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

ELLS, CHARLES

New York [u.a.], 1842

Escape of Wm. Oakley, and four of his Companions.

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him so near death, they thought it best to spare his life for the sake of future ransom. They agreed, therefore, to let him return to the Christians. His life was for some time despaired of; but through the kind attention he received, he was rescued from the threatened dissolution. His recovery was concealed, for fear of his being demanded back to work; and a few months after, the Spanish peace of 1784 being concluded, a ransom was accepted by the Algerines for this suffering family, and they were set at liberty.

These pirates in old times extended their depredations into the Atlantic as far as the British Channel. They swarmed in the Mediterranean, not only belonging to Algiers, but Tunis, and other ports on the coast of Barbary. Their corsairs making descents on the coasts of those countries which border on the Mediterranean, pillaging the villages and carrying off the inhabitants into slavery. The corsairs were vessels of different descriptions; some large armed ships, and latterly frigates; others were row galleys and the various craft used by the nations which navigate that sea, and had been taken by them and added to their marine. Upon the slaves being landed at Algiers they were marched to the Dey's or Bashaw's palace, when he selected the number which according to law belonged to him; and the rest were sold in the slave market to the highest bidder. A moiety of the plunder, cargoes and vessels taken also belonged to the Dey. Occasionally, a person by pretending to renounce his religion, and turning Mahomedan would have his sufferings mitigated.

The most desperate attempts were sometimes made to effect an escape from these ruthless monsters, which occasionally succeeded.

In 1644 William Oakley and four companions escaped from Algiers, in a most miraculous manner, in a canvas boat. There was at this time an English clergyman, Mr. Sprat, in captivity, and the wretched slaves had the privilege of meeting in a cellar, where he would pray with them.

Oakley had got into the good graces of his master, and was allowed his time by giving his master two dollars a month. He traded in tobacco and a few trifling articles, so that a strict watch was not kept on his movements. He

conceived the project of making a canvas boat. He says I now first opened my design to my comrades, informing them, that I had contrived the model of a boat, which, being formed in pieces, and afterwards put together, might be the means of our deliverance. They greedily grasped at the prospect; but cooler reflection pointed out difficulties innumerable: some of them started objections which they thought insuperable, and these I endeavored to overrule.

We began our work in the cellar which had served for our devotions, though it was not the sanctity of the place, but its privacy, that induced us to this selection. We first provided a piece of wood, twelve feet long, and, that it might escape observation, it was cut in two, being jointed in the middle. Next we procured the timbers or ribs, which, to avoid the same hazard, were in three pieces each, and jointed in two places. The flat side of one of the two pieces was laid over the other, and two holes bored in every joint to receive nails; so that when united, each joint would make an obtuse angle, and approach towards a semicircular figure, as we required. We had, in the formation of an external covering, to avoid hammering and nailing, which would have made such a noise in the cellar as to attract the notice of the Algerines, who are insufferably suspicious about their wives and slaves. Therefore, we provided as much canvas as would cover the boat twice over, and as much pitch, tar and tallow, as would make it a kind of tarpaulin; as also earthen pots in which to melt our materials. The two carpenters and myself were appointed to this service in the cellar. We stopped up all chinks and crevices, that the fumes of these substances might not betray us. But we had not been long at work, when the smell of the melting materials overcame me, and obliged me to go into the streets gasping for breath, where meeting with the cool air, I swooned away, and broke my face in the fall. My companions, finding me in this plight, carried me back, extremely sick and unserviceable. Before long, I heard one of them complain of sickness, and thus he could proceed no further; therefore, I saw if we abandoned our project this night, it might not be resumed, which made

me resolve to set the cellar door wide open, while I stood sentinel to give notice of approaching danger. In this way we finished the whole, and then carried it to my shop, which was about a furlong distant.

Every thing was fitted in the cellar, the timbers to the keel, the canvas to the timbers, and the seats to the whole, and then all were taken to pieces again. It was a matter of difficulty, however, to get the pieces conveyed out of the city; but William Adams carried the keel, and hid it at the bottom of a hedge: the rest was carried away with similar precautions. As I was carrying a piece of canvas, which we had bought for a sail, I looked back, and discovered the same spy, who had formerly given us much trouble, following behind. This gave me no small concern; but, observing an Englishman washing clothes by the sea side, I desired his help in washing the canvas. Just as we were engaged with it, the spy came up, and stood on a rock exactly over our heads, to watch us. Therefore, to delude him, I took the canvas and spread it before his face on the top of the rock to dry; he staid his own time, and then marched off. Still I was jealous of his intentions, which induced me to carry the canvas, when dry, straight back to the city, an incident that greatly discouraged my comrades. We also procured a small quantity of provisions, and two goat skins full of fresh water.

In the mean time, I paid my patron my wonted visits, kept up a fair correspondence, and duly gave him his demands; while I secretly turned all my goods to ready money as fast as I could, and putting it into a trunk with a false bottom, I committed it to the charge of Mr. Sprat who faithfully preserved it for me.

The place which we chose for joining the boat together was a hill about half a mile from the city, thinking by that means the better to descry the approach of danger. When the pieces were united, and the canvas drawn on, four of our number carried the boat down to the sea, where, stripping ourselves naked, and putting our clothes within, we carried it as far as we could wade, lest it might be injured by the stones or rocks near the shore. But we soon discovered that our calculations of lading were erroneous; for no sooner had we embarked, than the water came in

over the sides, and she was like to sink ; so that some new device became necessary. At last, one whose heart most failed him was willing to be excluded, and wished rather to hazard the uncertain torments of land, than the certainty of being drowned at sea. However the boat was still so deeply laden, that we all concluded that it was impossible to venture to sea. At length another went ashore, and she held her head stoutly, and seemed sufficiently capable of our voyage.

Taking a solemn farewell of our two companions left behind, and wishing them as much happiness as could be hoped for in slavery, and they to us as long life as could be expected by men going to their graves, we launched out on the 30th of June 1644, a night ever to be remembered. Our company consisted of John Anthony, William Adams, John Jephth, John the carpenter and myself. We now put to sea, without helm, tackle, or compass. Four of us continually labored at the oars ; the employment of the fifth was baling out the water that leaked through the canvas. We struggled hard the first night to get out of the reach of our old masters ; but when the day broke, we were still within sight of their ships in the haven and roadstead. Yet, our boat being small, and lying close and snug upon the sea, either was not discovered at all, or else seemed something that was not worth taking up.

On all occasions we found our want of foresight, for now the bread which had lain soaking in the salt water, was quite spoiled, and the tanned skins imparted a nauseous quality to the fresh water. So long as bread was bread, we made no complaints ; with careful economy it lasted three days, but then pale famine, which is the most horrible shape in which death can be painted, began to stare us in the face. The expedients on which we fell to assuage our thirst rather inflamed it, and several things added to our distress. For some time the wind was right against us ; our labour was incessant, for, although much rowing did not carry us forward, still, cessation of it drove us back ; and the season was raging hot, which rendered our toil insupportable. One small alleviation we had in the man whose province it was to bale the water out of

the boat; he threw it on our bodies to cool them. However, what with the scorching of the sun and cooling of the water, our skin was blistered all over. By day we were stark naked; by night we had on shirts or loose coats; for we had left our clothing ashore, on purpose to lighten the boat.

One of our number had a pocket dial, which supplied the place of a compass; and, to say the truth, was not ill befitting such a vessel and such mariners. By its aid we steered our course by day, while the stars served as a guide by night; and, if they were obscured, we guessed our way by the motion of the clouds. In this woful plight we continued four days and nights. On the fifth day we were at the brink of despair, and abandoned all hopes of safety. Thence we ceased our labor, and laid aside our oars; for, either we had no strength left to use them, or were reluctant to waste the little we had to no purpose. Still we kept emptying the boat, loth to drown, loth to die, yet knowing no means to avoid death.

They that act least commonly wish the most; and, when we had forsaken useful labor, we resorted to fruitless wishes—that we might be taken up by some ship, if it were but a ship, no matter of what country.

While we lay hulling up and down, our hopes at so low an ebb, we discovered a tortoise, not far from us, asleep in the sea. Had the great Drake discovered the Spanish plate fleet, he could not have been more rejoiced. Once again we bethought ourselves of our oars, and silently rowing to our prey, took it into the boat in great triumph. Having cut off its head, and let it bleed in a vessel, we drank the blood, ate the liver, and sucked the flesh. Our strength and spirits were wonderfully refreshed, and our work was vigorously renewed. Leaving our fears behind us, we began to gather hope, and, about noon, discovered, or thought that we discovered, land. It is impossible to describe our joy and triumph on this occasion. It was new life to us; it brought fresh blood into our veins, and fresh vigor into our pale checks: we looked like persons raised from the dead. After further exertion, becoming more confident, we were at last fully satisfied that it was land. Now, like distracted persons, we all leapt into the

sea, and, being good swimmers, cooled our parched bodies, never considering that we might become a ready prey to the sharks. But we presently returned to our boat, and from being wearied with the exertion, and somewhat cooled by the sea, lay down to sleep with as much security as if it had been in our beds. It was fortunately of such short duration that the leaking of the boat occasioned no danger.

Refreshed by sleep, we found new strength for our work, and tugged hard at the oar, in hopes of reaching a more stable element before night. But our progress was very slow. Towards evening an island was discovered, which was Fromentere, having already seen Majorca; at least, some of our company, who had navigated these seas, declared that it was so. We debated long to which of the two our course should be directed; and, because the last discovered was much infested with venomous serpents, we all resolved to make for Majorca. The whole of that night we rowed very hard, and also the next, being the sixth from our putting to sea. The island was in sight all day, and about ten at night we came under the land, but it consisted of rocks so steep and craggy that we could not climb up.

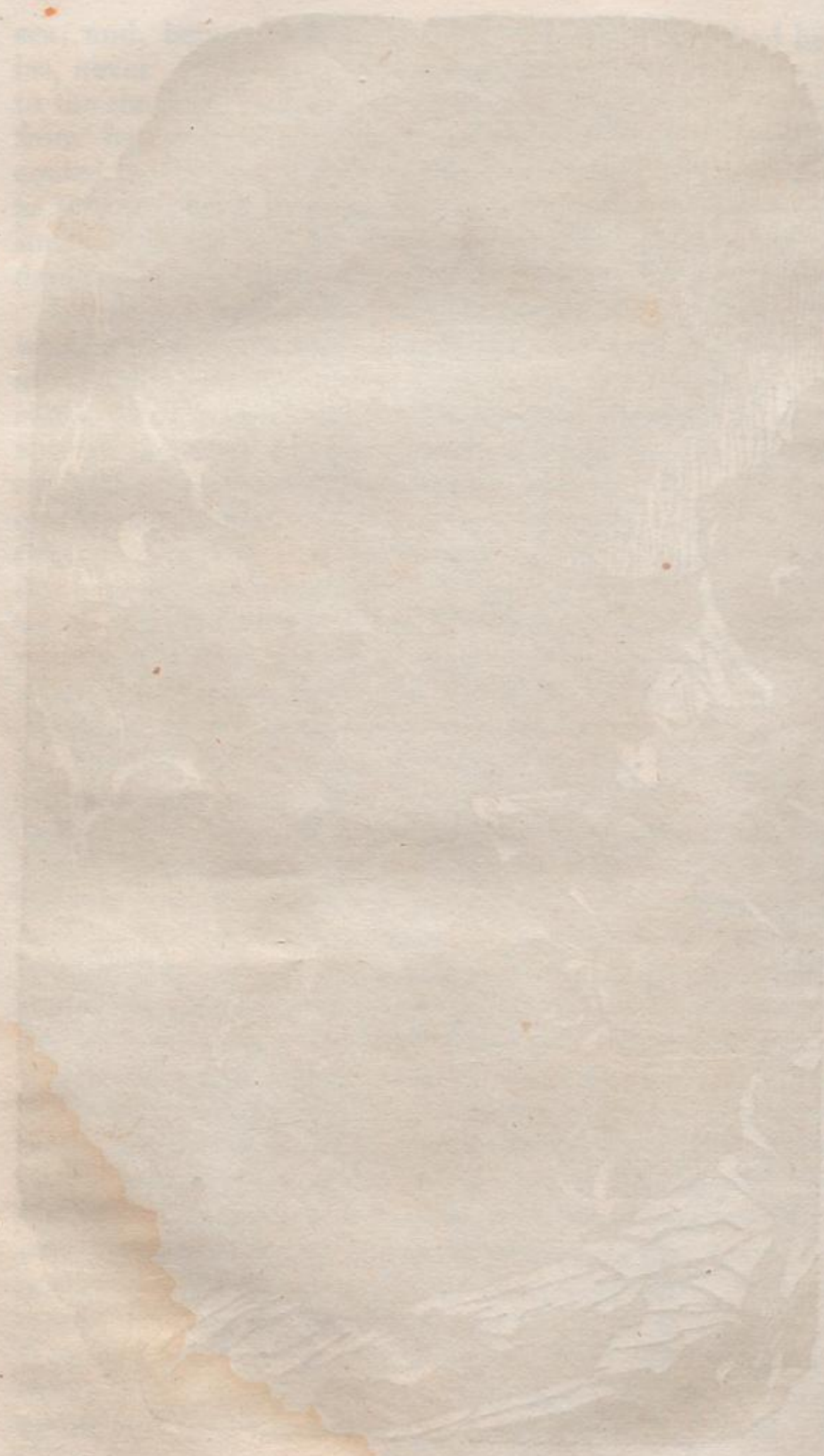
Whilst under these rocks a vessel approached very near. Let the reader conceive our apprehensions, after all our toil and labor, of being seized by some Turkish privateer, such as are never off the seas. Thus we were obliged to lie close; and, when the vessel had passed, we crept gently along the coast, as near as we durst to the shore, until finding a suitable place to receive our weather-beaten boat.

We were not insensible of our deliverance on reaching land; though, like men just awakened from a dream, we could not duly appreciate the greatness of it. Having had no food since we got the tortoise, John Anthony and myself set out in search of fresh water, and three remained with the boat. Before proceeding far, we found ourselves in a wood, which created great embarrassment. My comrade wished to go one way, and I wished to go another. How frail and impotent a being is man! That we, whom common dangers by sea had united, should now fall out about our own inclinations at land. Yet so we did. He

The fugitives from Algerine Slavery slaking their thirst at a well on the Spanish coast. p. 407.



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gave me reproachful words; and it is well that we did not come to blows, but I went my way, and he, seeing me resolute, followed. The path led to one of those watch-towers which the Spaniards keep on the coast to give timely notice of the approach of privateers. Afraid of being fired on, we called to the sentinel, informing him who we were, and earnestly requesting him to direct us to fresh water, and to give us some bread. He very kindly threw down an old mouldy cake, and directed us to a well close at hand. We drank a little water, and ate a bit of the cake, which we had difficulty in swallowing, and then hastened to return to our companions in the boat, to acquaint them with our success.

Though now necessary to leave the boat, we did not do it without regret; but this was lulled by the importunate cravings of hunger and thirst; therefore, making her fast ashore, we departed. Advancing, or rather crawling towards the well, another quarrel rose among us, the remembrance of which is so ungrateful that I shall bury it in silence, the best tomb for controversies. One of our company, William Adams, in attempting to drink, was unable to swallow the water, and sunk to the ground, faintly exclaiming, "I am a dead man!" After much straining and forcing, he, at length, got a little over; and when we were all refreshed with the cake and water, we lay down by the side of the well to wait for morning.

When it was broad day, we once more applied to the sentinel, to point out the way to the nearest house or town, which he did, directing us to a house about two miles distant; but our feet were so raw and blistered by the sun that it was long before we could get this short journey over; and then, the owners of the house, concluding from our garb that we came with a pilfering design, presented a fowling-piece, charging us to stand. The first of our number, who could speak the language of the country, mildly endeavored to undeceive him, saying, we were a company of poor creatures, whom the wonderful providence of God had rescued from the slavery of Algiers, and hoped that he would show mercy to our afflictions. The honest farmer, moved with our relation, sent out bread, water and olives. After refreshing ourselves

with these, we lay down and rested three or four hours in the field; and, having given him thanks for his charity, prepared to crawl away. Pleased with our gratitude, he called us into his house, and gave us good warm bean pottage, which to me seemed the best food I had ever ate. Again taking leave, we advanced towards Majorca, which was about ten miles distant.

Next morning we arrived in the suburbs, where the singularity of our attire, being barefoot and bare legged, and having nothing on except loose shirts, drawn over our coats, attracted a crowd of enquirers. We gave a circumstantial account of our deliverance; and, as they were willing to contribute to our relief, they supplied us with food, wine, strong waters, and whatever else might renovate our exhausted spirits. They said, however, that we must remain in the suburbs until the viceroy had notice of our arrival. We were called before him, and when he had heard the account of our escape and dangers, he ordered us to be maintained at his expense until we should obtain a passage to our own country; and, in the meantime, the people collected money to buy clothes and shoes.

From Majorca they proceeded to Cadiz, and from thence to England, which they reached in safety.

Several expeditions at different periods were fitted out by different European nations to chastise the pirates. The Emperor, Charles V., in the plenitude of his power, sailed with a formidable armament in the year 1541, and effected a landing. Without doubt he would have taken the city, if a terrible storm had not risen, which destroyed a great part of his fleet, and obliged him to re-embark with his shattered forces in the greatest precipitation. The exultation of the Algerines was unbounded; they now looked on themselves as the special favorites of heaven; the most powerful army which had ever attempted their subjection had returned with the loss of one third of their number, and a great part of its ships and transports. Prisoners had been taken in such abundance, that to show their worthlessness, they were publicly sold in the market-place at Algiers, at an onion a head.

For nearly a century after this, little occurs of note in