I’ve never seen a grayer face than the one on Captain Lovewell, nor a wider set of eyes, as he leaned over from the quarterdeck, and called forward to the mate. “Bring in all sail Mr. Chisholm, back the main topgallant and the fore top. We cannot outrun them, and a fight is out of the question. I’m bringing us into the wind.” His voice cracked but remained steady. He turned to the helmsman, “Jingles, go below and fetch up the cook, have him douse the galley fires, there’ll be no breakfast this morning.” He then took the helm himself, and brought the bow of the *Rachel* into the wind until her sails could no longer draw. At this the sails backed against the mast, and the vessel lost way so quickly that some of us were jarred nearly off our feet, and we were in stays, or in irons as sailors call it…dead in the water by any name.

The same hurried activity which had brought us to full sail only an hour before now brought in all sail except those two ordered by the Captain to remain backed. As we had come into the wind and lost our way, the pirate vessel surged beyond us. I watched as she beat into the wind to come about. There was no doubt that she had some fair hands on board, for she did so as neat as you please, crossed our bow with all her gun ports open, and came down on the wind to our starboard beam. Her topsails were smartly furled, then her main sail was lowered and flaked, and she maneuvered closer to us on just her foresail, forestays and jibs. She seemed almost to dance in the sea, and to hover on the wind like a bird of prey.

She then brought in all sail and hove to about fifty yards off, and we found ourselves looking down the throats of six cannon. I could make out quick movements along her deck, but her crew stayed low under her bulwarks, offering no clear sight of their numbers or activities. The same bright figure that had hailed us before now appeared again on the rail one hand on the shrouds to steady himself, and one hand on the speaking trumpet he raised to his face.

“I’ll have the Captain as my guest if you please.” he called out, “Bring your papers sir, and your crew and cargo manifests, step lively now, we haven’t all day,” he turned to glance over his shoulder, spoke something to those behind him, then turned his attention back to us and continued, “I’ll give you to the end of this song to have your oars in the water Captain, after that I’ll be forced to pepper you with some encouragement.”

We then heard the skirl of pipes, joined by a Fiddle, a Bodhran and a Fife. The instruments broke into a spirited rendition of “Men of Harlech”. In spite of our bleak prospects and the dangerous circumstances I found myself briefly humming along, for the song was an old Welsh battle hymn that my mother loved, and that she would long ago hum to lull her fretful child to sleep.

“He’s a marvel is Johnny”, broke in a voice behind me, it was Candy, “an arch pirate with a sense of humor. He always keeps a little band aboard. He got the notion from his days sailing with Charlie Vane, who fancied it. There’s some pirates as will keep a musician or two on board just to help pass the time, sailors fancy it to make the work lighter. Other such will use a fiddler to lull prey they’re closing on into thinking its a pleasure boat coming up, but Rackham? He presses good players whenever he can. He makes ‘em work at it too. You’d think he was an admiral of the fleet, so as he fancies-wait till you see.”

He listened appreciatively for a few moments. “We’ll be all right now though I think John, Rackham’s no butcher like Low -nor a bully like Teache was- there’ll be no violence as long as we keep in sight, and give him no cause to loose his dogs. It was Jack I last sailed with, before I took the King’s pardon. He’ll likely put us through a few hoops before the day’s out, but no one will come to hurt if we do as he says. Judging from the squawk of those damned pipes, and the way those topsails were handled, my guess is that I’ll be seeing more than a few old gallows mates soon enough.”

The *Rachel*’s jolly boat had been lowered from the stern as he spoke. Lovewell ordered Jingles and two of the deck hands to climb down, unship the oars and make ready. As Lovewell lowered himself, clutching his portmanteau, onto a thwart, the band on the pirate vessel stepped briskly into the final chorus of the song.

“Excellent time Captain,” came the voice from across the water, “Have a care with those manifests if you please sir, it would be most unfortunate were you to let them slip over the side...most unfortunate indeed. Have your crew stand by to receive visitors, make damned sure they understand to give my men no trouble, or they’ll live only long enough to regret it. Come and cross between us now, across and forward to my cathead if you please sir.”

As our jolly boat pulled away toward the pirate vessel, Captain Lovewell called out to us to remain calm, and to allow the boarders no occasion for violence. As he was doing so, I saw a longboat come out from around the bow of the other vessel, and pull strongly toward the stern of the *Rachel*. Their course being one that took them carefully clear of coming in between our two vessels. The menacing black throats of the pirate’s cannon thus free to instantly sweep us with iron from stem to stern should the need arise.

I counted six men manning the sweeps as the pirate’s longboat approached and another half a dozen besides the coxswain seated on the thwarts. They pulled hard and came up under our bow well before our own boat had reached the other vessel. There was the scrape and thud of hooks as they made themselves fast to our stern, followed by the clattering sounds of armed men, and their grunting and cursing as they climbed up over rails, and onto the quarterdeck.

One lead man came up at the head of a party on either side of the quarterdeck, and they were as disparate a set as can be imagined. One was very short and barrel shaped, hatless, and with wild black hair done up in stiff thick braids on either side of his face, like drooping horns. He had a fierce black beard, the end of which was clenched between large white teeth held in a broad grimace. He wore a stained leather waistcoat, and a heavy leather petticoat kilt, with a broad black belt over all.

The squat dark pirate’s waistcoat was open enough to show that the wild black hair covered more than just his head and face. He carried a long handled boarding axe and four pistols hung from leather straps slung over his shoulders; two other pistols were thrust into his belt. He had all the look of a maddened highland bullock about him, one held only just in check.

The other was tall and slender, clean faced, and very well featured, a very handsome face.

His eyes were squinted against the sun -but watchful- and his lips were a thin wide line. He had short-cropped light blonde hair, the color of white sand or new sails. He wore a short blue jacket, its brass buttons freshly shined so that they glowed, and a jaunty dark red knit cap with a tassel. He carried a cocked Musketoon leveled in our direction, a cutlass on a hanger and a brace of very fine looking pistols tucked into a broad scarlet sash. His long white duck pants were tied down at the ankle and he was, as most of his companions proved to be, barefooted. He was smiling and friendly looking, but alert.

His gaze rested on me for a moment and a most surprising change came over his countenance. His eyes grew wider and his mouth seemed to relax -as if he were about to speak. For myself I was afraid that some movement of mine had raised an alarm in him and that I would be shot down. I extended my arms to either side, showing my hands empty. As a carpenter my sleeves were already rolled up for my days work so I showed him no weapon neither place to secret one. His reaction to my smile and extended arms was also curious for I saw the flicker of a smile on his otherwise grim face and he motioned me to the mast -though the barrel of his weapon was pointed at the deck and never directly at me.

The short feral one turned his head slightly, never taking his eyes off of us, and called down to the last of the others clambering up behind him with a harsh and mocking voice. “Step up lively mates, there’s ‘naught to fear on this scow, only a gaggle of common lubberly swabs up here, come from the bilges onto the deck to bid us a good morrow.”

The other swept the deck with a sharp look, and his leveled firelock, and spoke up with a soft voice, and a cheerfully matter of fact tone. “Gather up about the main mast now lads, and keep your hands where I can see them, an honest tar has nothing to fear from us this day.”