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For Sandy and David  
who will someday sail  
to Miquelon



## The Spences and the Ship

ONE wind-whipped summer day in the year 1735, a black-hulled ship came storming in from seaward toward the mountain walls which guard the southern coast of Newfoundland. All the canvas she could carry was bent to her tall spars, and she was closing on the rock-ribbed coast at such a furious pace that it seemed inevitable she must meet destruction in the surf that boiled and spouted at the foot of the sea cliffs.

Just over the horizon astern of her a squadron of French men-of-war was straining to overhaul the fleeing ship. Aboard the Frenchmen a hundred cannon were primed and loaded, waiting for the moment when the massed fire of the squadron could rip the black ship into fragments.

The fleeing vessel, sardonically named *Black Joke* by her master, John Phillip, was one of the most notorious privateers in Atlantic waters, and for two years French merchant shipping bound for Canada had suffered her plundering. But on this summer day the vengeful French naval squadron had almost trapped her off the island of St. Pierre, and now she was running for her life.

In the waist of the privateer stood a young man named Jonathan Spence. Two months earlier he had been an ordinary seaman on an English ship which had crossed the Atlantic to fish on the cod-rich grounds of the eastern Newfoundland coast. Spence's ship had been lying anchored in Acquaforte Harbour one day when the dawn light revealed the presence of a newcomer, a slim black vessel, lying across the narrow harbor entrance and commanding the anchored fishermen with her long brass cannon.

There was consternation in the fishing fleet as the officers recognized the infamous *Black Joke*. The captains had no alternative but to obey Phillip's "request" that their crews be mustered on the decks. And they could do nothing but look on miserably as he addressed the crews, promising good wages and high adventure in his service.

Phillip's audience was attentive. In those days the crews of fishing ships were little better than slaves. And so, when Phillip's bully-boat rowed away from the fleet, it carried the pick of the young and able fishermen; and amongst them was young Spence.

Jonathan Spence enjoyed his service with Phillip even though it was a life of hard sailing and occasionally of hard fighting. But Jonathan had a great desire to be his own master. He had already fallen in love with Newfoundland, wild and formidable as it was with its great inland mountains, sea-racked shores, and dark spruce forests. And he had made up his mind to settle on the island, never to return to England where starvation and a serf's lot awaited him.

But a settler's life on the much-frequented eastern shores was a precarious business at best, for the owners and officers of the English fishing ships considered the settlers to be intruders into their fishing preserves and the conflict between the two groups was often bloody.

Things were different on the south coast of Newfoundland. Here the deep fiords and coves were so well protected by off-lying reefs and shoals that fishing vessels seldom ventured near them. Only

few men knew the secrets of that coast—and Captain John Phillip was one of them.

His knowledge served him well on the day *Black Joke* fled from the French squadron. He held *Black Joke* upon her course even though the green hands in his crew were sure he was taking them all to their deaths. The massive sea-cliffs seemed close enough to touch, when suddenly a cleft opened in the rock wall ahead. It was a mere slit in the face of the mountains, but the black ship drove unhesitatingly into it and in an instant had vanished from the face of the gray ocean.

The slit, no more than a hundred yards wide, twisted and turned between thousand-foot walls until it ended abruptly in an almost circular harbor, half a mile in diameter. The harbor looked rather like the crater of an extinct volcano, except that its floor was sunk under deep water and the steep surrounding slopes were clothed in forests. Tumbling down from the high rim were several bright rivers, and, almost in the center of the crater, were two small islets between which ships could moor in perfect safety from any wind that blew.

Even before *Black Joke* had dropped anchor, Jonathan Spence had decided that this secret place was where he would make his home.

Jonathan had worked well during his time with Phillip and so, after vainly trying to persuade the young man to stay with the ship, the pirate skipper granted his request that he be set ashore. Phillip also provided Jonathan with tools, arms, and ammunition, and with sufficient stores to support him through his first winter. Three days later *Black Joke* sailed, and Jonathan was left alone in the harbor which Phillip had named Ship Hole.

*Black Joke* returned in the following spring to find a well-built cabin on the shore of Ship Hole and a healthy but exceedingly lonely Jonathan Spence rowing anxiously out to greet the pirate ship.

Jonathan's loneliness did not last long. A few days earlier *Black Joke* had captured a vessel bound for Quebec with a cargo of unwilling young women from France who were destined to become wives to the garrison soldiers in the citadel. The young women had begged Phillip to set them ashore in some free land and he had promised to take them to New England. But while the vessel lay in Ship Hole Jonathan caught the eye of one black-eyed lass who was ready and willing to join this sturdy young man in building a life in the Newfoundland wilderness. Phillip married the pair of them before he sailed, and from that day onward Ship Hole was never without the sound of human voices.

Two centuries after Ship Hole received its first inhabitants, a man who was Jonathan's namesake stepped out into the spring sunshine from the doorway of a two-story frame house overlooking the harbor. This latter-day Jonathan Spence was a square-built man in his forties, ruddy-skinned, and with shaggy brown hair shadowing his deep-set blue eyes. He looked what he was—a man of the sea.

On this spring day he gazed out over a familiar scene. The sun came streaming down over the surrounding cliffs and glinted from the white-painted walls of a dozen almost identical wooden homes which straggled along the south slopes. Ship Hole stood revealed as a typical Newfoundland fishing village, with its handful of houses facing the waterfront; its small square church, and the more imposing and concentrated cluster of buildings and wharves belonging to the local merchant. There were no roads in Ship Hole or vehicles either. Narrow, twisting paths connected the various parts of the settlement; but the sea was the real highway, and the whole life of the inhabitants depended on the sea. It was to the sea that the Ship Hole men went for their livelihood, for they were all fishermen, and it was by the sea that the only communications with the outside world were maintained. Inland lay hundreds of miles of mountain plateau and caribou barrens across which only the local Micmac Indians could make their way.

It was to the sea that Jonathan Spence's thoughts turned as he looked out toward the twin islets, between which a cluster of five schooners lay closely moored. They were two-masted fishing vessels

“laid-up” now, as they had been all winter, with their sailing gear stowed away on shore, so that they looked sleepy and abandoned in the bright spring sun. But there was one amongst them which stood out from her sisters as a ballerina would stand out in a crowd of folk dancers. Her slim, black-painted hull had a grace and delicacy which was unique amongst the rough-built, hard-working fishing ships. Although she was too far away for Jonathan to be able to read the name painted in gold along each bow, he knew it as well as his own. She was the *Black Joke*; and she belonged to him.

A vessel called *Black Joke* had belonged to each succeeding generation of Spences since the day when the first Jonathan came to Ship Hole in Phillip’s pirate ship, and into the present *Black Joke* had gone all the experience and knowledge gained from generations of seamen and shipwrights.

Work on her had begun six years earlier, when Jonathan and his brother Kent had gone far back into the country to search out the trees destined for her timbers. It had taken weeks to find the right trees, to fell them and limb them, and to roll the logs down to the nearest rivers. In the spring the two men had rafted the chosen logs and towed them out to the coast where a trading schooner had picked them up and brought them on to Ship Hole.

Since there was no sawmill to do the work, Jonathan and Kent had to shape the timbers by hand, using axes and adzes exactly as the first Jonathan Spence had done. Planks to sheathe the timbers, two inches thick, ten to fifteen feet long, and often a foot wide, had to be whip-sawed out of solid logs—also by hand.

All that summer the timbers and piles of planks were left to season, and the following autumn the ship began to build. She took shape on a piece of relatively level ground between the house and the beach. Day after day the two men worked with their shipwright’s tools, using only a hand-carved model of the ship for guide and plans.

They worked in any and every kind of weather; in bright sun, in snowstorms, and in blinding rain. By spring the frame was up and planked, and one fine day the ship was ready for the launch. The whole population of Ship Hole was on hand to watch and help as the wedges were knocked out from under her and she slid down wooden ways greased with rotted cod livers, and met the water with a mighty splash.

Among those who watched the launch, none was prouder than two small boys who shouted with enthusiasm when the vessel built by their two fathers rode off into the harbor as light and lovely as a gull. Peter Spence, who was Jonathan’s son, was so carried away that he ran heedlessly down the way slipped on the cod oil, and shot out into the water in the wake of the schooner as if he was also being launched. His companion and first cousin, Kye Spence, Kent’s only son, thereupon distinguished himself by throwing the first object he could find at Peter to help him keep afloat. Unfortunately the first thing he found was a stone net-weight. The stone was no help to the floundering Peter, but Kye’s action gave rise to such a burst of laughter from the onlookers that the lad rushed home in tears and hid in bed. Here he was shortly joined by a chastened Peter, half-drowned and half-frozen, and wrapped in so many woolen petticoats belonging to his mother that he looked more like a rag doll than like a boy.

The launching of *Black Joke* was something the two children would remember all their lives. It was a lucky launching, and luck was with the ship.

When she had been fitted out and rigged, she sailed from Ship Hole with Jonathan as master and Kent as mate, and with a crew of four other local fishermen. She made her first fishing voyage to the far-off coasts of Labrador, and she was gone three months. When she returned, it was with a full cargo of salt cod in her hold. She had made a “bumper voyage.” She had also proved herself to be one of the best and ablest sailers in the entire Labrador fishing fleet which numbered several hundred schooners.

The following year the brothers sailed her far out in the Atlantic to fish on the Grand Banks. Here she showed her worth to some of the best fishing vessels in the world, the big Banks schooners out of

Gloucester and Lunenburg. Small as she was—she was only 80 tons as compared to the 200-ton Yankee and Canadian Bankers—she was able to carry sail in weather which forced the bigger ships to heave-to and if there was another ship on the Banks that year who could catch her when she had a favoring breeze, *Black Joke* never met her.

On her first two voyages she made a considerable local reputation as a fast and lucky ship, but on her third voyage she made a name for herself right across the Atlantic. During the autumn of her third year afloat she made a charter voyage from St. John's, the capital of Newfoundland, to Oporto in Portugal with a full cargo of dried cod. Sailed by her two owners and a four-man crew, she made the passage clean across the western ocean in twelve days—a time not many big steamships could easily surpass. It was a passage that old John Phillip himself would have envied, and it made *Black Joke*'s name famous wherever sailing men got together.

As Jonathan looked across the harbor at her on this fine spring day, he should have been happy, but in fact he was deeply troubled. The great depression of the '30's was in full swing, and hard times had come to Newfoundland. Though the seas were still full of codfish, markets and money seemed to have vanished. Fishermen could hardly give away their catch, let alone sell it. In every outport it was the same story—near starvation, and growing debts to the local merchants upon whom the fishermen were dependent for the miserable rations of flour, molasses, and tea which had now become their staple diet.

Few of the merchants were generous men, and fewer still believed in charity. In Ship Hole four of the five schooners belonging to the place had already passed into the hands of the local merchant, Simon Barnes, as part payment of their ex-owner's debts. *Black Joke* still remained free because the Spences had always fought shy of the merchant. The Spences had always paid their own way, for they had seen how easy it was to fall into debt to the merchant for food, clothing, or for fishing gear—and how difficult it was to escape again. They had observed that many outport people eventually came to be working for the merchant rather than for themselves.

Consequently, the Spence family bought little from Barnes, and sold even less to him. They preferred the adventurous alternative of sailing to St. John's each autumn with their summer catch of cod and selling it there. When they sailed home again, they would bring with them most of the supplies they would need in the year ahead.

The independence of the Spences did not endear them to Simon Barnes. Not only was he unable to make a profit on them, but their example was a dangerous one, for it tended to spread to other fishing families.

Jonathan knew perfectly well how Barnes felt, and he was worried. Ever since his brother Kent had been lost at sea during the annual seal hunt two years earlier, Jonathan had been hard put to keep things going. *Black Joke* was still free of debt, but Jonathan knew that unless he could find work for her, work that would bring in cash money, he would eventually lose her. He had thought of making a voyage to Labrador or to the Banks fishery—but what was the use of that when he would be unable to sell his fish for even enough to pay the cost of grub for his crew? He had thought of risking *Black Joke* in a voyage to the ice after seals, but the loss of his brother in a vessel even larger than *Black Joke* made him realize that this would be too foolhardy a venture. For a time he had hoped to be able to charter the ship to one of the big St. John's fish merchants for a spring voyage to carry salt cod to the Caribbean. With her reputation for fast sailing, she ought to have had no trouble finding charters; but the merchants stick together, and Barnes had persuaded the merchants in St. John's not to give *Black Joke* an opportunity.

Jonathan was still staring at his ship, and puzzling over her future—and his own—when the door behind him swung open and he was almost bowled over as the two boys of the household, Peter and Kye, came bursting through the doorway wrestling fiercely with one another. Quick as a cat, Jonathan

recovered himself and with one swift lunge grabbed each boy by the back of his homespun jersey.

~~They were an oddly assorted pair. Peter was lean and lanky with a wild mop of sandy hair and piercing blue eyes. His face was crimson with wind and sun, except for a thick band of freckles across his nose and cheekbones. By nature he was an enthusiast, often reckless, and usually heedless of the troubles he was storing up for himself.~~

Kye was of a different build: heavy-set and chunky with lank black hair and a face as brown and round as that of an Indian, which was not surprising, for his mother, who had died when he was born, had been a Micmac from the nearby Indian settlement of Conne River. Kye was of a different nature from his cousin, tending to be more stolid and cautious, though he had a droll wit and an easy and engaging smile.

“By the Harry,” Jonathan said when the lads had stopped struggling. “Is it bear cubs I have in the house—or b’ys? Answer me, ye whelps, or I’ll skin ye and find out!”

He gave them both an affectionate shake that almost loosened their heads from their shoulders. Still panting, Peter wriggled in his father’s heavy grasp.

“Leave be, sorr, please,” he begged. “ ’Twas just that Kye said *Black Joke* would have the dry rot afore we ever got around to givin’ her an overhaul, and I told him ’twas *he* had the dry rot—in his head!”

Jonathan chuckled and released them. They stood before him looking sheepish. Good sturdy lads for their years, he thought to himself. It’s a sad thing that Kent can’t see his own boy now.

“Well, ye meant nothin’ by it, Kye,” he said aloud. “And ye may not be so far off the mark. The truth of it is I can see nothin’ for the ship to do; no work at all. Still...that’s no reason to neglect her. And broodin’ and thinkin’ won’t keep her fit. It’s past time we turned-to and got her into shape. Com on then, ye pair of connors! Down to the stage with ye and we’ll do some proper work.”



## A Merchant Makes a Plan

FOLLOWED by the boys, Jonathan picked his way down the path toward the shore. It wound steeply between immense gray boulders that had scaled off the surrounding cliffs in ages past.

Each family owned its own stretch of beach from which the business of the cod fishery was conducted. A rough shanty, called the “fish store” or simply the “store,” stood near high-tide mark and contained fishing and sailing gear, supplies of salt for making salt cod and, in season, piles of dry salt fish ready for market. Laid out haphazardly to shoreward of the stores were the drying flakes: flimsy platforms of spruce poles covered with boughs. On these the split, salted cod were laid to dry and cured during the warm summer days. Poking out into the harbor from each store was a rough-built dock of small logs decked with spruce poles. This was the “stage,” where the fish were landed and where the men and boys gutted and split them.



One of the Spence dories—a flat-bottomed, high-sided boat about sixteen feet long—was moored to the end of their stage and while Peter and his father collected brooms, scrapers, brushes, paint, and tar from the store, Kye climbed nimbly down into the dory and began bailing out the accumulated rainwater. After loading the gear into the boat the others joined Kye, and the two boys took up the double set of oars and began to row toward the islets. They rowed standing up, leaning hard against the oars so that the narrow little boat leapt forward and in a few minutes was bumping her bow against *Black Joke's* side.

Apart from a weekly visit to pump out her bilges, the ship had been deserted since the preceding autumn. When Kye pushed back the slider over the companion hatch leading down into her forepeak, he was greeted by a gust of damp, foul air.

“Whew!” he said. “Seems like we must have left half the fish in her last fall.”

“Open her up, b’ys, open her up!” said Jonathan. “Let her breathe and she’ll soon be sweet again.”

The boys jumped to obey, opening ports and hauling off hatch covers to let the spring air into the dark lower spaces. Meanwhile Jonathan walked aft and, standing with his hands on her big wheel, let his eyes wander over his ship. He was seeing her, not as she was now, dirty and unkempt, but as she would be when she put to sea again.

She was not a big vessel—about seventy feet long on the deck line, if you did not count the big bowsprit which jutted out for another dozen feet. Just behind the bowsprit was a homemade anchor windlass and just aft of this again was the curved hood of the companionway leading down into the dark little forepeak where the crew lived and slept. The forepeak was like a cave, lit only dimly by a single round deadlight set into the deck overhead. It contained six narrow bunks in two tiers of three, a triangular deal table between the bunks, and a rusty stove. Apart from the deadlight, the only other illumination was supplied by an ancient brass lamp which swung in gimbals so that it would always stay upright no matter how much the vessel rolled or pitched.

Aft of the forepeak was the main fishhold, a cavernous black space stretching from the foot of the foremast to abaft the foot of the mainmast, a distance of nearly thirty feet. Dark as pitch, it stank of bilge water, salt fish, and wet wood.

Astern of the fishhold was the engine room, a tiny hold just big enough to take the old-fashioned single-cylinder gasoline engine which was the ship’s auxiliary power. This “bullgine,” as it was called, was twenty-five years old—an antique—but *Black Joke* was lucky to have even this aged monstrosity, for most of the coast schooners could afford no engine of any kind.

In the stern of the ship was a tiny cubbyhole known as the “master’s cabin” but this was only a courtesy title for it was so small and damp that the captain never used it, preferring to bunk and eat with the crew in the forepeak.

The helmsman stood right out in the open; and in heavy weather, salt spray burst over him with every sea that came aboard. As Jonathan stood at the wheel now, he could almost feel the spray in his face and, looking up at the bare spars, he could imagine a full press of canvas bellying to the gale as he had so often seen it on *Black Joke's* long sea passages.

The thought that he might have to part with this ship, which he loved next to his own family, struck him with intolerable pain. Shaking his head to put the thought out of mind, he left the wheel and went forward to where the boys had already lit the galley stove in the forepeak and had placed a pot of pitch to soften on its top.

Once started, the boys and the man worked with a will. Equipped with a sharp, three-sided scraper, Peter was soon swarming over the vessel’s upperworks, scraping away the peeling paint and laying bare the clean spruce beneath; and Kye worked in the engine room, oiling the old motor and repairing the bilge pump. Meantime Jonathan, equipped with a caulking mallet and a wad of tar-

smelling oakum, was busy caulking the deck seams. As he finished each seam, he sent Peter below to fetch the pot of hot pitch, and then he carefully poured a fine stream of it into the seams, over the oakum. A little wind came curling around in the quiet harbor and the smell of oakum, pitch, and wood tingled in the nostrils.

All three were so engrossed in the pleasurable task of getting the ship ready for sea that they did not even look up when the *bumpu-bump-bump* of a single-cylinder engine came echoing across the still waters. A big open motor skiff had cast off from the elaborate wharf in front of Simon Barnes's store and warehouses, and was bearing down on the cluster of moored schooners. Standing up at the tiller was Simon Barnes himself, a lump of a man who had once been as powerfully built as an ox, but who had gone soft with many years of easy living. His jowls were whitened with a week-old beard, but above his craggy nose his black eyes still shone as bright and hard as those of a gull.

The motorboat came alongside *Black Joke* and Barnes pulled the switch to cut the motor just as Jonathan looked up. Barnes waved a hand.

"Morning, Skipper. Fine day for boat work, ain't it now?"

At the sound of the voice, Peter popped his head out of the engine room where he had been helping Kye to clear the suction of the bilge pump. His cheerful face hardened into a look of dislike as he recognized the merchant.

"Kye!" he called softly. "That ole dogfish Barnes's come alongside. Stand by to repel boarders!"

Pirate phrases and pirate thinking came naturally to both boys. They relished the ancient family association with Captain John Phillip, and the fact that the first *Black Joke* had been one of the most famous pirate vessels in Atlantic waters. Kye's reaction to Peter's challenge was immediate.

"All right," he whispered back. "You sneak out on deck and slip the pump hose through the scupper where he's got his boat. Give a kick on the deck when she's all set...I'll do the rest."

When Barnes hailed him Jonathan answered politely, for it is in the nature of the outport people to be polite—even to those they do not like.

"It's a good enough day, Mr. Barnes...for any kind of honest work," he replied slowly.

There was just the slightest extra emphasis on the word "honest," but if Barnes noticed it, he paid no attention. He seemed determined to be amiable.

"Yiss," he said. "A fine day, indeed. Though it do seem a pity, the time it takes a man to overhaul his vessel, and no work waitin'. What you plan to do with her this summer, Skipper Spence?"

Jonathan answered with calculated vagueness.

"Well now. That do depend. Might be I'll take a voyage to the Banks. Then might be, again, I won't." He stooped and deliberately began to pour a stream of hot pitch into a seam, as if he assumed the conversation to be at an end.

Barnes was irritated by the rebuff, but he kept his temper.

"These do be right hard times, Skipper," he said affably. "However, your name's as good as any on the coast. A man would never lose on you. Anything you need for fittin' out, now, you let me know. Anything at all. You come alongside t'store and let me know. I likes to see a man who don't give up easy. Yiss, sorr, I likes to give a hand to a man...."

He was suddenly cut short. With a gruesome gurgle a big rubber hose that had eased its way through a scupper hole under *Black Joke's* rail, directly over the motorboat, began to jet a black and stinking flow that pulsed with every ounce of pressure Kye could exert on the rotary bilge pump. The solid mass of bilge water caught Barnes just below the chin. Staggered more by surprise than by the strength of the jet, he lost his balance and fell on one knee so that the water hit him square on the side of the face. His white stubble-beard turned black with old bilge oil and, as he opened his mouth to yell his anger, the filthy water trickled into it and almost gagged him.

From the deck Jonathan's stentorian bellow echoed across the harbor.

“PETER. KYE. LAY OFF THAT PUMP!”

~~The jet of water slowed to a trickle and then stopped. Kye turned to his cousin with wide-open eyes.~~

“We got him, Peter! We got him square! Only I guess now *we’ll* git it too!” he muttered.

“Worth it, a million times,” Peter replied; but there was a quaver of uncertainty in his voice.

On deck, Jonathan was leaning solicitously over the rail.

“Now that’s a turrible thing to happen, Mr. Barnes,” he said. “The b’ys never know’d you was alongside. I’ll whop them good for bein’ so careless.”

Barnes had no answer that he could trust himself to deliver. Scrambling to his feet he bent and spun the flywheel of the engine and, as the boat got under way, he deliberately turned his back upon *Black Joke* and spat, with feeling, into the harbor. It may only have been, of course, that he was trying to get the taste of bilge water out of his mouth....

As Barnes’s boat pattered down the harbor, Jonathan called the boys on deck. They came slowly dragging their feet and refusing to look at him. When they were only a yard away he said in his sternest voice of command:

“Look up, ye pair of tom-cods! Look UP, I say!”

Reluctantly they raised their eyes; only to find Jonathan standing with his legs widespread, and a grin on his broad face that no amount of self-control could master. Even as they watched, the grin spread wider and the big man slapped himself on the stomach and broke into a rolling bellow of uncontrollable laughter.

“Oh, ye young devils!” he sputtered when he could talk again. “Ye should have seen his *face*...” But here a new wave of laughter overwhelmed him. The boys, knowing Jonathan of old, realized that there would be no sore seat for either of them and they relaxed, joining their mirth to his.

As he cut his engine to come alongside his own wharf, Simon Barnes heard the echo of that laughter and his fists clenched. He knew very well that the incident would become a story to be told against him for three hundred miles along the coast. Nevertheless, as he threw the mooring line to one of his clerks and climbed ashore, Barnes displayed no sign of the anger he felt, for he had good reason to believe the Spence family would soon have little enough to laugh about.

It had been no casual visit he had paid to the *Black Joke* that day. His visit had been prompted by the contents of a letter which had arrived the previous night from St. Pierre, one of the three small islands still owned by France (and the last of her once-mighty possessions in North America) which lie less than twenty miles off the south coast of Newfoundland.

St. Pierre, a treeless, rocky island usually shrouded in fog, was a free port, which is to say that foreign goods could be imported and exported without payment of customs duties. As a result, it had been the center of a smuggling business for two centuries.

The smuggling had always been a local affair until prohibition was enforced in the United States in the 1920’s. Then St. Pierre became the headquarters for an immense contraband liquor trade. Hundreds of thousands of cases of whiskey, brandy, and other spirits were landed there by big ships from Europe, for transshipment to rum-running vessels bound for the New England coast.

The resultant prosperity brought a building boom to St. Pierre, and most of the lumber required to satisfy it was supplied from the forests of Bay Despair, a multi-armed fiord which runs deep into the south coast of Newfoundland some thirty miles distant from Ship Hole. Control of this lumber trade fell into the hands of half a dozen south coast merchants, of whom Simon Barnes was one. This trade brought him into close contact with several prominent businessmen on St. Pierre, and the letter which led him to pay his disastrous visit to *Black Joke* was from one of these businessmen.

This letter had come wrapped in an oilskin packet carried in the inner pocket of a St. Pierre fisherman’s blouse. Two nights earlier this fisherman had landed his big sea-going motor dory on a

deserted beach three miles from Ship Hole. There he had gone ashore and, with the aid of a carefully shaded flashlight, had located a pile of lobster traps stored in a cleft in the rocks. He had no difficulty picking out one particular pot which was marked with a splash of red paint across one end. Thrusting his hand into this pot, he found a thin copper box under the anchor stone, and in this box he placed the letter. Then he climbed aboard his dory which he and a companion rowed until they were well off shore. Only then did they start their engine. When dawn broke, it found them innocently anchored over a cod bank several miles off the coast, busily jigging for fish.

That same morning a man named Millar from Ship Hole was rowing his own small dory out of the harbor mouth. Millar too was a fisherman, though he never caught much fish—a fact which did not prevent him from getting unlimited credit at Barnes's store. As Millar came opposite the uninhabited cove, he was quick to see that the topmost lobster pot of the pile was now crossways to the rest. Casually he beached his dory and, after a good look about him to make sure he was unobserved, he ambled up to the pile of pots. An hour later he was sidling through the door of Simon Barnes's private office to lay a small package on the merchant's desk.

This unofficial postal service between Ship Hole and St. Pierre was not only quicker than the official one, it was also much more private, which, considering the kind of correspondence it carried, was no doubt just as well.

The letter described the current situation regarding the rum-running trade from St. Pierre to the United States. For a long time the rum-runners had used mother ships sailing from St. Pierre to points outside American territorial waters (which extend three miles seaward from the shore). Here the mother ships would rendezvous with fast motorboats which would then load up with contraband and slip it ashore at unguarded places on the New England coast. As long as the mother ships remained outside United States waters, the authorities could not touch them. As for the motorboats, they were so fast the revenue vessels could not catch them at all. It had been an excellent system in its time, but now—so the writer of the letter explained—things had changed.

The United States government had begun to wage all-out war on the rum-runners. A number of high-speed navy torpedo boats had been pressed into service. In addition, agents had been planted in St. Pierre, equipped with short-wave transmitters with which they could notify the American authorities of the departure of suspicious vessels laden with liquor.

The result of these measures was to disrupt the trade. Several of the fast motorboats had already been captured. The departure of a mother ship from St. Pierre was now quickly known to the authorities, and these ships were so closely shadowed that they had no chance of approaching the United States coast in secrecy.

The situation was becoming desperate for the rum-runners. Their warehouses at St. Pierre bulged with tens of thousands of cases of contraband whiskey, representing a value of millions of dollars—if it could be delivered in the United States. New smuggling methods were needed, and so new methods had been invented. The smugglers had now concluded that where speed and power would no longer serve them, cunning would have to be substituted.

Now for generations big fleets of sailing schooners had put out each year from many New England and Nova Scotian ports to fish for cod on the Grand Banks. The sight of these comparatively slow sailing ships beating heavily homeward with their holds full of fish was a familiar one all along the Atlantic coast. These fishing schooners had never been used for large-scale smuggling attempts and no one ever suspected that they might be so used. The rum-runners had therefore decided that certain chosen schooners, mostly small two-masters, were now to be purchased and refitted for a new "trade." False bottoms were to be rigged in their fishholds, and they were to be given powerful diesel engines. By day, or in clear weather when there were patrol boats or aircraft about, these innocent-looking vessels would mosey along under sail alone. But at night, or when they had thick weather to

conceal them, they would proceed under the full power of their new engines.

~~When they sailed from St. Pierre, they would apparently be laden with salt cod, or even fresh fish—but this cargo would only be a thin cover, and under it the main holds would be filled with whiskey. To all intents and purposes the schooners would look like legitimate fishing vessels bound either for New England ports with fresh-caught cod, or for Caribbean waters with salt cod. In point of fact they would proceed to secret coves and harbors on the American coast and there deliver their illegal liquor cargoes.~~

The rum-runners naturally wished to buy the fastest schooners available for their new venture, and it was inevitable that they would have heard about *Black Joke*. So it was that the St. Pierre representative of one of the American smuggling syndicates undertook to arrange for her purchase, and wrote his good friend Simon Barnes about it. His letter concluded with these words:

...and so, my dear Barnes, we can make an offer of very high price for this schooner. I myself think perhaps ten thousand dollars. If this makes an interest to you I am delighted to hear, but I will tell you we must have quick possession. The vessel should be delivered into St. Pierre before the first of June.

There was no question about Barnes's being interested in the proposal! Ten thousand dollars was an immense fortune in those times and in that place. The fact that he did not own *Black Joke*, and therefore could not sell her, was unimportant. He was now determined to own her.

Having read the letter for the third time, Barnes went to his office window, as if to assure himself that *Black Joke* was still moored behind the islets. Since there was no employment for her that he knew about, he had not expected to see the Spences at work fitting her out. The sight of the activity aboard her was unsettling. He decided he had to know what was afoot, and it was this which prompted him to visit her in his motorboat.

At that time he had some thought of attempting to buy *Black Joke* from Jonathan Spence, even though he knew in his heart that Jonathan almost certainly would not sell her. But after the encounter with the bilge pump he gave up any ideas he might have had of trying to acquire her by fair means.

Bathed, and changed into clean clothes, he sat at his desk once more, slowly writing a reply to his friend in St. Pierre.



## The Dark Clouds Lighten

THE WEATHER remained fine throughout the following week, and work aboard *Black Joke* went forward rapidly. The upperworks soon glistened with fresh paint. The deck was tight again. The running rigging had been rove off and the vessel had begun to look eager and seagoing once more.

But now that the job was done, Jonathan again lapsed into a mood of dark depression. He was ready to work. The ship was ready. And there was no work for either of them. If nothing turned up in the next week or two, he knew he would be forced to go to Simon Barnes and ask for credit at the store; for his wife, Sylvia, had almost exhausted the supply of staple foods which Jonathan had brought in from St. John's the previous autumn. There was still lots of fish, both fresh and salt, but nobody can survive on fish alone, least of all the seven children who now lived in Jonathan's house. These included his own two girls and two boys, of whom Peter was the oldest, together with the three orphaned children of his brother Kent, led by Kye.

It was a quiet Saturday afternoon. Kye and Peter with some of the younger boys went up the harbor in a dory to try their luck fishing for sea trout. Sylvia, helped by her two young daughters, was finishing the dishwashing. Jonathan was sitting on the front steps, his eyes on *Black Joke* while he once again went carefully over all the possibilities for the employment of himself and his ship. He could think of nothing new. The only hope, and it was so faint as to be hardly worth considering, was that one or another of the St. John's fish dealers might have changed his mind about chartering *Black Joke* for a trip to Jamaica. Jonathan had laboriously written to these dealers again, begging them for work. An answer might be arriving on the weekly coast boat which was due that evening; and on this answer Jonathan pinned his final hopes.

Just before dusk the silent harbor came suddenly awake as a sonorous steam whistle sounded from beyond the entrance. The sound echoed and re-echoed from the surrounding cliffs. Doors burst open throughout the settlement as people began to pour out into the warm spring air. The children came first, racing wildly down the steep paths toward Barnes's wharf where the steamer would berth. Their elders followed more sedately, but by the time the little S. S. *Fortune* had poked her old-fashioned prow into the harbor proper, almost the entire population of Ship Hole was waiting for her on the dock. "Steamer time" was the great event of the week.

The mail was unloaded first and carried to the Simon Barnes store, for Simon was, amongst his many other roles, the postmaster.

Jonathan Spence was already waiting by the post office wicket.

"Letter for ye, Skipper," said Simon's clerk. "Come from St. John's, I do believe." He passed it across the counter.

Barnes, who had been standing nearby, quietly shifted his position so that he could watch as Jonathan moved away from the crowd, tore open the letter and studied its contents. Having had no formal education, Jonathan could not read easily, but he had no difficulty gathering the import of this

reply to his pleading letter to the St. John's merchants. As he thrust the envelope into his pocket and turned toward the door, his face mirrored the bitter disappointment he felt.

"A moment, Skipper Spence," Barnes called after the departing Jonathan. "Can ye spare a moment, Skipper?"

Jonathan hesitated; he was in no mood to talk to anyone, but there was still politeness to consider. Reluctantly he turned about.

Barnes was too astute to refer directly to the letter, whose contents he had already guessed. Assuming his most amiable and friendly attitude he invited Jonathan into his private office.

When Jonathan emerged half an hour later he walked with the spring of a young man. His face was alight with eagerness and he almost ran up the long slope to his own home where Sylvia and the elder children were sitting by lamplight. The children were doing their lessons under Sylvia's direction, for there was no school in Ship Hole.

Throwing open the door and striding into the big kitchen, Jonathan caught Peter and Kye such a whack on their shoulders that they very nearly collapsed over their spellers.

"Enough o' that bookwork," he cried. "They's man's work to be done, me sons! Three days hence *Black Joke* goes to sea, and I'll be needin' willin' hands."

Pandemonium broke loose and it was some time before things quieted down enough for Jonathan to explain.

"'Tis this way, ye see," he began. "Ye know Barnes has collared the timber trade 'twixt Bay Despair and St. Peter's Isle. Well now, it seems he's got a rush order for timber for the Frenchies, and his own schooners won't be fit to sail for a couple of weeks or more. He's stuck, ye see. Stuck good. Anyhow, he's chartered *Black Joke* to make the trip. *And* somethin' more. The old dogfish agreed to give us three more charter trips if I'd help him out of a hole by taking on this one. He balked over that but I told him straight I'd not shift a line until he gave his word, *and* wrote it out on paper too! And here it is."

He thrust a slip of paper under the lamplight and the family crowded around to spell out the words of the agreement written in the merchant's angular handwriting. Unable to contain himself, Peter grabbed the paper and began dancing around the big kitchen table.

"Ye're takin' Kye and me, Father," he cried. "Ye *said* ye were. I heard ye good!"

"Hush now," his father answered. "Ye'll have the whole settlement out to see what the row's about." He turned to his wife and, almost apologetically, continued:

"I know ye'll not like it, Sylvia. But ye see, I've no money for to hire a crew, and if I take a couple of men on shares, there'll be precious little left for ourselves at the end of the voyage. It's an aisy voyage. Inside-waters, the most of it, and a bare thirty mile of open crossin' to St. Peter's. I'll watch the weather sharp, and never sail unless it's fine. The b'ys are nigh onto bein' men, ye know. The three of us can work the ship. We *has* to do it—they's no other way."

Kye and Peter were closely watching Sylvia's face. The chance to make a voyage with Jonathan, not as deck boys or passengers, but as real crew, was almost too good to be believed. They hung anxiously over the table waiting for Sylvia's reply.

She smiled.

"There's no place to argue," she said gently. "The work must be done, and when there's not men enough, then b'ys must give a hand. Take a care, Jonathan; though I know ye will."

The Spence family was a long time going to bed that night. In celebration of their luck Sylvia made a huge lunch for them all, with pots of tea, and brown, crisp blueberry tarts. There was no longer any need to skimp.

Simon Barnes was also enjoying a celebration, though a much quieter one. Until nearly midnight he sat in his office, a bottle of contraband rum at his elbow, contemplating with increasing pleasure

the ease with which he had persuaded Jonathan Spence to stick his neck into a noose.

~~A few minutes before midnight there was a gentle knock on his door. Barnes turned down the flame of the oil lamp before he opened to the visitor. It was Millar. Barnes gave him a letter-packet.~~

“Out with you now,” he said. “The Frenchy’ll be in to pick this up at the lobster pots soon as the moon is down. If you miss him, I’ll have yer eyes for it!”

*Black Joke* duly sailed the following Tuesday morning. Her departure was a gala event. Every boy and most of the men in the settlement were on the beach to watch her go. The boys stared enviously at Peter and Kye as they nipped about the decks in answer to Jonathan’s orders.

There was no breeze in the harbor so they departed under power. Kye had been given charge of the engine and on his first try he managed to spin the huge flywheel by himself and get the bullgine started. As it belched blue smoke from its exhaust, Jonathan gave his orders in a ringing voice.

“Let go aft—run her up to half speed, Kye!”

Kye, who had been standing with his head out the engine-room companionway waiting for the order, ducked below and shoved the throttle forward. The old engine thumped and jumped on its bed. The propeller churned, and slowly *Black Joke* drew away from the wharf and pointed her shapely bow toward the harbor entrance. On the steps of the Spence house Sylvia lifted a big conch horn to her lip and blew a blast of farewell that was answered by Peter, pumping the handle of the ship’s foghorn.

The departure would have been perfect; except for one thing. *Black Joke* was carrying a passenger, and one of whom her crew did not approve. On Monday night Simon Barnes had sent a message to Jonathan announcing that he intended to accompany them on the voyage to supervise the loading and delivery of the cargo. It was a most distasteful prospect, but there was nothing Jonathan could do about it since his ship was under charter to the merchant.

Unfortunately for Barnes, he was no sailor. Even before the ship had cleared the quiet waters of the harbor and had begun to lift to the eternal swell of the open Atlantic, he disappeared from view to stretch himself out on one of the bunks in the forepeak.

“Fat ole landlubber!” Peter muttered to Kye as the two boys ran forward at Jonathan’s command to begin hauling up the headsails. “Hope we git a hurricane. Might make him sick enough to die.”

“Be no loss, I guess,” Kye replied.

“Sway her up, b’ys,” Jonathan barked from the wheel.

Slipping the halyard coil from the pinrack at the base of the mast, the two lads began hoisting the jib. It rattled and banged in the grip of a fresh southwesterly breeze that was beginning to blow, but they soon had it swayed-up and made fast, and the sheet hauled in so that the sail began to draw. The jumbo followed, then Kye went aft to take the wheel while Jonathan, helped by Peter, hauled up the big mainsail and the smaller foresail.

It was tough work for so small a crew, but all three were used to hard work and, though they were slower than a proper crew would have been, they managed the job in shipshape fashion. A few minutes after clearing the harbor entrance the engine was stopped and *Black Joke* was soon lying easily over on the starboard tack with all sails filled and drawing. The quartering breeze sent her boiling along at a good eight knots with a white bone at her teeth while to the north the great red coastal cliffs began to slide past.

It was a four-hour passage to the mouth of Bay Despair, but on such a bright spring day as this the boys could have wished it was forty hours. They stood alternate half-hour tricks at the wheel, for it was imperative that they should practice their helmsmanship. Steering a big schooner under all sail is not the easiest thing in the world. It is always necessary to keep a weather eye on the wind and the sails, watching for a shift, while at the same time trying to keep the vessel on a steady course.

Peter had been at the wheel about ten minutes when Jonathan came aft. He stood silent a moment looking back at the ship's wake.

"'Tis a funny thing, Peter," he said after a time. "There be no snakes at all in Newfoundland unless it happen there's one steerin' this here ship."



Surprised, Peter cast a quick glance astern. To his horror he saw that the ship's wake, instead of being an arrow-straight line, was more like a continuous letter S. He began spinning the big wheel to straighten out the wake, but the more he spun it, the more the ship swung alternately from one side to the other of her proper course.

"Steady, lad," said Jonathan, amused at his efforts. "Be aisy with her. Just keep her sails full and by, and cock your eye on them islands up ahead to give ye a course."

Relaxing, Peter did as he was told and after a few more minutes the feel of the ship began to settle into him. He began to find himself so exhilarated by her motion, and by the knowledge that the whole eighty tons of her was as responsive as a child to his command, that he was soon steering instinctively; and the wake had straightened up behind him.

Meanwhile Kye had gone down to the forepeak to stir up some grub for dinner. He found Barnes still stretched out on a bunk. Tentatively Kye (who was secretly afraid of the merchant, as were all the boys of Ship Hole) cleared his throat and politely asked:

"Would ye feel like a bowl of fish and brewis, sorr? Missis Spence, she sent a pot of it on board for we 'uns."

Fish and brewis, which is a pudding-like mixture of softened ship's biscuits, salt cod and pork fat, is not the best thing to offer a man whose stomach is heaving with seasickness. But Kye did not know that, and he was shocked and enraged when the merchant answered with a particularly lurid curse.

Kye held back the angry comment he wanted to make, and, turning to the old stove, he soon had a roaring wood fire going. Then, deliberately and with malice aforethought, he took a frying pan and, half-filling it with thick slices of fat pork, set it to sizzling merrily on the stove. As if this were not enough, he soon contrived to spill some of the grease onto the stove lid where it sent up a billowing oily smoke which filled the whole forepeak.

There was a stifled groan from Barnes. Suddenly the merchant rolled off the bunk, staggered to

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