

The Black Boar

By Jack Lambert

The first thing that he heard was the running, the heavy boots pounding the planks overhead, sprinting in all directions, voices muffled through the creaking timbers. Then came the sharper edge of panic, a cry cut its way clean through the wet air, followed by more hurried footsteps.

Captain Selwyn rose from his chair and stepped forward, his boots heavy on the floor. Each step was planted firmly and with complete certainty in every movement. He dragged his hand down his thick, black beard, placed one hand on his belt, and the other on the hilt of his sword and strode to the door. He swung it open, almost flying off its rusted hinges, and light flooded in like a tidal wave.

The noise hit him at full-force now. The crew of *The Black Boar* were shouting to one another, pointing, clambering around the deck. Cannons were being fastened to the floor and readied, anything rolling around was quickly tied down, and no man stood still for longer than a breath. The air was ripe with salt and fear.

Selwyn stepped out, the boards groaning under his powerful frame. The sky was heavy and thick with fog, almost swallowing the boat whole. His dark, scarred eyes scanned left to right, port to starboard and back again. He barely lifted an eyebrow, but within moments he could feel where every man stood, what cannons were loaded and which were empty, and the exact speed of the wind in the sail.

A cabin boy sprinted across his door and with a quick movement, almost imperceptible to the human eye, he reached out his enormous arms and grabbed the boy's collar, like a bear catching a salmon, and lifted him from the ground by three feet or so, matching his eyeline at his towering height.

"Why do you panic?" He growled, slowly, calmly and quietly, almost making no sound at all but speaking entirely in the vibrations of the air.

"It's-it's the ship, Captain, sir", the boy trembled. He looked straight into Selwyn's eyes, unable to escape them.

"What ship?"

"There's a ship off the port-side bow, Captain. She drifted in, we don't know where she's from, nobody saw her, sir. She just appeared".

Selwyn looked to the bow, where the majority of his crew were gathered, some looking over the side and some clambering the mast so as to get a clearer view. He dropped the cabin boy who

hit the ground with a *thud* before scrambling away, and began to pace toward the source of the commotion.

As he approached, the men parted for him like the boat itself through water, and sure enough, emerging from the fog as though birthed by it, came another vessel, equally matched to *The Boar* in both size and power. Selwyn gripped the golden hilt of his sabre tighter, and his other hand slowly to the grip of his flintlock pistol, his forefinger gently resting on the trigger, and his thumb on the hammer. He didn't say a word, and if it hadn't been for the slight tension in his upper lip, you could have sworn he hadn't seen it. He was as stoic as the sea itself.

The ship drifted silently past, and for a minute or so, everything was silent. The crew of *The Black Boar* watched it bob on the waves, scanning for any sign of movement, but nothing came. There was no attack, no cry of revenge, no crew presented themselves in any form. It was deserted. The lanterns were lit and papers fluttered along the deck. Tankards were filled and rocked back and forth, but there was not a single man to drink from them. It was as though the whole crew had disappeared in a blink of an eye.

Selwyn was no fool, nor was this his first venture on the waters, and he had been ambushed more times than he had eaten hot dinners so knew not to take this mystery at face value. He drew his sword slowly, barely making a sound other than the snake-like hiss of the blade along the leather sheath. He stretched out his long finger and pointed at three of his crew, and then at the adjacent ship. They nodded, drew their own swords, climbed up the rigging and leapt across, their feet landing quieter than the lapping of the waves. They took a sweeping look at the deck, then disappeared below.

After a few moments, the three returned and cried out, "She's clear, Captain!"

Selwyn, with his sword still in hand, stepped up onto the side of the *Boar*, the wood splintering as he did so. He waited a moment, then another, and it looked as though he was reluctant to board, but for a split second, the two ships met, just bumping into one another on the same wave, and in that second, he stepped from one to the other as though both ships were one and the same.

Selwyn moved slowly across the deck, eyes sweeping every rope, barrel, and plank. Everything was in place, as if the crew had only stepped away for a moment. Perhaps they were raided, or marooned, a mutiny gone wrong. Perhaps a sickness had suddenly taken each member and they were disposed of one by one. He bent down and touched his fingers to the deck. He closed his eyes gently and inhaled slowly before letting out a cold breath. The ship was completely deserted, he could feel it.

Satisfied there was no living soul aboard, he gave a single sharp nod to the men still aboard *The Black Boar*. They clambered across in twos and threes, their boots hammering against the deck, less cautiously than their predecessors, and without needing further orders, they began

pocketing whatever coin, trinket, and powder they could find, holding it above their heads with pride, and showing one another as they gloated and bragged.

Captain Selwyn ignored them, and crossed straight to the captain's cabin. The door swung open on creaking hinges. The air inside was close, smelling faintly of tobacco and salt. Papers lay strewn across the desk, charts marked and organised. Whoever was residing here did not seem the sort of man to lose control of a crew. He seemed ordered and intelligent. He must have had a similar background to Selwyn, as they shared many of the same literary volumes and detailed paintings. Then, in the corner of his eye, he saw the glint of a golden pocket watch, carved with delicate symbols and stars. This, he was certain he had seen before. This was unique, the only one of its kind in the whole of the known world.

He picked it up. The chain was warm against his palm, though the air was crisp and cool. He turned it over, and his jaw tightened.

On the back, there was an engraved name.

Captain John Selwyn.

His name.

The boards seemed to shift and warp beneath his feet and for the first time in more years than he cared to remember, he felt a deep unease. Almost fear.

His eyes darted to the railing, the same bloody stain where John Callis had driven a dagger into his side last winter. To the starboard planks, patched with oak from a Spanish galleon they'd taken two summers past. To the notch in the mainmast where his own blade had slipped, when he momentarily lost his footing during a storm.

This was *The Boar*, there was no doubt about it.

He strode back across the deck, the watch clutched tightly in his fist, and looked toward the ship he had stepped from...but she was gone.

As the crew noticed the slight wobble in their Captain's stance and the quiver in his hand, one by one they too noticed the absence of their home. They sprinted to the edge, swaying the whole boat to one side, and stared into the waters, half expecting to see it disappearing into the dark abyss below, but they saw nothing. There wasn't so much as quill floating in the foam.

A murmur of unease rippled through the men. Boots scraped on the deck, and voices rose, sharp with fear. Selwyn turned slowly, scanning the fog-bound horizon for answers, unsure of what to do nor how to proceed.

Then, from out of the mist, another ship's silhouette took form, carving through the cloud. As it drew closer, Selwyn could see its lanterns swaying in the gloom and its details sharpened into

view. The torn edge of the foresail, the patch of mismatched planks on the starboard hull, the very same knot of rope hanging loose on the rail. The stain, the oak, the notch. Every mark, every scar, every imperfection.

It was *the same ship*. It was *The Black Boar*, heading toward them.

And it was deserted.