

VOYAGE OF THE TURTLE

by Brian Dunning

I clung tightly to my brother the first week at sea. Whenever I strayed, I was certain to get into some trouble or other; if not entanglement in the myriad of crazy lines and blocks that comprise a whaleship, then from my nearly constant seasickness. As captain of the *Turtle*, Joshua was always ready with a command for me: “Stand over there, Han,” or “Keep your eyes on the horizon, Han, and eat this.”

Although favorable for hunting the mighty whalefish, the Kamchatka Sea was cold and made a protracted and difficult journey. But our stores were good, the crew’s pay high, and spirits fairly soared.

The *Turtle’s* crew was as varied as a circus troop. One of the men, Mike, rarely spoke at all, save it be a threatening growl if he was approached. Mike was a harpooner, and spent the most of his day leaning against a bulkhead sharpening his many points. He often sat right where the sailors needed to work, for he considered himself above the menial crewmen and delighted in causing them inconvenience.

Another was Robbins, who developed leprosy almost the day we shipped. After only two months, his disfigurements were horrible to behold. Robbins took up residence in the starboard head, atop the forecandle, where the wind and spray could carry away the foul particles of his infection. Strangely, the diseased man did not mind the chill of those tiny, unthinkable quarters; often he would appear on deck barechested at night, shouting into the blowing seas, while the watch wore heavy sealskin parkas and had to brush the ice from their beards.

Robbins sang nearly every day. We all believed he had gone mad, and most of the crew held that to sail with a lunatic was bad luck.

I have the strongest memories of Grant. Grant had a powerful, deep, and melodic singing voice, and was fond of using it. Everyone respected Grant, and liked him. He had no enemies among the crew, and was constantly stepping in to break up a fight and settle disputes. On several occasions, when arguments broke out, Grant would lift up his thunderous singing voice and drown out the shouting. Many of the crew had good voices, and it became a game to join in with Grant and end arguments in this manner. As often as not, the arguing parties ended up singing too:

*It's a damn tough life full of toil and strife
We whalemens undergo
We don't give a damn when we drink our rum
How hard the winds did blow
We're homeward bound, it's a grand old sound
With a good ship taut and free
We don't give a damn when we drink our rum
With the girls of Old Maui.*

Nothing can compare to the excitement I felt the first time I heard the lookout's call "Blow to starboard" from atop the mainmast. Exhilaration spread through the crew like wildfire. Torvill, the lead harpooner and third mate, would man one whaleboat; Grant and Mike the other. The burly oarsmen gave the small launches great speed, and Torvill sent his harpoon home nearly every time. Once a whale was killed, Torvill hammered a spike into it and ran a line back to the *Turtle*. The whale was hauled in and tied along the port side. The men fell to with blubber knives and cable saws, and dragged the oily bounty on board. Most of the blubber was boiled down and stowed in our emptied water barrels; whenever we had an excess of blubber, our plentiful fresh water was jettisoned and the precious cargo could be stored.

This work could continue for perhaps an hour until the killer whales appeared, and they always did appear. The whaleboats were winched aboard first. This was a necessity; if not done immediately, the killer whales could easily crush the small boats as they tore into their prey. The whale was then cut free; canvas was raised, and all hands gorged themselves on the fresh meat.

It was on one such day that I think I first realized the depth of my respect for my brother. Grant and some of the other men were astride one of these vast carcasses cutting out whalemeat and stacking it in one of our boats. The water was stained a thick, bright red, as if the whale lay on an artist's palette, and spirits were very high. Suddenly there was a great upheaval in the water, and an ugly black and white head rose straight up and closed on Grant. He hadn't even time to scream before he was dragged out of sight into the redness.

"Orca!" shouted the lookout; "Man overboard!" screamed others.

"Chum to starboard," said Captain Millen as he strode up. In seconds, blubber, whalemeat, scraps, or anything that could be thrown was dumped over the opposite side of the *Turtle* in a vain effort to draw the killer whales away from our doomed shipmates.

By now there were several of the loathsome fish charging into the whale carcass and tearing out great slabs with each bite. The launch capsized, throwing two more men into the blood.

Two score of the crew shouted and threw lines to the hapless men, but as the condemned thrashed wild-eyed in the redness and slapped helplessly at the sinking lines, a dozen more black fins slashed the surface as they shot in for the kill.

The other men on the carcass sprang for the *Turtle's* slippery bulwarks and were pulled on board. A net was cast over the side, and some of the men

climbed down and tried to reach those in the water, but it was hopeless. The convulsing killer whales were between the men and the ship.

Just at this moment there was a flash through the air, and a great splash. It was our Captain who surfaced, treading water in the blood, with a halyard tied round his middle. He swam three powerful strokes and wrapped an arm about each man, and the next instant all three were spinning aloft as twenty strong men ran astern with the halyard.

The gory men landed on deck and were doused with buckets of seawater. The Captain pushed the buckets aside and struggled to his feet. "Cut the damned whale free," he said.

A chop of the hatchet and the *Turtle* groaned as she leveled off. We watched the carcass slowly disappear, shuddering from the constant killer whale hits. In a minute, the surface was still again. Someone removed his hat, and everyone followed suit.

"Make sail, Mr. Cable," said the Captain.

The frightful incident was over, with the loss of but one man; thanks to my brother's selfless courage and the loyalty of his crew.

*Once more we sail with a northerly gale
Through the ice and wind and rain.
And them coconut fronds and them tropical lands
We soon shall see again
Six hellish months have passed away
In the cold Kamchatka sea
But now we're bound from the Arctic ground
Rolling down to Old Maui.*

It was some months later, in the first week of winter, that we experienced our next crisis, and one that I hope never to witness again. The disagreeable Mike was taken ill with some kind of distemper. Some of the men had seen the symptoms before, and the diagnosis was clear. The scurvy had struck the *Turtle*.

The Captain went to the medicine chest. As the company did not find it necessary to send a surgeon with each and every whaleship, stores included a medicine chest with twenty numbered bottles of medicines and a hefty medical almanac. Joshua studied the almanac and was obliged to offer Mike a mugful of medicine number 8. Mike drank the dosage heartily, but within a day his skin was mottled with the most appalling sores. He cursed at any and all who were near him. He coughed violently. By morning, he was vomiting a black fluid and died in his hammock that very hour.

Nobody stirred to bury the body. Indeed, no one was anxious to be near the infected corpse at all. The Captain ordered a detail to remove Mike's body and scrub out the crew quarters, and for the first time on all that long voyage, he had to give an order twice.

That same day, one of the strongest of the crew fell to the deck dead most unaccountably. Many began to notice sores on their bodies. Fear began to spread, and with it, the onslaught of the disease.

The effects of the pestilence were astonishing in their variety. Gums softened, and the teeth worked loose with surprising facility. A great lethargy overcame the sick, such that they were restricted to quarters and could not perform even the lightest of duties. Even so, strong men rolled from their hammocks and dropped to the deck, dead from the exertion. Bones which had been broken and long since healed re-separated as if they had never mended. Scars of any age liquefied and became as fresh as the day they were inflicted. One of our helmsmen, Nash, had lost a leg to grape ten years before in the English War, and now even that long-healed stump splayed open and began to putrefy.

More than half of the crew was afflicted to some degree. By some stroke of fortune, neither I nor any of the officers had shown any signs yet, so the

Captain ordered the four of us to raise stuns'ls and run south with the trades for the Sandwich Islands.

Captain Millen also declared martial law, that the epidemic might be arrested. He restricted the sick to the foc'sle, and opened the officers' mess and aft stowage as quarters for those of the crew capable of duty. These apartments grew to be unbearably close, and there arose a stench such as words cannot describe. But the quarantine was necessary to save us all.

"Thirteen men aft," counted the bosun Cable, "leaving eighteen forward."

"Eighteen? You mean seventeen."

A man was sent forward for a head count. "Seventeen forward," came his reply.

The confused bosun went over his roster again. "Robbins," he said at last. "Robbins is in his quarters on the bow. Captain, we must bring him aft as well."

"The bow is in quarantine, Mr. Cable. Robbins is as sick as the others."

"But we've no reason to believe that he has the scurvy too. We can put him in the larboard officers' head."

"Leaving thirteen men to share a single head for another two months? And become lepers in the process?"

"We must at least check on him, for if he has the scurvy, he should receive medicine like the rest."

"And who shall distribute the medicine?" asked the Captain. Until now, he had been doctor and commander in one.

The bosun thought a moment. "I don't see why anyone should have to distribute the medicine," he said at last. "We don't need it back here. We should send it forward, and let the sick tend themselves."

"Then everything is decided," my brother said. "There should no longer be any need for anyone to go forward, and risk bringing the infection aft."

The cook stood up. "Captain, I sent enough food forward to last the trip, but someone will still have to take meals to Robbins."

The cook himself usually fed Robbins by leaving a bucket of rations outside the head. But it meant crossing the foc'sle.

"Captain, I'll feed Robbins," said the bosun. "My berth is separate from the rest, so even if I do contract the scurvy--"

"Mr. Cable, you'll inform the men in the foc'sle that feeding Robbins will now be their responsibility."

The bosun looked down at the deck. Then he stood and snapped to attention. "With all due respect, Captain, we can't condemn the man to one disease simply because he already has another."

Most of us nodded in agreement, and all eyes turned to the Captain for his response.

"I'm not insensitive to that, Mr. Cable. Two more months at sea is a very long time when a dozen men have perished and most of the rest are afflicted."

The Captain stood and addressed us all:

"Check on him, you say? Check on Robbins? Check his gums for softening? And who's going to do that? Mr. Cable, would you check the gums of a leper?"

The bosun looked at the deck again.

"Han, would you do it?"

I smiled and shook my head.

"How about you? Or you?"

A murmur of laughter went up among the men. The Captain stood sternly at the head of the group until he had silence again.

“We’ve already made some hard choices, and doubtless there will be plenty more. We must take every precaution to ensure that enough of us are still alive in two months to sail the ship.”

And sail it we did. Every day for a week, I and the officers were brought on deck. We trimmed the sails with the great capstan on the middeck, inserting the heavy bars like spokes and pushing them round with all our might. The ship made good speed. There was an eeriness about being on deck with the ship so quiet, so devoid of crew; no laughter and music, just the rush from the bows and the heavy flapping of the canvas.

And then, one night just at six bells, the horizon darkened with easterly storm clouds. The Ship’s Master recommended a jibe to starboard to outrun the weather.

“All hands on deck,” said the Captain, and the bosun not being on hand, the Master repeated the order.

“Where is Mr. Cable?”

I went round to the bosun’s berth and found Cable swaying drowsily in his hammock. He turned toward me slowly with yellow eyes. “Here...” I started to call, but broke off when Cable’s lips moved.

“I’m sick, Han.”

“Sick?”

“Don’t tell the Captain.”

He closed his eyes and murmured something to himself. I could see his black, decaying gums.

I stepped back.

Just then the Master and my brother appeared behind me.

“All hands on deck,” said the Master. “We’re going to jibe.”

Joshua took two or three measured steps toward Cable. "Mr. Cable, report to the foc'sle."

"I'm all right, Captain, just haven't been sleeping very well."

"Report to the foc'sle, Mr. Cable."

"I'm capable of duty, sir."

But he lay heavily in the hammock. He raised a bloated arm slightly, but his eyes rolled back and the hammock began to turn.

"Catch him!"

The Master and I sprung as the hammock spun over and dropped Cable to the deck. We caught his head just in time.

Cable tried to focus on us, then exhaled a long breath. He was dead.

We let go of him and stepped back, wiping our hands on our breeches. Joshua was in the corridor, covering his mouth with his jacket, his angry eyes betraying his disgust at the putrid corpse.

I ran on deck to the stern railing and swallowed as much fresh air as I could. The ship heaved through the thickening spray, and the cold water slapping my face felt good.

I turned to collect myself and started back to the cabin when I saw two dark forms struggling across the moving deck, dragging another man. They flopped the lifeless body over the bulwark and threw the legs over. The dead man disappeared into the bow spray and even the splash was lost in the tossing sea. As the two men huddled back to the foc'sle, I could not forget that the dead man's splash was lost. I could not tell who he was nor recognize his clothing. A nameless shadow, buried at sea without ceremony or grief, without even a splash to mark the grave.

But I saw Robbins the leper emerge shirtless from his quarters into the rain. He loped to the bulwark, looked over the side, and followed the water

astern with his eyes. He was still there when I went inside a quarter of an hour later, and he didn't look at me.

*Once more we sail with a northerly gale
Towards our island home
Our mainmast sprung and our whaling done
And we ain't got far to roam
Our stuns'l booms is carried away
What care we for that sound
A living gale is after us
Thank God we're homeward bound.*

Within a week or so, more of our small group relocated to the bows as they fell sick as well. It gave our cramped living space a bit of fresh air, which was greatly needed.

It fell to myself to help the cook pass supper among our huddled group. The cook handed round our water cask while I distributed our chunks of bread and cheese. I had one left over.

"Who's not here? Is someone missing?"

It was not difficult to obtain a head count with all hands pressed tightly against one another on the floor.

"The Captain," said the cook. "He's in his cabin."

I took my brother's plate and stepped over one or two men to get to Joshua's door. I knocked. No answer. I looked down at the men, but they seemed to have eyes only for their grub. I pulled the door open against a man's leg and squeezed inside.

"Joshua?"

It was dark, but I could see my brother's hand reach to the lamp and turn up the flame. His face was wild with fright.

I set the meal on his chart table and strode over to his berth.

"What's the matter?"

"My feet," he said, "my damned feet."

He lay back upon his pillow and folded his arms over his face while I pulled the covers aside.

"They look fine. What's wrong?"

"The scurvy is in my feet. They're too sore, I can't walk."

"But there are no blemishes."

"There don't have to be. I've checked the damned book. Don't you think I would have checked the damned book?"

"How do you know it's the scurvy? You haven't been around anyone who's infected. Certainly not in your bare feet."

"Cable. I caught a splinter outside Cable's berth. I hadn't dressed yet."

"What about your teeth?"

"They hurt."

My brother looked at me imploringly, as if begging for something. I knew what it was.

"I'll go forward and get the medicine."

"No. Send the Master. Don't go yourself."

"I'll get it."

"Number 8. Make sure you get number 8."

I pushed back into the stench of the officers' mess and faced the men. What had I gotten myself into? I knew it was impossible to go forward. Contraction of the disease would be certain. But my brother ... I found myself at quite a loss.

"The Captain wants some of the medicine brought back here," I said, and I must have been quite pale.

Most of the men stopped eating and looked up. None seemed too surprised. A few exchanged knowing glances and returned to their meals.

"You can't go forward," said Torvill, "you'll infect us all."

"Unless you stay there," guffawed a voice.

"I'll go forward and get it," said the Master and rose to his feet.

"If you bring it for the Captain, you'll bring it for us all," said Torvill.

"We should all have some for prevention."

"We only started with the one bottle," I said, "and we don't know how much is left."

"However much it is, we'll split it equally. We'll all be sick before long."

"If you want some, then you come along as well," the Master said.

Torvill stopped chewing for a moment. "All right," he said, and set down his plate.

"What is this nonsense," said the Cook. "It's not safe for anyone to go, let alone three of you."

"Say that again when your teeth are falling out."

"We'll scrub down before we come back inside," said the Master. He took three napkins and passed one to each of us, then took up a lantern and the three of us went forward.

"Mind you don't bring those clothes back in," said the cook.

We tied the napkins over our noses and mouths and crossed the deck against the gale. The *Turtle* was headed up into the growing swells. The icy rain fell in cold sheets.

*How soft the breeze from those island trees
Now the ice is far astern
And them native maids in them island glades
Is awaiting our return
Even now their big black eyes look out
Hoping some fine day to see
Our baggy sails running 'fore the gales
Rolling down to Old Maui.*

The Master rapped on the foc'sle door. We waited a moment or two, looked at one another expectantly, then pushed the door open. The Master held the lantern up and peered in.

"What are you waiting for?" said Torvill. "Let's get it over with."

"You keep your own counsel, Torvill."

The Master crept inside, and Torvill pushed his way past. I squeezed in and closed the door against the cold and the rain outside.

"Hello?"

A single sickly whale oil lamp was burning. Five men lay heaped upon one another on the musty wooden floor, and they were dead, their bodies bloated with the scurvy.

Torvill and the Master looked at one another. Torvill went to a cubby of bottles and peered in.

Here and there were scraps of food on the floor. A rotten shred of whalemeat. Empty water tins. The dead men all stared at the ceiling, their eyes dried and discolored, their faces strangely quiescent. I knelt beside old Nash, the helmsman, and looked into the dead face. I pulled a blanket over his body.

Just then we heard a sound from the forward compartment. The Master led the way with the lantern, and we rounded the corner, bringing bright flickering light into a pitch dark room, and a man on the floor threw up an arm to shade his eyes. The hand was mottled with gray lumps.

"Robbins!"

We all stepped back. The leper squinted into the lantern.

"Who's there?"

"It's me," said the Master. "And Torvill, and Han."

"Don't be too loud." Robbins turned away, uncorked a bottle and put it to the lips of a man on the floor. Two others were nearby. "We four are the only ones left now."

We exchanged excited glances at the sight of the bottle.

Robbins turned his full face toward us. A smile crinkled over his twisted features; the lantern light shone on one eye covered in a gray film. Robbins shook and hissed with soft, raspy laughter.

"You've come for this, haven't you?" He corked the bottle. "Sooner or later, an officer always realizes that he's mortal. And then he must quit the sea. He can no longer command."

The Master squatted down to the floor and examined the dying crewman. Then he looked at Robbins. "You seem quite well yourself," he said.

Robbins grinned again, his flaky skin protruding like scales. "How is he?"

"How is who?"

"Your Captain."

"He's well," I said.

Robbins laughed again, then suddenly became grim and said:

"He's mortal."

Torvill stepped forward. "Let's have that bottle, Robbins. We'll bring it straight back."

"Send the Captain up here, where he belongs. Tell him he can keep his rank."

"How much medicine is left?" asked the Master.

"I pray enough for these three to see land."

"Boyle there looks dead already," said Torvill. "And these other two can't possibly last the night. Listen to their breathing."

"Perhaps," said Robbins, "we should cast them to the sharks now."

"Perhaps we should. Instead of them festering right in our very laps."

"Or perhaps we should throw you over, Torvill, that you might not be so offended by the sick."

"Gentlemen," broke in the Master, and slapped the floor with his hand for attention. "The Captain's ordered that the medicine be sent aft. Now hand it over, Robbins."

Robbins stared with his dead eye straight through the Master, picked up the medicine, and slipped it inside his ragged shirt.

"It's no good anyway," said Torvill, "with his rotten leper flesh oozing all over it."

"Go back to your Captain's rotten scurvy flesh."

I started to respond to the insult, but a flash caught my eye. Torvill had snatched a capstan bar and sprang at Robbins. The wooden club rang like a churchbell when it bounced off Robbins' skull, and Robbins threw his head back and howled like a wolf. Torvill raised the bar for another blow, but Robbins shot out an arm and clenched it, tore it away from Torvill. Torvill covered his head and scrambled around the corner into the other room.

"Damned lunatic!" shouted the Master, and doused the lantern. The last thing I saw was Robbins, one eye gray and the other blazing red, holding the bar aloft with his skinny, lumpy arms, mouth gaping with his animal wail. The master snatched my arm and pulled me through the dark. The door slammed open and the three of us tumbled into the rain as a blade of lightning flashed, the door pounded shut, and the deck shuddered as Robbins hammered his weapon inside.

"Go below," the Master told Torvill, "and bring a musket."

"It's about time." Torvill ran aft, his footsteps slapping the wet deck.

The Master took me by both shoulders. "Go to quarters and stay there."

He disappeared down the port gangway.

“Quarters,” I repeated to myself. They were going to kill the fool Robbins. Kill the fool. Like killing a baby whale; there’s hardly enough blubber to make it worth the while, and so where is the prize? Let the baby grow. Don’t shoot at Robbins while he’s holding the bottle of life.

I pulled the napkin back over my nose and went back inside. Robbins was there in the anteroom, still clutching the capstan bar. The whale oil lamp was dying.

“Get out of here, Han,”

“They’re going to kill you, Robbins. Give me the medicine.”

“Come and get it.”

His dried fingers held the bar like tree roots around a rock.

Robbins looked at me for a moment, and satisfied that I wasn’t about to attack him, went to the lamp, took it down, and carried it into the other room. I followed.

He knelt beside the three sick men and uncorked the bottle.

“Robbins, please. Others need it too.”

“Get out of here, Han.”

My mind spun. “What about yourself? Surely you must have the scurvy too. Save some medicine for yourself.”

Robbins laughed, like a little girl’s squeal of delight. “My headstone is already carved, Han.”

He put the bottle to the lips of the first man. There was only a draught or two at the most left in the bottle. The throat swallowed. Robbins moved to the second man.

“Robbins, please, just the last bit for my brother.”

“The medicine can’t cure the Captain,” hissed Robbins. “His ailment is of a different nature. Just as it can’t cure leprosy.”

He looked at me, winked his dead eye, and grinned with his black teeth. A wave of nausea washed through my gut, and as Robbins lifted the bottle from the lips of the last man, the final drop fell out; the medicine was gone, my brother was sick, the ship lurched and swayed, the whale-oil stank, and the disgusting man at my feet rasped with laughter. I whirled as the retchings came up, and half ran, half stumbled to the door.

I burst upon the watery deck and landed at someone’s feet just as the *Turtle* plunged through a mighty swell that drenched us all. He gripped a cocked musket, and behind him were all hands. It was my brother, the Captain! Joshua put his foot against the door and smashed it open.

A hatch on the foredeck slammed open and Robbins was there, against the white spray in the cloudy moonlight, lashed by shimmering bands of rain. Robbins began to sing, and danced with his skinny gray arms out to his sides. The Captain put the musket to his shoulder and fired.

Robbins jerked and fell on his back. Joshua threw the spent musket aside, and everyone rushed for the gangway up to the foredeck. Robbins pulled himself back to his feet, nearly fell as another mighty surge knocked the *Turtle* aside, and tumbled back to the middeck.

And now the spray from the surge fell upon us. The powerful wash tore across the decks, snatching our feet from under us and dashing us against the bulwarks. Robbins sprang for the rigging and started up.

Torvill appeared with another musket. Captain Millen yanked it away from him.

“Kill him!”

He fired again but missed. Robbins reached for the lookout's platform and pulled himself up.

Robbins threw back his head with laughter as the lightnings flashed again. Men sprang into the nettings and streamed aloft, and when I looked up I saw them close in upon the horrid man like a fist. Again he lifted his voice in song, loud and clear, the last words he would ever sing, as the first of the men reached the platform, and fingers grasped the wooden planks in the rain:

*The quick and the brave have been chosen
For they are condemned to grow old;
'Tis a twist too strange for fortune's folly
Only Destiny could be so bold.*

And he plunged with his hands in front of him, his tatters flapping in the wind. The men stopped climbing to watch him fall. Robbins struck the deck and skidded into the storm netting as the *Turtle* lurched against a swell. The decks washed and Robbins was gone.

Joshua lowered the musket. The men clung silently throughout the rigging, dotted black against the steely sky.

"Secure that netting," said the Captain at last. The order was obeyed and I watched the men climb carefully down to the deck. They huddled in their jackets and shuffled quickly into the aft quarters. My brother and I were alone on deck with the helmsman.

"Keep her heading up."

"Ay-ay, sir."

"Get below, Han."

I turned and waited for him to follow me down, but he did not. The Captain stood on the poop, arms folded, staring ahead into the weather. I went below.

The sun broke upon the sharp green peaks of Maui as the *Turtle*, still in the shadow of the storm, raised the reef and dropped anchor in the leaden bay. The shoreline flashed with the dancing colors of the native girls, and the waving fronds beckoned us ashore. I looked upon the other ships anchored around us, and they were all gray and lifeless as our own. To port a pallid detail lowered a whaleboat to bring life-giving fruits and unspoiled water aboard. I marveled that I was among the survivors, for I had not been brave, nor strong; yet many of our fallen brothers had been both. I wondered how many other crewmen in the harbor were alive not through fortitude, but like me, through fortune's misdirected folly. And I wondered how many of them knew it.

Hanford Millen
Lahaina, Sandwich Islands, 1823