



The Captain's Gig

By Curtis Jerry Smothers

Our ship struck a reef among the Caribbean barrier islands and was lost within the hour. Seventy-eight men sailed aboard her. Only twelve reached the Captain's gig alive, fighting off the others as they struggled to climb aboard. We left them to the sea and whatever mercy God chose to grant them.

The Captain, his coxswain, the first mate, the ship's carpenter, the cook, six crewmen, and I—the second mate—rowed southwest in hopes of reaching land. The current had other ideas, carrying us relentlessly northeast. Within days we were exhausted. Our meager supply of water and hardtack, even under strict rationing, lasted barely a week.

When the provisions were gone, we drew lots.

The coxswain drew the short straw.

As agreed, we shot him, butchered him, and divided the meat. The coxswain tasted surprisingly like pork.

A week later the first mate drew the fatal straw. He always did resemble a hog.

One by one the others followed.

Soon only the Captain, the cook, and I remained.

The cook and I quietly agreed that only two men would be required to row the gig once we reached land, so the Captain's long-standing exemption from the lottery no longer seemed practical.

Besides, he had once been a remarkably corpulent fellow. Though weeks at sea had diminished his impressive girth, there was still more of him than either of us.

"Look!" cried the cook, pointing toward the horizon. "A ship!"

The Captain turned eagerly.

I put a musket ball into the back of his head.

We dined quite well for the next week.

Now, some might call such behavior barbarous and un-Christian. I take a more practical view. Had we not resorted to those unpleasant necessities, neither the cook nor I would have survived long enough to be rescued by the fat merchantman that finally hove into view.

As the senior surviving officer, I was naturally elected captain.

The merchant crew welcomed us aboard with admirable generosity.

I couldn't help noticing what a healthy-looking lot they were.

Especially the merchant captain's plump wife.

I reckoned she'd keep us all alive for another fortnight.

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