

Fisher of Men

A short story by Justin Newland

“There they are,” John Cabot said in his heavy Venetian accent, pointing at the crowded quay. One was a friar in a black cloak over a white habit, the other, his lay assistant, was attired in a more rugged cloth. The Black Friar strode up the gangplank followed by a line of men each porting a large bundle of twigs on their backs.

As he reached the top of the gangplank, from beneath the drapes of his cassock he pulled a crucifix, which he held up to the heavens, mumbled some blessed thing, and brushed past my shoulder.

“Wait, why are these men bringing this tinder on board? One spark and we’ll all be sent to heaven,” I remarked, stopping the first in the line from boarding. The smell of ale on his breath was rank.

The Black Friar lowered his hood revealing dim eyes, gaunt cheeks and a face as wrinkled as a dried fig.

“Capitan, I warn you, do not impede my work,” he glared. “Show these men the way to the hold.”

“No,” I cried. “The hold is already full – with victuals.”

“By the Lord our Christ, I am a fisher of men. Remove them, make room for the twigs. They are essential to the success of this holy expedition. They must be kept dry, so remove the victuals,” He spat the words out like poisoned morsels of food.

I was about to question him again when I felt a nudge in my elbow. It was John Cabot. He leant over and whispered in my ear, “The Friar bears the Seal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition.”

Then I knew all further resistance was futile: I felt crestfallen as I watched my crew unload the food and supplies onto the deck, while the friar’s men with their bundles of twigs stomped up the gangplank. In all my years at the helm, I’d never sailed with such a cargo, but then this was no ordinary voyage.

Once all of his blessed twigs were loaded, I noticed his lay assistant sloping up the gangplank carrying a large cage covered with a black cloth. I imagined it was a bird cage.

“S-sorry about your supplies,” he stammered in a voice as soft as the waters of the Avon.

“We all will be,” I replied. “What do they call you?”

“Geb Drum.” He had a neck like a goose, a crook nose and sleepy eyes that blinked as if he was walking through a hailstorm.

Before we weighed anchor, the friar gave an impromptu sermon. He declaimed that it was

our religious duty to discover the new land and there welcome every lost savage into the arms of Christendom. His words brought the fires of the inquisition right into the dock. From the terrified look on Geb's face, it appeared that I was not the only one who abhorred this righteous Dominican.

The sway and pitch of the ship's movement soon made me forget all about him. I looked forward to the routine of life at sea and my two watches of dawn and dusk. When Geb emerged on the morrow, I was on duty as the first slither of dawn bled out of the sky. His shadow was huddled over the cage beneath the mast as he lifted off the black cloth, revealing a pair of snow white doves. At dusk he returned. Then every day thereafter he'd feed the cooing pair.

One evening, ten days into the Atlantic, Geb let the doves out of the cage. One flew up to the rigging while the other perched on the main mast. In the gathering gloom, they looked like shimmering white angels, full of grace.

During those days of squall and swell, I fell in love with the ocean's vast, audacious beauty. As a young man in Bristow, I'd been confined to the stocks, spat upon and humiliated, shackled on one hand by a suffocating religion and on the other by cruel landowners. I had to find the new virgin land, which surely wouldn't be tainted by these pestilential monks.

We squeezed into our quarters as the winds howled and the rains lashed the deck. The men murmured that sooner or later the ship would reach the edge of the world and topple over into the fires of Hell. I was convinced the Dominican had stoked the men's superstitions. The crew could succour to him; that was their choice. Me, I preferred to listen to the creak and groan of the ships' timbers as she rose and fell to the tune of the ocean, safe in the knowledge that the ship was hewn from solid English oak. That was my solace.

On the fiftieth day at sea, pulled north by north east by a vital current, we followed huge shoals of brown-backed fish as long as my arm. They were so tantalisingly close, but the friar refused to allow us to fish for them. By now our supplies had gone, and no-one could eat tinder. At dawn, when Geb unlatched the cage, the birds refused to fly, preferring to stay on their perches, their heads tucked into their chests.

Later that day, a fog cocooned us.

"Let us celebrate the eve of the Feast of St. John the Baptist," the friar cried, droplets of water dripping from his hood. Like Geb, we all bent the knee and pressed palms together. Had we confessed our sins, the monk derided us, the mists would not have descended. In truth, we feared the edge of the world more than the friar. Through the night and the following day we followed the currents and the legions of fish, expecting at any moment to fall into the fires of perdition. At dusk, a breeze blew in and began to disperse the mists.

When Geb opened the cage, they both emerged, two flashes of white. They flew directly over the deck and out across the waters into the thinning mists. Geb reached out a forlorn arm: his face sunk. Yet John Cabot led the crew in a mighty cheer, full with relief and thanks in equal measure. Weak

from starvation, fearful of the world's edge, strangled by religious tyranny, still we were all exhilarated by the discovery of a new world. The doves had taken to the wing; it couldn't be far.

Men are rendered by the passion of the moments they engage with, and this was one that forever after shaped our lives.

I heard a shriek from behind me. When I turned and looked, a man was writhing on the deck, legs kicking and arms flailing. The deck was dark and at first I failed to name the man so demonically possessed. When I stepped forward, I saw it was the Dominican, his limbs twitching like a chicken with a broken neck. Now he'd have no need of all those bundles of twigs. Geb had confided in me that the Friar intended to purify the heathen souls of any of the savages who refused to convert.

Suddenly we were of one mind. I nodded at Geb, my boatswain and one of the crew. Holding one limb each, we lifted the friar, swung him back and forth, and then threw him overboard to join his beloved fishes. Another raucous cheer went up as the mists cleared and dusk settled, and I could just discern the silhouette of a coastline.