the brink of the pit into which they are to fall. It was so with the captain of this slave-ship. He arrived in Africa, took in a considerable number of slaves, and in order to complete his cargo, went on shore, leaving his mate in charge of the vessel. This mate was a bold, wicked, reckless, and ungovernable spirit, and perceiving in Benito de Soto a mind congenial with his own, he fixed on him as a fit person to join in a design he had conceived, of running away with the vessel, and becoming a pirate. Accordingly the mate proposed his plan to Soto, who not only agreed to join in it, but declared that he himself had been contemplating a similar enterprise during the voyage. They both were at once of a mind, and they lost no time in maturing their plot.

Their first step was to break the matter to the other members of the crew. In this they proceeded cautiously, and succeeded so far as to gain over twenty-two of the whole, leaving eighteen who remained faithful to their trust. Every means were used to corrupt the well disposed; both persuasion and threats were resorted to, but without effect, and the leader of the conspiracy, the mate, began to despair of obtaining the desired object. Soto, however, was not

so easily depressed. He at once decided on seizing the ship upon the strength of his party: and without consulting the mate, he collected all the arms of the vessel, called the conspirators together, put into each of their possession a cutlass and a brace of pistols, and arming himself in like manner, advanced at the head of the gang, drew his sword, and declared the mate to be the commander of the ship, and the men who joined him part owners. Still, those who had rejected the evil offer remained unmoved; on which Soto ordered out the boat, and pointing to the land, cried out, "There is the African coast; this is our ship—one or the other must be chosen by every man on board within five minutes."

This declaration, although it had the effect of preventing any resistance that might have been offered by the well disposed, to the taking of the vessel, did not change them from their purpose; they still refused to join in the robbery, and entered one by one into the boat, at the orders of Soto, and with but one pair of oars, (all that was allowed to them) put off for the shore, from which they were then ten miles distant. Had the weather continued calm, as it was when the boat left the ship, she would have made the shore by dusk; but unhappily a strong gale of wind set in shortly after her departure, and she was seen by Soto and his gang struggling with the billows and approaching night, at such a distance from the land as she could not possibly accomplish while the gale lasted. All on board the ship agreed in opinion that the boat could not live, as they flew away from her at the rate of ten knots an hour, under close reefed topsails, leaving their unhappy messmates to their inevitable fate. Those of the pirates who were lately executed at Cadiz, declared that every soul in the boat perished.

The drunken uproar which that night reigned in the pirate ship was in horrid unison with the raging elements around her; contention and quarrelling followed the brutal ebriety of the pirates; each evil spirit sought the mastery of the others, and Soto's, which was the fiend of all, began to grasp and grapple for its proper place—the head of such a diabolical community.

The mate (now the chief) at once gave the reins to his

ruffian tyranny; and the keen eye of Soto saw that he who had fawned with him the day before, would next day rule him with an iron rod. Prompt in his actions as he was penetrating in his judgment, he had no sooner conceived a jealousy of the leader than he determined to put him aside; and as his rival lay in his drunken sleep, Soto put a pistol to his head, and deliberately shot him. For this act he excused himself to the crew, by stating to them that it was in *their* protection he did the act; that *their* interest was the other's death; and concluded by declaring himself their leader, and promising a golden harvest to their future labors, provided they obeyed him. Soto succeeded to the height of his wishes, and was unanimously hailed by the crew as their captain.

On board the vessel, as I before stated, were a number of slaves, and these the pirates had well secured under hatches. They now turned their attention to those half starved, half suffocated creatures;—some were for throwing them overboard, while others, not less cruel, but more desirous of gain, proposed to take them to some port in one of those countries that deal in human beings, and there sell them. The latter recommendation was adopted, and Soto steered for the West Indies, where he received a good price for his slaves. One of those wretched creatures, a boy, he reserved as a servant for himself; and this boy was destined by Providence to be the witness of the punishment of those white men who tore away from their homes himself and his brethren. He alone will carry back to his country the truth of Heaven's retribution, and heal the wounded feelings of broken kindred with the recital of it.

The pirates now entered freely into their villianous pursuit, and plundered many vessels; amongst others was an American brig, the treatment of which forms the *chef d'œuvre* of their atrocity. Having taken out of this brig all the valuables they could find, they hatched down all hands to the hold, except a black man, who was allowed to remain on deck, for the special purpose of affording in his torture an amusing exhibition to Soto and his gang. They set fire to the brig, then lay to, to observe the progress of the flames; and as the miserable African bounded from rope to rope, now climbing to the mast head—now clinging to the

hearers! How far the brutality of the pirates was carried in this stage of the horrid proceeding, we can only surmise; fortunately, their lives were spared, although, as it afterwards appeared, the orders of Soto were to butcher every being on board; and it is thought that these orders were not put into action, in consequence of the villains having wasted so much time in drinking, and otherwise indulging themselves; for it was not until the loud voice of their chief was heard to recall them, that they prepared to leave the ship; they therefore contented themselves with fastening the women within the cabin, heaping heavy lumber on the hatches of the hold, and boring holes in the planks of the vessel below the surface of the water, so that in destroying the unhappy people at one swoop, they might make up for the lost time. They then left the ship, sinking fast to her apparently certain fate.

It may be reasonably supposed, bad as their conduct was towards the females, and pitiable as was the suffering it produced, that the lives of the whole left to perish were preserved through it; for the ship must have gone down if the women had been either taken out of her or murdered, and those in the hold inevitably have gone with her to the bottom. But by good fortune, the females succeeded in forcing their way out of the cabin, and became the means of liberating the men confined in the hold. When they came on deck, it was nearly dark, yet they could see the pirate ship at a considerable distance, with all her sails set and bearing away from them. They prudently waited, concealed from the possibility of being seen by the enemy, and when the night fell, they crept to the hatchway, and called out to the men below to endeavor to effect their liberation, informing them that the pirate was away and out of sight. They then united their efforts, and the lumber being removed, the hatches gave way to the force below, so that the released captives breathed of hope again. The delightful draught, however, was checked, when the ship was found to contain six feet of water! A momentary collapse took possession of all their newly excited expectations; cries and groans of despair burst forth; but the sailors' energy quickly returned, and was followed by that of the others; they set to work at the pumps, and

by dint of labor succeeded in keeping the vessel afloat. Yet to direct her course was impossible; the pirates having completely disabled her, by cutting away her rigging and sawing the masts all the way through. The eye of Providence, however, was not averted from the hapless people, for they fell in with a vessel next day that relieved them from their distressing situation, and brought them to England in safety.

We will now return to Soto, and show how the hand of that Providence that secured his intended victims, fell upon himself and his wicked associates. Intoxicated with their infamous success, the night had far advanced before Soto learned that the people in the *Morning Star*, instead of being slaughtered, were only left to be drowned. The information excited his utmost rage. He reproached Barbazan, and those who had accompanied them in the boarding, with disobeying his orders, and declared that now there could be no security for their lives. Late as the hour was, and long as he had been steering away from the *Morning Star*, he determined to put back, in the hope of effectually preventing the escape of those in the devoted vessel, by seeing them destroyed before his eyes. Soto was a follower of the principle inculcated by the old maxim, "Dead men tell no tales;" and in pursuance of his doctrine, lost not a moment in putting about and running back. But it was too late; he could find no trace of the vessel, and so consoled himself with the belief that she was at the bottom of the sea, many fathoms below the ken and cognizance of Admiralty Courts.

Soto, thus satisfied, bent his course to Europe. On his voyage he fell in with a small brig, boarded, plundered, sunk her, and, that he might not again run the hazard of encountering living witnesses of his guilt, murdered the crew, with the exception of one individual, whom he took along with him, on account of his knowledge of the course to Corunna, whither he intended to proceed. But, faithful to his principles of self-protection, as soon as he had made full use of the unfortunate sailor, and found himself in sight of the destined port, he came up to him at the helm, which he held in his hand, "My friend," said he "is that the harbor of Corunna?"—"Yes," was the reply

"Then," rejoined Soto, "You have done your duty well, and I am obliged to you for your services." On the instant he drew a pistol and shot the man; then coolly flung his body overboard, took the helm himself, and steered into his native harbor as little concerned as if he had returned from an honest voyage. At this port he obtained papers in a false name, disposed of a great part of his booty, and after a short stay set out for Cadiz, where he expected a market for the remainder. He had a fair wind until he came within sight of the coast near that city. It was coming on dark and he lay to, expecting to go into his anchorage next morning, but the wind shifted to the westward, and suddenly began to blow a heavy gale; it was right on the land. He luffed his ship as close to the wind as possible, in order to clear a point that stretched outward, and beat off to windward, but his lee-way carried him towards the land, and he was caught when he least expected the trap. The gale increased—the night grew pitchy dark—the roaring breakers were on his lee-beam—the drifting vessel strikes, rebounds, and strikes again—the cry of horror rings through the flapping cordage, and despair is in the eyes of the demon-crew. Helpless they lie amid the wrath of the storm, and the darkened face of Heaven, for the first time, strikes terror on their guilty hearts. Death is before them, but not with a merciful quickness does he approach; hour after hour the frightful vision glares upon them, and at length disappears only to come upon them again in a more dreadful form. The tempest abates, and the sinners were spared for the time.

As the daylight broke they took to their boats, and abandoned the vessel to preserve their lives. But there was no repentance in the pirates; along with the night and the winds went the voice of conscience, and they thought no more of what had passed. They stood upon the beach gazing at the wreck, and the first thought of Soto, was to sell it, and purchase another vessel for the renewal of his atrocious pursuits. With the marked decision of his character, he proposed his intention to his followers, and received their full approbation. The plan was instantly arranged; they were to present themselves as honest, shipwrecked mariners to the authorities at Cadiz;



Soto was to take upon himself the office of mate, or *contra maestra* to an imaginary captain, and thus obtain their sanction in disposing of the vessel. In their assumed character, the whole proceeded to Cadiz, and presented themselves before the proper officers of the marine. Their story was listened to with sympathy, and for a few days every thing went on to their satisfaction. Soto had succeeded so well as to conclude the sale of the wreck with a broker, for the sum of one thousand seven hundred and fifty dollars; the contract was signed, but fortunately the money was not yet paid, when suspicion arose, from some inconsistencies in the pirates' account of themselves, and six of them were arrested by the authorities. Soto and one of his crew instantly disappeared from Cadiz, and succeeded in arriving at the neutral ground before Gibraltar, and six more made their escape to the Carraccas.

None are permitted to enter the fortress of Gibraltar, without permission from the governor, or a passport. Soto and his companion, therefore, took up their quarters at a Posade on the neutral ground, and resided there in security for several days. The busy and daring mind of the former could not long remain inactive; he proposed to his companion to attempt to enter the garrison in disguise and by stealth, but could not prevail upon him to consent. He therefore resolved to go in alone; and his object in doing so was to procure a supply of money by a letter of credit which he brought with him from Cadiz. His companion, more wise than he, chose the safer course; he knew that the neutral ground was not much controllable by the laws either of the Spaniards or the English, and although there was not much probability of being discovered, he resolved not to trust to chance in so great a stake as his life; and he proved to have been right in his judgment, for had he gone to Gibraltar, he would have shared the same fate of his chief. This man is the only one of the whole gang, who has not met with the punishment of his crimes, for he succeeded in effecting his escape on board some vessel. It is not even suspected to what country he is gone; but his description, no doubt, is registered. The steward of the *Morning Star* informed me, that he is a tall, stout man, with fair hair, and fresh complexion, of a mild and gentle

countenance, but that he was one of the worst villains of the whole piratical crew. I believe he is stated to be a Frenchman.

Soto secured his admission into the garrison by a false pass, and took up his residence at an inferior tavern in a narrow lane, which runs off the main street of Gibraltar, and is kept by a man of the name of Basso. The appearance of this house suits well with the associations of the worthy Benito's life. I have occasion to pass the door frequently at night, for our barrack, (the Casement,) is but a few yards from it. I never look at the place without feeling an involuntary sensation of horror—the smoky and dirty nooks—the distant groups of dark Spaniards, Moors, and Jews, their sallow countenances made yellow by the light of dim oil lamps—the unceiled rafters of the rooms above, seen through unshuttered windows and the consciousness of their having covered the atrocious Soto, combine this effect upon me.

In this den the villain remained for a few weeks, and during this time seemed to enjoy himself as if he had never committed a murder. The story he told Basso of his circumstances was, that he had come to Gibraltar on his way to Cadiz from Malaga, and was merely awaiting the arrival of a friend. He dressed expensively—generally wore a white hat of the best English quality, silk stockings, white trowsers, and blue frock coat. His whiskers were large and bushy, and his hair, which was very black, profuse, long and naturally curled, was much in the style of a London preacher of prophetic and anti-poetic notoriety. He was deeply browned with the sun, and had an air and gait expressive of his bold, enterprising, and desperate mind. Indeed, when I saw him in his cell and at his trial, although his frame was attenuated almost to a skeleton, the color of his face a pale yellow, his eyes sunken, and his hair closely shorn; he still exhibited strong traces of what he had been, still retained his erect and fearless carriage, his quick, fiery, and malevolent eye, his hurried and concise speech, and his close and pertinent style of remark. He appeared to me such a man as would have made a hero in the ranks of his country, had circumstances placed him in the proper road to fame; but ignorance and poverty turned into the

most ferocious robber, one who might have rendered service and been an honor to his sunken country. I should like to hear what the phrenologists say of his head; it appeared to me to be the most peculiar I had ever seen, and certainly, as far as the bump of *destructiveness* went, bore the theory fully out. It is rumored here that the skull has been sent to the *savans* of Edinburg; if this be the case, we shall no doubt be made acquainted with their sage opinions upon the subject, and great conquerors will receive a farther assurance of how much they resemble in their physical natures the greatest murderers.

When I visited the pirate in the Moorish castle where he was confined, he was sitting in his cold, narrow, and miserable cell, upon a pallet of straw, eating his coarse meal from a tin plate. I thought him more an object of pity than vengeance; he looked so worn with disease, so crushed with suffering, yet so affable, frank, and kind in his address; for he happened to be in a communicative mood, a thing that was by no means common with him. He spoke of his long confinement, till I thought the tears were about to start from his eyes, and alluded to his approaching trial with satisfaction; but his predominant characteristic, ferocity, appeared in his small piercing black eyes before I left him, as he alluded to his keeper, the Provost, in such a way that made me suspect his desire for blood was not yet extinguished. When he appeared in court on his trial, his demeanor was quite altered; he seemed to me to have suddenly risen out of the wretch he was in his cell, to all the qualities I had heard of him; he stood erect and unembarrassed; he spoke with a strong voice, attended closely to the proceedings, occasionally examined the witnesses, and at the conclusion protested against the justice of his trial. He sometimes spoke to the guards around him, and sometimes affected an air of carelessness of his awful situation, which, however, did not sit easy upon him. Even here the leading trait of his mind broke forth; for when the interpreter commenced his office, the language which he made use of being pedantic and affected, Soto interrupted him thus, while a scowl sat upon his brow that terrified the man of words: "I don't

understand you, man; speak Spanish like others, and I'll listen to you." When the dirk that belonged to Mr. Robertson, the trunk and clothes taken from Mr. Gibson, and the pocket book containing the ill-fated captain's hand writing were placed before him, and proved to have been found in his room, and when the maid servant of the tavern proved that she found the dirk under his pillow every morning on arranging his bed; and when he was confronted with his own black slave, between two wax lights, the countenance of the villain appeared in its true nature, not depressed nor sorrowful, but vivid and ferocious; and when the patient and dignified governor, Sir George Don, passed the just sentence of the law upon him, he looked daggers at his heart, and assumed a horrid silence, more eloquent than words.

The criminal persisted up to the day before his execution in asserting his innocence, and inveighing against the injustice of his trial, but the certainty of his fate, and the awful voice of religion, at length subdued him. He made an unreserved confession of his guilt, and became truly penitent; gave up to the keeper the blade of a razor which he had secreted between the soles of his shoes for the acknowledged purpose of adding suicide to his crimes, and seemed to wish for the moment that was to send him before his Creator.

I witnessed his execution, and I believe there never was a more contrite man than he appeared to be; yet there were no drivelling fears upon him—he walked firmly at the tail of the fatal cart, gazing sometimes at his coffin, sometimes at the crucifix which he held in his hand. The symbol of divinity he frequently pressed to his lips, repeated the prayers spoken in his ear by the attendant clergyman, and seemed regardless of every thing but the world to come. The gallows was erected beside the water, and fronting the neutral ground. He mounted the cart as firmly as he had walked behind it, and held up his face to Heaven and the beating rain, calm, resigned, but unshaken; and finding the halter too high for his neck, he boldly stepped upon his coffin, and placed his head in the noose, then watching the first turn of the wheels, he mur-

mured "*adios todos,*"\* and leaned forward to facilitate his fall.

The black slave of the pirate stood upon the battery trembling before his dying master to behold the awful termination of a series of events, the recital of which to his African countrymen, when he shall return to his home, will give them no doubt, a dreadful picture of European civilization. The black boy was acquitted at Cadiz, but the men who had fled to the Carraccas, as well as those arrested after the wreck, were convicted, executed, their limbs severed, and hung on tenter hooks, as a warning to all pirates.

\* "Farewell, all."

