

Clinging to the ship's mast, Castigio shut his eyes, shivering from head to toe! He was too frightened to move!

Lightnings flashed! Winds howled! Torrents of rain beat down upon the sea! Below the murky deep, ancient fountains bubbled and burst, surging upward to crest against the midnight sky. Towering waves swelled and broke over the dark waters of the ocean until its depths shook with their pounding. Sailing into its murderous clutches, the Spanish galleon struggled to stay afloat.

"Batten down the hatches! Pull in the sails!" yelled a crewman on the ship. Hatches slammed shut and sails fell flat against the deck. Everyone was scurrying to and fro except for Castigio who was hiding behind the masts and rigging. Storms scared him to death!

Sprays of salt water rushed over his head, knocking him flat upon his face! Sliding across the deck, he nearly slipped over the edge before grabbing a rail just in the nick of time!

"Great fish-flappin' belly sprawlers!" he screamed. "We shall all be drowned alive!"

"Drowned alive! Drowned alive 'e says! Haw! Haw!" echoed the voices of the crew as they began to mock him. Their coarse brawls of laughter filled the air. Rugged and seafaring were they - pirates each and every one!

Quickly Castigio looked for a place to hide from them and from what he feared worse than the storm! He ducked under a fallen sail. Thunder crashed, then the rumbling of heavy feet running across the deck filled his ears. The footsteps stopped. He listened for a moment. Cautiously, he lifted a corner of the sail covering him and dared to peek out. A blinding bolt of lightning flashed overhead! For an instant a fallen sail hanging suspended above his head became transparent in the light. Through it Castigio saw the dark silhouette of the giant man he feared more than the storm approaching.

Castigio shuddered. "El Capitan!" he gasped. The hanging sail crashed to the deck as the ship tossed once more. Standing before him was the most wicked pirate who had ever sailed the seven seas!

El Capitan, large and stout, stood under the creaking mast and spars. He was dressed in not one, but in two blood red capes which flapped violently in the fierce wind. His tangled mass of black hair whipped like a nest of snakes about his face. Glittering through his hair, an Indian slave's silver ankle bracelet hung from his ear! With his jaw set, his mouth fixed in a grimace, and his eyes piercing straight into the eye of the storm, the pirate looked like a statue carved of stone. Then he moved.

Anchoring his spiked heels into the wooden deck, he sliced at the air with a sparkling jeweled saber as if he alone could frighten away the tempest. Indeed, El Capitan appeared more permanent than the ship's own mast. Castigio almost pitied the storm, for of the two - the storm and the pirate - he was sure the pirate was the more evil and could outlast El Capitan was not a man to be crossed.

Lightnings flashed around the pirate, setting the half-lowered sails on fire! "Put it out!" yelled the pirate pointing up. Then with the tip of his saber, he snagged the belt buckle of a startled sailor and tossed him

into the air! Flying past the flaming sail, the sailor reached out to grab it. Ripping it clean away, he plunged into the raging sea! Nervous laughter broke out among the crew as El Capitan searched for another victim. Castigio dared not move.

"Who shall be next? Ye spineless seadogs!" roared the pirate with a horrible laugh.

Every pirate jumped to attention to appear as fearless as El Capitan. Stepping back, the captain surveyed the prospects with a sneer. Quietly, Castigio peeked out from under the sail which still kept him hidden from view. In horror, he saw the pirate's boot step beside the very spot where he was hiding! Castigio held his breath as he felt the point of the pirate's saber scrape across the sailcloth over his back! All eyes followed the saber as El Capitan slashed the air with its razor-sharp edge.

"What are ye gawking at?" thundered El Capitan. "Get to work! Swab the deck! Wrap up the sails!" Crewmen jumped like whips to obey as El Capitan whirled about in every direction shouting out commands. Castigio waited for a chance to escape and when the pirate's back was turned, he fled for safer shelter.

"To the crow's nest!" El Capitan was screaming. Castigio glanced up at it as he ran by. High above the ship it wobbled in a gusty gail just as the vessel heaved to one side in the waves. Slipping and sliding on the wet deck, Castigio kept running.

Realizing that he had given out more orders than there were men to fill them, El Capitan stopped in his confusion. Then he snickered as one more name came to his fiendish mind, "Castigio!" he bellowed.

Unnoticed, the scrawny shadow of the man slipped away behind the pirate as Castigio scurried down to the lower decks as fast as his legs would take him! With not a moment to spare, Castigio had escaped the pirate's eye!

"Castigio! You scoundrel! Shake your bones fast and get to the crow's nest!" Castigio shuddered as he rounded the corner of the stairs. He leaped down five at a time to get to the bottom faster!

"Where 'er ye dreamer?" demanded El Capitan, throwing back the crumpled sail where Castigio had been only moments before. Fuming and flissing, the pirate tossed sails and rigging aside looking for Castigio. "Ye scallywag! No use to me at all! Shan't it be a good night this one, if at last we have lost ye at sea and rid ourselves of the burden of ye!" he threatened as he poked his saber into the frumpled piles of sails that littered the deck about him. "Blast my boots! Where 'er ye?"

When no answer came, the pirate became enraged. "Have we a deserter mates?" Grabbing a crewman by the neck, he sent him sprawling in the direction of the galley stairs, yelling, "Find him or ye'll share his fate as well when I get my hands on him!" Jumping to his feet, the man began the search calling, "Castigio! Castigio! Castigio!"

Soon all the pirates were looking for Castigio. Where was he? Down in the darkest part of the ship: its very belly, the bilge. Among crates and barrels stacked together on top of boards and ballast stones near a crossbeam under the bow of the ship, Casfigio found a place to hide.

The mere thought of sitting in the crow's nest made him more seasick than ever. Each time the ship pitched and fell in the sea, his eyes rolled around in his head. As he dangled his legs from a barrel where he was sitting, bilge water swirled about his ankles. The stench was horrible. But the pickles inside the barrel had a worse odor of vinegar that made his head swim. Many times before, he had hidden from El Capitan in the pickle barrels when they were empty. Only now there were pickles in the barrels and the ship's beam had cracked, so that slowly but surely the sea was coming in to drown him!

Castigio wondered how much time he had left before either the sea or the pirates finished him off. Lifting up the tiny stub of a candle he had grabbed from the stairs, he searched for the leak.

The crack was bad. Castigio decided to climb up higher on the barrels. But as he did, his foot slipped on a slimy patch of barnacles.

"Oh, doomed! Doomed!" he cried as he fell into a bilge water puddle.

Instantly, it was as if the sea had heard his remark, for suddenly it tossed the ship again, setting the stagnant water from the bottom to rolling. Splashing over the pickle barrels, it put his little candle out!

"Oh, no!" sobbed Castigio. "I didn't really mean what I said!"

But it was too late.

"*Could it get any worse?*" he thought. "*Oh, dear me, it seems I've been saying that forever, and, curiously enough, it does get worse!*" He sighed as he pulled his scrawny knees up under him and shivered a little. Yes.. "*Much worse!*"

He sobbed as he sat there in the dark thinking of how he had come to be in such a miserable state. "Ah, my motherland, my queen, my dear, dear Spain. How I have failed you. I shall never be a great conquistador now - no never, not ever.

He recalled the day so many years ago when Spain had sent her young men away in search of treasure, spice and gold and the wonderful Fountain of Youth! What a wonderful vision it was, but alas his youth, how quickly it had passed away! That day seemed as though it had happened yesterday. Castigio remembered it as he would have remembered a holiday.

He could still see himself standing on the docks in a shining new suit of armor. Waving to the crowds, he had joined a great parade of brave explorers marching up the gang plank to their ship. Each had dreamed of returning one day in victory and wealth!

However; days at sea turned into years, and years into decades until at last the crew's dreams faded away and the ship was lost at sea. Castigio was quite certain that Spain had forgotten them all long ago.

Only Castigio continued to dream the old vision. But his armor did not fit so well anymore, because he had grown old and skinny. He had lost his courage too. But a dream truly believed, even in the heart of a coward, can lead a man into adventure.

One day El Capitan's ship had passed by them. There was extreme excitement among the crew. The pirate had introduced himself as a great explorer. Everyone of them believed all the tales of adventure that he told them except for Castigio who thought their happening upon him was just too good to be true.

The crew were too quick to turn their ship over to El Capitan and proclaim him their brave new leader. Castigio protested, but no one listened. Spellbound by the notion of pirating riches and conquering new lands, the conquistadors gave up their mission, dusted off their sails from years of drifting and readied them-selves for high adventure. When Castigio reminded the crew of the glory of Spain and of their dream to find the precious Fountain of Youth, El Capitan mocked him for being a dreamer. Castigio became an outcast!

"We have run aground on an island. We are going to march against its people and conquer them. Then we'll steal their treasures too!" said a greedy voice in the dark somewhere.

Castigio squinted and noticed that light instead of water was coming through the cracked bilge. The voice was right. The ship had stopped. He heard a shuffling of feet and ducked behind a barrel.

"Get up, you old coward!" It was the voice of the crewman who had been searching for him. He had a spear in his hand and pointed it in Castigio's face.

"Oh, mercy me! Mercy me! Mercy, sir!" Castigio whimpered.

"I ought to say I found you and win a favor for myself!" the crewman said, his chest swelling with pride. "But now El Capitan is busy preparing for battle, and you'll not interest him at all till it's done. Lucky for you, Castigio! Here! Take this, you old bag of bones!" he said, thrusting a spear at Castigio's hand. "Go fall in line, or I'll drown you right here! Get!"

Castigio grabbed the spear, slipped through the crack in the ship and scrambled to shore. He lined up with the others, soon lost in the crowd.

"Oh, thank you, somebody!" he said.