

PAST IMPERFECT

CHAPTER EIGHT

A VOYAGE TO OBLIVION

As their chairs hovered over the heaving waves below, with Joe and Sarah keeping perfectly still in case they suddenly fell out into the ocean, the Chief looked round as if expecting something.

“Should be ship here. It late!” he announced.

“You’ve got it wrong again, you clot!” came the angry voice of Leaping Elk from somewhere above them.

“Take no notice. Ship just a bit late. It arrive soon,” the chief said reassuringly. Joe and Sarah hoped it would - being sat in a chair above a very large and very empty-looking ocean was more than a little alarming. Suddenly the Chief pointed.

“Look, there is ship! It is on way!” he said.

They looked. A ship, with big, white sails billowing in the breeze, was heading straight for them. It was a wooden ship, the sides brightly painted but in that huge ocean it seemed quite small. It moved quickly through the waves and was soon close to the hovering chairs.

“Won’t it look a bit strange, if they see us three sat in chairs in mid-air,” wondered Sarah aloud.

“No problem - we invisible,” announced the Chief confidently.

“Something funny off the port bow,” came a cry from the ship. They saw that the look-out in the crows nest had seen them and his eyes were nearly popping out of his head.

“Oh hunga-mugga,” muttered the Chief. “Mand o yar boo!”

“Language!” snapped the voice of Leaping Elk. “There are children present.”

The Chief waved his hands in meaningful, mysterious gestures, his eyes closed. Then his chair vanished and he fell with a mighty splash into the sea. The children’s chairs vanished too, but luckily they were only a few inches above the deck of the ship by now and they tumbled onto the planks in a heap. They scrambled to their feet and looked over the side for the Chief.

“Where is he?” asked Joe.

They heard voices in the air above them - an argument was taking place but the sound drifted further away and they couldn’t make out what the voices were saying. As the voices grew fainter, Sarah and Joe looked at each other.

“We’re on our own,” said Joe.

“With not even a daft Roman for company,” added Sarah. “All alone in the sea!”

“Oh, not quite all alone,” came a mild voice from behind them. “Welcome aboard.”

They turned round and came face to face with a bearded man, not very tall, dressed in a leather jerkin, green knee-breeches and stout sea boots. On his head was a flat dark blue soft cap with a narrow brim all round it.

“Hello,” said the man. “Let me introduce myself. I am the captain of this ship - I am Leif the Lucky, the finest navigator to sail the seven seas!”

“Oh, er, hello!” said Joe. “I’m Joe and this is Sarah.” Sarah curtsied. She didn’t know what else to do.

“Good to see you both.” said the man, bowing to Sarah. “Will you be staying long?”

“Um, we don’t really know,” said Sarah, a bit mystified at the matter-of-fact way that the captain accepted the sudden arrival of a boy and a girl on his ship, dressed for a Sunday summer tea-party. “Aren’t you, well, a little surprised to see us?” she asked, a bit hesitantly.

“Oh no! I’ve been seeing things for years!” said the captain, gaily. “I’m used to it. My crew isn’t, of course - they might think it a bit unusual. But at present only Ben Bun’s awake - he’s the look-out and no-one will take any notice of what he says. He’s barking mad. You’re quite safe. I shall introduce you as friends of mine who stowed away.”

“Oh, yes, I see,” said Sarah, who didn’t and was getting more mystified by the minute. Now they had a captain who was used to seeing things and a look-out who was barking mad. She wondered what the rest of the crew were like.

Joe was also feeling rather uneasy. “We’re not too sure where we are,” he said, “and we don’t really know how long we’re staying here - and I think someone else was supposed to be joining us,” he continued, gazing desperately out to sea and hoping to catch sight of Chief Thunder Head. All he could see was a distant white cloud which was falling further and further behind, although the sounds of a quarrel were coming from it, and the cloud seemed to be shuddering and jumping about as if someone inside it was hitting someone else with a wooden spoon by the noise. There were also shouts which at this distance were difficult to make out exactly but sounded roughly like, “You’ve got it wrong again, you great”

“Well, you’re perfectly welcome to stay as long as you like,” said Leif. “It’s going to be an exciting voyage, I can promise you that. We are on a journey of discovery!” he finished, proudly.

“What do you want to discover?” asked Sarah, trying desperately to remember something about the Voyages of Discovery. It was difficult because they hadn’t yet read anything about them at school. She vaguely knew that someone called Columbus had discovered America - she couldn’t remember anyone called Leif being involved. Joe was racking his brains too - he had seen something about this on the television. He seemed to recall that Columbus wasn’t actually looking for America, but was after something else - a way to India perhaps. The television programme hadn’t mentioned anything about someone called Leif that he could remember. Both Sarah and Joe were rather taken aback at the answer from Leif.

“I’m going to prove that the world is flat!” he announced with great pride.

Sarah and Joe looked at each other in amazement.

“Flat!” Joe repeated. Leif nodded.

“Er, I heard that it might be round,” said Sarah, rather hesitantly. Leif snorted.

“That’s what they all say!” he said. “It was that know-it-all Italian called Columbus who put that about. Now he’s persuaded the King of Spain to give him a ship to prove it! Says he’ll find new lands across the sea and a way to India! Ha! Rubbish! The world is flat and I’m going to be the man to prove it! I shall go down in history!”

“And he says I’m mad!” came a voice from behind them. “He’ll go down all right. Into Davy Jones’s locker, the great barmcake!”

They turned. Standing on the deck behind them was the man they had seen in the crow’s nest. His hair was wild and white, and he had a white beard that stuck out all round his chin - he looked like his face was surrounded by a white halo. His eyes were still staring but he had a beaming smile on his face.

“I knows you!” he continued, capering round them. “I sees you on them chairs, in the air above the sea. If you’ve joined this ship, you be as mad as I am! Welcome aboard!” He shook their hands, danced a wild hornpipe and turning a somersault, capered off, cackling.

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“That’s old Ben Bun,” said Leif. “You’ll have to excuse the crew. They’re all I could get; good sea-faring men but a bit odd.”

Odd was the word, thought Joe - and none odder than the captain. “How do you intend to prove the world is flat?” he asked.

“Easy, I’m going to sail off the edge!” announced Leif with pride. “A real voyage into the unknown!”

Joe and Sarah looked at each other, and the same thought was going through their minds - just what had the Chief got them involved in now? It was obvious that Ben Bun wasn’t the only one who was barking mad on the ship.

“That’s why I say the crew are a bit odd,” continued Leif. “After all, who in their right mind wants to sail off the edge of the world? Fancy some breakfast? Come on.”

And he led the two mystified children down some steps and into a cabin at the front end of the ship.

“What has old Thunder Head got us into now?” whispered Sarah to Joe.

“A ship full of loonies on a voyage to nowhere!” hissed Joe back. “Nice one, Chief!” he muttered to thin air.

“We haven’t even had any of Marie Antoinette’s cakes, yet,” added Sarah.

“A nice Sunday tea,” sighed Joe. “Oh well!”

They had followed Leif into the cabin and it was bit dark inside; it took a while for their eyes to get used to the light but their noses told them that something delicious was being cooked somewhere in the gloom. As their eyes adjusted to the light they saw eggs and bacon being fried on a stove at one end of the cabin, where a sailor with an apron tied round his middle was arranging some plates. They noticed that he had a wooden leg and there was a parrot sat on his shoulder.

“It’s not! It can’t be!” hissed Sarah.

“It looks like . . .” began Joe.

“Let me introduce you,” said Leif. “This is our cook, Short John Gold.”

The man looked up, eyes as bright as burning coals, and smiled broadly at them.

“Welcome aboard, me hearties,” he roared. “Welcome to the good ship Nemesis! Meet my old pal Cap’n Mint!” he went on, pointing to the green and white striped parrot.

“We’re all going to die! We’re all going to die!” squawked the parrot. “Man the boats! Me and the parrot first!”

“Ah, that’s my old pal!” said Short John. “He’s remembering our last voyage! I was the captain of the Mersey Ferry before it’s last sad accident. Here, have some grub!”

He passed them each a plate of eggs and bacon and the children sat down with Leif at a table in the middle of the room, feeling more apprehensive than ever. The rest of the crew wondered in, and the apprehension of the children grew worse as each one was introduced.

Old Ben Bun was first, cackling and dancing about, talking to the parrot who seemed very pleased to see him. They sat and squawked at each other. Then more men followed, one by one, and Leif told the children who each of them was. Deaf Charlie was the first. He nodded, grinned and grabbed a plate.

“He’s a good seaman,” said Leif. “Deaf as a post - he was sat by a cannon when it went off years ago. He signed on for the voyage - of course I told him where we were going but he couldn’t hear a thing. Can’t read or write either - you tell him to furl sails or pull up the anchor in sign language and he’s quite happy. I couldn’t think of the sign language for falling off the edge of the world.”

A big bear of a man came in and Leif said that he was called Bomkoff. The man nodded to Leif and the children and said something that sounded like “Tchegorev! Minski pot blat pokiff!” smiled and sat down to a plate of eggs and bacon.

“We think he’s from the Russias,” said Leif, “Can’t understand a word said to him. As far as we can make out, he thinks he’s going home. I’ve got a special compass that shows we are actually sailing North-east all the time. I show him that and he’s happy.”

Five mournful men came in, all sad-eyed and gloomy. Leif introduced them as Carlos, Riccardo, Stefan, Franz and Didier. Each of them sat down with their plates at separate tables and each pulled out a little gold-framed picture, looked at it and sighed. Sarah sneaked a look over their shoulders as she took her plate back up to Short John. She came back shaking her head.

“The pictures!” she whispered. “They’re all the same! Some big blond woman.”

“Yes, that’s right,” whispered Leif. “Dockland Doris, a friend of mine. I had an arrangement with her. She promised all of them that she would marry them and then broke of the engagement. They were all madly in love with her and once she broke off their engagements they all wanted to end it all. I offered them a one-way ticket to oblivion and they jumped at the chance. Bingo! I got a crew and Doris got 10 groats for each man.”

“That’s rotten!” said Joe.

“Difficult to get a crew these days,” said Leif. “Especially for a voyage like this. Columbus did it as well - Dockland Doris’ sister got him his crew.”

“That’s something you don’t read in the history books,” said Sarah.

“Yes, and who’s going to believe us if we put that bit of detail in our school work?” asked Joe. Sarah saw what he meant. It was all right getting the real story but if no-one believed you it wasn’t much use.

The last member of the crew ambled in. He was unusual; small and swarthy, with a look about his eyes that said he was from the Far East - China or Japan perhaps. He smiled at Leif and the children and went to get some of the last of the bacon and eggs.

“That is Sakowa,” said Leif. “Or at least we think that’s his name. Again, we can’t understand him but he seems to understand us a bit. He’s the only one who can steer the ship properly and no-one can catch fish better than him.”

Sakowa returned to his table, but before he sat down he bowed to the children. They got up and did the same, remembering their manners from their time with the Khan - everyone there used to get up and bow to each other. Sakowa smiled even more and shook their hands, chattering in a totally incomprehensible language. Then he sat down to his breakfast, next to the huge Russian. The Russian greeted him with a burst of complete guttural gibberish to which Sakowa replied in rather more musical gibberish.

“Neither of them understands a word of what the other says but they’re the best of friends,” said Leif.

“How did you get Sakowa on board?” asked Sarah.

“He volunteered, or at least I think he did,” said Leif. “He could have been asking the way to Southend for all I know but he seems very happy to be here.”

Old Ben Bun had crept up behind them.

“Now he’s told you all about us, it’s about time you had a proper introduction to the noble captain here,” cackled old Ben. Leif looked uneasy and embarrassed.

“Go away, Ben,” he said. “Haven’t you got something important to do? Like sticking your head in a barrel of rotten fish?”

“Arr, business first, pleasure later,” said the old man. “Our captain here told you he was called Leif the Lucky, didn’t he?” Joe and Sarah nodded. “Well he isn’t! He’s known across the seven seas as Leif the Liability, ‘cos he’s a rotten captain! He wanted to sail with Columbus but he wouldn’t have him!”

“Only because he was jealous,” snapped Leif. “And he’s got that daft idea in his head that by sailing due West he can reach India from Europe. He’s convinced that there’s land there and that it’s the Indies or Cipango or Cathay. All because of some daft map. That’s all Columbus wanted from me, a look at that map. That’s how I got to know him.”

“What map was that?” asked Sarah.

“Some ancestor of mine claimed he had sailed to some far-off land in the West where there were trees and vines,” said Leif. “It’s a long time ago. He was a Viking and he had first voyaged to Iceland and then went even further West. He made a map of what he said he had found. It was passed down from father to son in my family and I showed it to Columbus to try and get him to take me with him, on a sort of combined expedition, but he refused.”

“Tell them what he said!” cackled Ben.

Leif stirred uneasily. “No, he was rude,” he said.

“He told him that he thought the map was a forgery!” laughed old Ben. “Said Leif here was trying to con him and threw him out!”

“All because the ink smudged!” said Leif. “It was a copy of the real map. Wasn’t going to let him have that, was I? It’s a family heirloom, even if my ancestor was potty and made it all up. Real story teller, he was. But Columbus must have believed a bit of what I said because he’s sailing in the same direction, just like us.”

“Least he’s not daft!” whooped Ben.

“Why don’t you go back up to the crow’s nest and hang upside down for a few hours!” snapped Leif, impatiently.

“Oh ta! I never thought you’d ask!” replied old Ben happily and he capered off, pleased as punch at the prospect of dangling downwards from the crow’s nest.

“Not that he’s much use as a look-out,” sighed Leif after he had gone. “He keeps seeing things and confuses the crew. Yesterday he shouts down, “Elephant on toast off the starboard bow.” You should have seen the look on everybody’s faces. All except Sakowa and Bomkoff; they just smiled and nodded. It may have meant something to them. Well, I can’t stay here chatting. I better go and make sure Deaf Charlie’s steering the ship in the right direction. It’s his turn at the wheel. Make yourselves useful somewhere, won’t you?”

And off Captain Leif went, leaving Joe and Sarah looking at each other in bewilderment.

“Some voyage of discovery!” said Joe.

“I keep hoping Thunder Head will make an appearance and get us out of this mobile madhouse,” said Sarah.

“If he doesn’t, where do you reckon we will end up?” asked Joe.

“Well, my history isn’t too good,” replied Sarah, “and to be honest, nor is my geography, but Columbus got to the West Indies, I think.”

“So Leif might wind up there or perhaps America,” suggested Joe. “Let’s hope the locals are friendly.”

“Let’s hope Leif isn’t right,” said Sarah. “After all, suppose we do go off the end of the world?”

“But it’s round!” laughed Joe. “You know it is! You’re going as daft as Old Ben Bun!”

“An hour with this lot and I think I’d believe anything,” sighed Sarah. “I wonder how long they’ve been sailing so far.”

“We could ask Short John,” suggested Joe. “Leif said to make ourselves useful. Perhaps we could help him. I don’t know anything about sailing a ship so there’s not much else we can do.”

“I certainly don’t want to climb up the crows nest,” said Sarah with a shiver. “I don’t like heights much.”

They asked Short John if he wanted some help and he said that he did.

“It’s a big job, cooking for the crew,” he said. “If you can help with the washing up it will help a lot. I hardly get any time for plotting a mutiny or stealing treasure maps or anything of that sort. Pity.”

“Is that what you like doing?” asked a puzzled Joe.

“Oh yes,” replied Short John. “Every man has to have a hobby and mutiny, piracy, murder and treasure hunting are mine. Old Cap’n Leif knows I likes a good plot but he don’t mind! He knows I can’t get any of this lot to go treasure-hunting or try a bit of piracy. They’re all mad! I’m the only sane one here.” He winked at them then looked round to make sure no-one was listening and whispered, “I saw a mermaid earlier. She was combing her golden hair. That’s a good sign! Arr!”

He went off to talk to Cap’n Mint and Joe and Sarah looked at each other again.

“All potty!” whispered Joe. “Every last one of them!”

“We’re all going to die!” squawked Cap’n Mint.

“Arr! That we are!” said Short John happily and he began wiping the tables down. Joe and Sarah washed up and then dried everything and cleaned the top of the stove. Then they helped John prepare a huge pot of stew for dinner and John showed them how to make dumplings.

“Well, that’s it, me hearties!” he said at last. “Duty over till later. We’ll leave the stew to simmer for a couple of hours and take a stroll round the deck.”

It was mid-morning now and the sun was warm; the breeze made the ship scud across the sea and the crew went about their work. The dismal cast-offs of Dockland Doris mournfully coiled rope, swabbed decks and reefed sails. Deaf Charlie happily steered and Captain Leif stared into the far distance, adopting the heroic pose of gallant captain, oblivious of the fact that a seagull had made a mess on his hat. Ben Bun hung upside down from the crow’s nest, snoozing happily in the sun.

“Look!” shouted Short John in excitement. “There’s that mermaid again. The one I was telling you about!”

The children looked in the direction of his pointing finger. To their amazement they saw a mermaid, combing her long golden hair, sat in the waves as calm as anything. However, on a closer look they realised it was Aunt Fifi in a blond wig and wearing some sort of shiny gold swimming costume. John reckoned that she was sat on a blue inflatable ring like the sort of thing he had in the swimming pool.

Aunt Fifi waved to them and shouted, “Just keeping an eye on you, dears. See you again soon when old Thunder Head has sorted the cloud out,” and she blew a kiss to Short John.

No-one else had noticed the appearance of the mermaid and Short John went all misty eyed as Aunt Fifi slowly disappeared.

“She blew me a kiss!” he said. “’Tis a good omen. A very good omen! A fine figure of a mermaid if ever I saw one!”

Sarah and Joe left him gazing over the side and went back to give the stew a stir. They both felt better now that they had seen Aunt Fifi and knew that she was keeping an eye on them.

Dinner came and went and Joe and Sarah were kept busy afterwards, clearing up. It was late afternoon before they had another stroll around the ship with Short John.

“How long has the ship been at sea, Short John?” asked Sarah, as they gazed out over the sea; the sun was now low in the sky and turned the ocean fiery gold.

“About six weeks,” came the reply. “Cap’n Leif reckons we should reach the edge very soon!”

Joe noticed that Sakowa was shading his hand against the fierce red glare of the setting sun and gazing intently at the skyline as if in expectation of something. Bomkoff was fishing. The light began to dim as the sun sank down into the distant horizon and looking somewhat disappointed, Sakowa turned to go below and to bed. Bomkoff wound in his line and joined him. Ben Bun woke up and shouted “Nothing at all off the Port Bow!” and fell out the crow’s nest. He hurtled down towards the deck and Sarah screamed,

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but at the last minute, just before Ben's head made a nasty, squashy mess all over the freshly swabbed deck, a rope he had tied round his leg tightened and Joe and Sarah realised that the other end was attached to the crows nest. Now he swung upside down, to and fro, his head an inch above the deck, grinning.

"Missed again!" he said to Sarah and Joe and winked.

"Missed what?" asked Joe.

"The deck!" came the reply.

Sarah and Joe assisted him to untie himself and stand up.

"Supper's up!" shouted Short John, banging a gong with a wooden spoon. "Come and get it! Tea, toast and fairy cakes!"

Ben set off at a run yelling, "Last one there's a loony!"

Sarah and Joe dashed past him to reach the door first.

"There, what did I tell you?" cackled the old man happily.

The supper was good - although it was rather a surprise to Sarah and Joe to see how enthusiastically the pirates ran to have tea, toast and fairy cakes - it put a whole new complexion on life at sea in the days of sailing ships.

"Well, tea with Aunt Fifi's turned out to be pretty good as regards the food," said Joe. "Eggs and bacon, stew and dumplings and now toast and fairy cakes - I know we have had to help out but it's been worth it!"

"Yes, it's just that the tea's lasted rather longer than we thought," said Sarah. Leif wondered in and greeted the crew with his beatific smile. "Not long now!" he said. The mournful faces of Dockland Doris' rejects brightened up, Ben cackled away and capered about and Sakowa and Bomkoff chattered to each other in fluent gibberish. Sarah and Joe looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders and began to clear away the plates.

"Well, oblivion, here we come!" said Short John to them when they bought the plates to be washed up. "That's if he's right, that is."

"Do you think he is?" asked Joe.

"I've been a sailor since I was sixteen," said Short John. "I've heard stories about sea monsters, oceans of seaweed, parts where men are burned black by the sun, parts where men have their heads in the middle of their chests or where they have only one leg and a foot so big they shelter under it when it rains. Until I became Captain of the Mersey Ferry, I'd sailed the seven seas - pretty well everywhere where man has sailed so far. I've never seen any of those things. But I don't say they don't exist, only that I haven't seen them. Perhaps he's right, and the ship will go over the edge into oblivion. If it doesn't I win a bet I've got with old Ben there. If it does, me and old Cap'n Mint will be cruising in the stars."

Sarah didn't think John was quite as batty as some of the others. Strange, possibly, but not wholly barmy. "Why did you come on this voyage?" she asked.

Short John looked embarrassed. "Well, it's like this," he said hesitantly, "Leif's ship and Columbus's were side by side on the harbour. Both were signing up a crew. I was engaged as cook on Columbus' ship but I got lost in the dark when I boarded at night and came up the gangplank of the Nemesis by mistake. By the time we were at sea, and I realised what had happened I couldn't do a lot about it. I tried plotting and to persuade the crew to put the Captain over the side and turn to piracy but it were no use. So, I make the best of it. The cook old Leif had engaged must have made the same mistake and wound up on Columbus's ship. I pity him and his crew - I know him. He's probably poisoned the lot of them by now. All he knows is stewed seagull!"

"Where did Leif get the money from to get a ship and crew for a voyage like this," asked Joe.

“The King of Spain paid for Columbus’s ship because he wants the wealth of the Indies, but Bishop Diego the Simple paid for Leif’s expedition because the Church maintains the world is flat. So he has the idea that Leif’s voyage will prove the church is correct,” answered Short John.

“But how on earth is Leif supposed to report back if the ship really does go over the edge?” asked Sarah.

“He is going to release a pigeon with a message tied to its foot. I sincerely hope we don’t sail off the edge of the world, though,” said Short John, looking worried.

“Why?” asked Joe.

“Cos I cooked the pigeon a while ago, by mistake,” admitted Short John.

They helped wash up and put everything away - and then there was a cry of alarm from the deck and they all rushed out to see what was the matter. Outside in the dark they found almost the whole crew staring up at the sky, their faces wide with astonishment and fear. The peaceful starlit sky had been ripped apart to reveal vast purple swirling clouds in some distant galactic chasm, shot with stars. It cleared here and there to show an enormous planet surrounded by multi-coloured rings, spinning very fast and heading straight for them. They all cried out and then at the last minute, it seemed, the planet swung away and disappeared into the edge of the tear in the sky. Comets swirled and collided, exploding soundlessly in space, and a mighty cloud of red gas shot up into the purple cloud, with suns spinning off it one by one, exploding as they collided with each other and the odd planet that spun through the spaces between the suns. It was an awesome sight, absolutely without sound, but terrifying in its sheer scale, - the distances they were looking into seemed too great for the mind to behold.

“I never seen anything like that before,” breathed Short John. “Oblivion here we come by the look of it. I reckon I’ll have to tie a message onto Cap’n Mint’s leg.”

Abruptly the rip in the sky closed up and once again they saw a clear, starlit, peaceful sky. The crew looked at each other, puzzled and afraid, all except one.

“Who let off all them fireworks,” demanded Deaf Charlie. “They were real good!” and he stamped off below, to bed.

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy,” said Ben. “Or at least that’s what my nephew at home in Stratford says!”

Sarah started as if she recognised the words.

“It’s a sign!” said Leif, his eyes shining. “We shall soon be there! I’ll get the message written for the pigeon,” and he went into his cabin. Short John looked uncomfortable.

“I hope old Cap’n Mint hasn’t forgotten how to fly!” he said. “I’ve made up a couple of hammocks for you two in the foc’sle,” he went on. “Time for bed, I reckon. You’ll sleep well tonight after all this sea air.”

The foc’sle turned out to be a cabin at the front of the ship, above the galley. A little room there had two hammocks swinging to and fro.

“Ah!” said Sarah, doubtfully, “and how are we supposed to get in these? Have you ever slept in a hammock before?” she asked Joe.

Joe shook his head; “No,” he replied.

They had a few goes at getting into the hammocks and after a while - and after falling out a couple of times - they got the hang of it and found that they were quite comfortable. Short John had thoughtfully provided some blankets and they were nice and warm and after all the excitement of the day and all that sea air, they were both soon fast asleep.