

Message From The River

Look lively, growls I, the Steamboat Squadders'll be here in a trice if you don't get 'er done. How long's it take to strip off a swine's jacket?

We was in the shadows under a kind of arch formed by the stone and iron of what they says will be a bridge across the river to Breuckelen. Believe 'er when I sees 'er, but the law don't lie about everything. The gaslight shone weakly in the murk and boggy muck of the street-end. Good a place as any to waylay an Admiral's bastard, let out his brains in the rainmuck and steal his uniform. Come in handy one night.

But it got me thinkin. The ship was moored out of sight of any coppers or Squadders on the river in the black

rain. No fit weather for a soft policeman, especially one who wanders into a tavern in Five Points, but perfect for a riverwolf who runs best when the night is murder and the decent folk tremble under their goosedown quilts.

Twas never no great trial to speak the bastard's tongue in the taverns, tenements, alleys or over the bow to a seadog. Nor to speak the Queen's when called for, in the parlors of the Manhattan gentry. To Pass as they say. Tis in them parlours where a man of my Abilities often finds a neglected mistress to tend to while her pallid master is out chasing Thom's men down streets he'd best avoid. Me pulling or being pulled into a library or two by the lonely missuses of our grand industrial and mercantile elite. Charming em.

Aye, giving me the education back in the perfect sodden miserable days of brutal youth in Glesga was one of me ma's great regrets. Turn a hellion into an Enlightened Villein.

I developed me own tastes as well, wining and dining and lying under the chandeliers of the salons on Fifth, on their chaises. Anyway, after the vintages they drunk, not for me the flip and bumboo and mumme gagged back with salmagundi by me own dear fiends and scurvies in the stinkin holds of the ship.

Nor the stale beer they suck from tubes out of the barrels in the Pit or them deathtraps on the Bowery. No nay never no more, I'll have me Grog

if you please and there'll always be
more wine where this come from.
Enlightened.

And Villein, unto them that's still got
fear in em. No, tis no great trial to
see inside a desperate or cunning or
merciless rat's soul - no matter what
uniform he's hidin in. Butcher, baker,
drunkard, mayor. Admiral, robber,
duchess, whore. They all keep the
same secrets in their darkest hearts.
And I'm a man what's got the second
sight...

I touched me eyepatch as the men
guttet him. Twas one o them give it to
me - or rather, took the eye away.
When I first went on account, we was
a ragged and free crew. I recall a long
night in Kit Burns's Rat Pit, stepping
over and around the three-sheeters

and Water Street whores for a meeting in the private rooms with Molly, and then speaking aye too freely over too much wine of things no buccaneer should know to men he'd no right to be with.

But when I saw the Admiral and his men in our tavern, carousing for a bit o the rough night out with the stringworted rabble of the Points, I couldn't help meself. What's yer pleasure, sorr, says I, and stands em to a round. Talking politics, the architecture of our shining city, literature. When one of the Admiral's men says Haven't you a deck to swab? Posh as can be. And the smug bastards all laugh.

And being the man that I am, I opened his ear for im with a glass, and these men of honour, men of the law,

dragged me back through the labyrinth of fetid halls to the last room in Kate's, the one nobody checks out of, and I'm thinking they'll be treating me to the cat until one of em pulls his polished blade...

Leaving me on this very spot, bleeding out through a gouged eyehole in the rainmuck until Molly found me and dragged me to Rivington. And healed me. If that's the term. For if the socket scarred over, the soul never did. Stop the clocks. They'd have been better sending me to the fish me than making me eternal.

Henceforth men, says I, we pull down the Jolly Roger and sail under the Red Flag. Jack Ketch'll have his way with them all, and I'll be his most obliging

handyman. Tighten the noose even, if needs be. No prey, no pay. Make em dance the hempen jig. They'll pay in the way they'd least enjoy, their coins spread through Five points to the people they've caged up down here worse than dogs in a fightpit.

They've turned a thief into an avenger, and I'll run up and down this river in the crow's nest till the Devil stops the clocks until the wrong is righted. I'll write my ghostpoem across the souls of the quick and the dead.

They say a Lady comes from faraway France to stand anon in yon harbor. Bearing the Book, she is, and a Torch, but not to raze these stately homes to the ground, no, to light the benighted knaves cowering under her robe-hem

away from dusky death and the coziness of the reekin creakin tenements. Fair dues to her. Any friend of the people of Kit's may end up bein one o mine. We'll see what's under her skirts. So to speak.