

# *The Benito Giphers*



*By Richard McRoberts*

*For Chris*

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## Chapter 1      What was that?

‘Take a look!’

Chris handed Wally the binoculars and went below.

‘You’re right. A house – with a bloody great tower on it! What is it?’

Chris was consulting the chart downstairs.

‘Buggered if I know.’

He climbed up into the cockpit again and peeled off his gloves.

‘Look here.’ He pointed. A tiny mark on the island indicated a dwelling, though not its size, which was considerable.

‘What does the gazetteer say?’ He could see that Chris had brought that up too.

Chris opened it up and flipped through.

*‘Babel Island. A granite island. Area 440 hectares, famous for its Short-tailed Shearwaters – some 3 million pairs, nearly a fifth of the whole species. Also Little Penguins. Sea Eagles and Peregrine Falcons nest in the cliffs. Privately owned.’*

They stared at the cliffs of the island.

‘Lots of birds, that’s for sure...’

‘Nothing about a house?’

‘Nup...’

‘It’s a bit hard to see clearly with the boat moving, but it looks very old. I’d say long since abandoned.’

‘Funny place for a house. Must be a landing place on the Flinders Island side. It’s far too rough to go ashore on this side. But great views. Whoever lived there would have been able to see ships twenty or thirty nautical miles away, in either direction. In fact pretty much all the marine traffic going to and from Tassie.’

‘That’s the reason for the lighthouse on Storehouse Island. Want to take a closer look?’

‘Why not? We’ve got plenty of time to make Deal Island before nightfall. Then a few hours and we’re back in Port Phillip Bay.’

Wally turned the tiller to port and headed towards the island.

‘Wal, is that the boat we saw back at Lady Barron? The filthy great big bastard?’

‘*Mary Dear II?*’

‘Yeah.’

‘I reckon so...’

‘What’s it doing out here?’

‘Dunno. It’s at anchor.’

‘Steer closer to the island. We’ll go between it and the island.’

‘Sure?’

‘No worries. This nor’westerly’s safe enough. It’s taking us away from land. We’re not going to be washed up on the rocks, if that’s what you’re thinking. And we’ve got 40 metres under us still.’

A quarter hour passed.

The island loomed above them. Its tall grey cliffs rose out of the sea. Birds wheeled. They were perhaps 300 metres offshore. The house was still visible, towering up into the overcast sky.

‘Nobody there! I was right – probably falling in on itself.’

Wally passed Chris the glasses.

‘Yep. Stuffed. Going by its age, I’d say the owner long since joined Davy Jones...’

‘Pull away and back to the proper course?’

‘Yeah. We’ve seen enough. Set 040! And keep your eye on the depth indicator – just in case.’

‘Aye, aye, Captain!’

Chris gathered the chart and book and went below again.

‘Cup of tea?’ he called up.

‘Beauty...’

Silence for a minute. Then...

‘MACCA! MACCA!! There’s something coming at us...!’

‘What?’

Chris was back up the stairs in a flash.

‘Where?’

‘Under the water... Something moving fast... and it’s coming towards us...!’

‘Snap yourself on – quickly!’

**CRASH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!**

‘SHIT!!!’

‘WHAT WAS THAT?’

‘Dunno... I didn’t get a good look...’

The boat rocked drunkenly. Its sails flapped as it slid round in a semi-circle towards the island.

‘BUGGER, BUGGER, BUGGER...!’

‘Shut up, Wally! Correct course. I’ll go below and check...’

‘Chris, I can’t steer!’

‘What do you mean, YOU CAN’T STEER?’

‘It won’t respond. Look!’

Sure enough, the tiller was loose.

‘BLOODY HELL. Now what? Mayday?’

‘No. Sit still and calm down. I’ll go and check below decks. It’s broad daylight. We’re only ten miles from Lady Barron. Damn it, we can *see* Flinders

Island. As long as we're not holed, we'll be all right.'

'Karen said it was madness to...'

'SHUT UP! Panic isn't going to help. Just give me a moment.'

'What are you doing...?'

Chris' voice came up from inside the yacht.

'No water in the bilges... No water near the engine... No water in the bow...'

He heaved up again, red with the exertion.

'We're intact below. Thank goodness!'

'Chris, that big boat. Call them up!'

'Good idea...'

'This is *La Mouette, La Mouette*. Struck by a whale. Calling the *Mary Dear, Mary Dear*. Come in please!'

Silence.

'Calling the *Mary Dear, Mary Dear*. Come in please!'

Silence.

'No luck.'

'A ship that size has to be listening in. What are they playing at?'

'Calling the *Mary Dear, Mary Dear*. Come in please!'

Ten minutes later, Chris clambered up again.

'We'll have to do it ourselves, Wally.'

'What?'

'Get back to port...'

'YEAH, BUT WE CAN'T FRIGGING WELL STEER...'

'Not with the tiller...'

'Well what with then?'

'We'll jury rig a steering pole...'

'WHAT?'

'We'll use the spinnaker pole, tied over the stern with a rope on either side – so we can steer with it. In light winds like this, we can basically run back down to Lady Barren – and probably get there faster than if we called out a rescue boat – supposing there is one...'

'Steering pole?'

'Standard practice when you lose your rudder. Don't worry...'

'Yeah but...'

'Want to swim?'

'Sarcastic bastard. Never again...'

'Shut up Wally. Let's just do it...'

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## Chapter 2      Obi One tells a tale

Lady Barron had only pub – the Furneaux Tavern. When they got there, it was practically empty. A grizzled old sea dog sat slumped in a corner.

The publican, the only other person in sight, put down the glass he was polishing, and nodded at them.

‘G’day,’ he said.

‘Hi there. We just tied up at the wharf. Got a bit of a problem. Steering’s stuffed. Think we got hit by a whale – off Babel Island.’

‘Yeah?’

A man of few words, thought Chris. This is going to be interesting.

‘You wouldn’t know someone who could help us?’

‘Flat Chat,’ said the publican.

‘Beg your pardon?’

‘Des Connor – but everyone calls him Flat Chat.’

‘Why?’

‘Grass grows faster than Flat Chat moves.’

‘I see... Anyone else we could try?’

‘Nup. Flat Chat’s your man.’

‘And where would we find Mr Chat ... Mr Connor?’

‘Right here. He comes in every morning, regular as clockwork.’

‘Excellent. We’ll have a cold one ourselves, while we wait.’

The publican turned to get their beers.

‘Babel Island, eh? ... A whale, eh?’

‘Think so...’

‘Odd things happening at Babel Island...’

‘Really?’

‘Too right. Strangers... Looking for something. If you believe Obi One, it’s a treasure...’

‘Really?’

‘No bullshit. Ask him.’

‘Ask who?’

The publican pointed at the old man asleep in the corner. ‘He’s got a theory about Babel Island. Shout him a beer, and he’ll tell you.’

‘Obi One?’

‘Name’s Oberon Canobi, so ... Mind you, he’s more than a bit mad.

Harmless, but a fruitcake...’

Minutes later, Chris and Wally were seated with the old guy. There were three beers in the middle of the table. It was a way to pass the time while waiting for Flat Chat.

‘Babel Island, eh?’

‘What’s this about a treasure?’

‘Who told you?’ said the old guy, suspiciously.

‘Him...’ said Chris, pointing to the publican.

‘Black Pete? ... He doesn’t believe me... Thinks I’m cracked,’ he said, making a twirling motion with his finger.

‘Maybe,’ said Chris diplomatically. ‘But obviously *you* believe in it.’

‘Tell us,’ coaxed Wally.

‘You may have heard of Benito’s treasure...’ said the old man, mysteriously – and licked his lips.

‘Benito?’ said Wally.

‘Wasn’t he the guy who buried his loot at Queenscliff?’ said Chris.

‘RUBBISH!’ The old man practically spat the words out. ‘No one ever found anything there...*Why?* Because it’s not *there*, that’s why.’

‘And it’s on Babel Island?’

‘Did I say *on*?’

‘Near?’

The old guy slurped his beer, and looked even more enigmatic.

‘Behind?’

‘Beyond?’

Obi One smiled a gap toothed smile. He was enjoying himself.

‘Under?’

‘That’s it laddy. Now you’re getting somewhere...’

‘Who was this Benito guy, Chris?’

‘A famous pirate. Eighteen hundreds, I think. Supposed to have ended up with a fabulous fortune. But the British Navy came after him. As they closed in, he hid the stuff away - somewhere. Soon after, the pirate hunters caught him, convicted him and strung him up from a yardarm. So no one ever found out where the treasure was.’

‘Not true...’ said the old man, in a whisper.

‘What?’

‘He bribed them.’

‘And...?’

‘Got away...’

‘Mr Canobi. You seem to know a lot about this man. How?’

‘Me great granddad served with him.’

‘What happened to him after he got away?’

‘He changed his name and took up a respectable life – in Van Diemen’s Land...’

‘Van Diemen’s...?’ Wally scratched his head.

‘*Tasmania*,’ muttered Chris. ‘And?’

‘He died at sea. Went down in a storm with all hands on this very coast. So no one knows where, including those halfwits on the *Mary Dear*.’

‘But how do you know it’s on ... *under* ... Babel Island?’

‘Because of the map... And the letters.’

Chris and Wally looked at him – stunned. Was Black Pete right? Maybe the

old guy *was* living in cloud cuckoo land.

‘And *you* have this map?’

‘Naturally ...’

‘And it shows the island?’

‘No.’

‘What then?’

‘The house.’

‘What house?’

Obi One pointed. He was pointing up the coast.

‘The house on Babel Island? But if you only have a map showing a house, how can you be sure it’s *that* house?’

‘Because of the name...’

‘What name?’

‘The name of the pirate...’

‘But we were talking about the house...’

‘Same thing...’

‘What?’

‘The name of the pirate and the name of the island!’ The old guy looked at them as if they were a sandwich short of a picnic.

Chris and Wally exchanged glances. This was getting crazy – like mirrors that show your reflection in both directions forever. *Was* he mad?

‘Don’t get you...’ One last try to make sense of this.

‘Flinders is supposed to have named it Babel Island because of the sound of the birds. But *Flinders* – in another life – had known Benito, under *his* old name, *before* he turned to piracy. In fact, he owed him a favour. It was a close friend of Flinders who caught Benito, and let him go again.’ He mimed money changing hands. ‘Flinders’ mate helped him cover up.’

‘So what was Benito’s new name?’

‘Babel!’

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### Chapter 3      Flat Chat makes a deal

The conversation was interrupted by a loud noise. Someone had come into the bar.

‘Flatty!’ said Black Pete. ‘The usual?’

They turned and looked at the newcomer. He was a very large man, dressed in a grubby overall. His hair was long, grey and unwashed. He was wearing a battered captain’s cap, which had seen its best days. He had a huge moustache which drooped on either side of his mouth. When he turned and looked at them, they saw with a shock that he had a glass eye. It was examining the ceiling, while his good eye studied them darkly.

‘This here’s Flat Chat!!’ called the barman. ‘These blokes been waiting for ya...’ he added with what could have been a sneer.

They made their way to the bar and introduced themselves. Flat Chat sipped his beer and glared at them.

‘That your boat tied up by the crane?’ he growled. He took out a cigarette, ignored the NO SMOKING sign, and lit up. He was a two pack a day guy, they could tell.

They explained what the problem was, using as few words as possible. This man was not in a good mood.

‘Have another one?’ said Chris, pointing to his empty glass.

‘Don’t mind if I do.’

Flat Chat’s mood lightened slightly.

‘I hear you’re the go-to man around here for boat repairs...’

‘Dunno where you got that idea,’ said Flat Chat, fixing his eye on Black Pete. ‘I tinker,’ he grumbled.

‘Come on, Flatty,’ said Pete. ‘They *all* go to you. You’re the best between Melbourne and Hobart!’

Flat Chat burped, nodded privately to himself, and lit another fag.

‘Any chance you could look at our steering?’ said Wally. ‘Otherwise, we’re stuffed.’

‘I’m flat chat at the moment,’ said Flat Chat. ‘And Gofa’s gone...’

‘Gofa?’

‘Arnie Biddle, his nephew, and assistant,’ explained Pete.

‘Gofa’s down in the big smoke for a week.’

‘Hobart,’ translated the barman.

‘Bloody holiday!’ roared Flat Chat, his spittle dousing them.

‘Have another,’ said Chris, nodding to the barman.

‘Anything we can do to help out, take the pressure off you – make it easier – so you can have a quick look at our boat?’

Flat Chat’s eye narrowed. Here was an opening he hadn’t expected.

‘You bloody yachties know how to drive a motor boat?’ He squinted at them. Chris checked himself in the course of saying a motor boat wasn’t a 747.

‘Of course...’

‘Well, I’ve got to get the air bottles out to the *Mary Dear*. They’re hunting for wrecks, the silly bastards. Gofa normally takes care of it for me, but the little turd’s probably up to his elbows in sheilas as we speak. Fancy a refreshing little trip out to sea? Great day for it... And you know the way, I hear.’

Chris and Wally exchanged glances. Word got around here. Flat Chat already knew about their recent movements. What to do? They *had* offered, after all. *The Godfather*, that repository of wisdom, had put it so well...

‘It’s an offer we can’t refuse,’ Chris said, smiling graciously.

‘While you’re gone, I’ll try and find time to have a look at your boat...’

‘Great!’

‘Meet me at midday down on the wharf, and I’ll give you a briefing, and the keys to the runabout.’

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## 4 Babel's Grave

Flat Chat was over an hour late for his own briefing. When he finally turned up he was a little the worse for wear. His face was flushed, and he seemed unsteady on his feet – though he had no difficulty jumping into the ‘runabout’.

It was an ancient open wooden workboat, with broad side decks, a long wooden tiller, and a wheezy old diesel motor.

‘Is this thing safe?’ ventured Wally.

‘COURSE IT’S SAFE!!’ Flat Chat fixed him with a contemptuous eye. ‘Got lifejackets ... Got a compass ... Got an eskie.’

‘Those are the bottles for the *Mary Dear*.’ He pointed to a palette on the front deck stacked with around twenty of what looked like large scuba bottles.

‘But how ...?’

‘They’ve got a crane.’

‘Who do we ask for?’

‘Welby ... Famous wreck hunter, I’m told.’

‘Not someone looking for treasure?’

‘You been talking to Obi One?’ He glared at them. They nodded.

‘Full of shit. Lives in a dream world.’

‘What about his grandfather the pirate?’

‘Absolute crap!! His grandfather was a sealer. Married an aboriginal woman at the reserve on this island. Obi One tries the story on anyone silly enough to listen.’

‘And Babel?’

‘What of it?’

‘Is it named after Mr Babel, the reformed pirate?’

Flat Chat burst into raucous laughter. His face turned an even brighter shade of red. He slapped his knee. Tears ran from his eye.

‘Pirate eh?’ he spluttered. ‘Pirate be damned. Flinders heard the birds as he passed the island and called it that because of the row they were making. Something from the Bible, it seems... Anyway, enough fanning about. Take those bottles out to the *Mary Dear*, and I’ll look at your boat.’

By the time they reached the *Mary Dear* it was mid afternoon. Flat Chat’s workboat was reliable at least. The old motor chugged along without missing a beat. Full throttle was only perhaps 6 knots, but the sea was calm.

As they neared the *Mary Dear*, they could see how big she really was. This was a serious exploration vessel – perhaps 100 foot long. A Zodiac hung from a davitt on the rear deck. A mysterious gantry frame on tracks, enclosing a long square cavity like a dry dock, occupied the rest of the space.

‘AHOY!!!’

A sun-tanned man in white overalls was hailing them. They turned the boat and steered in closer to the ship.

‘Where’s Connor?’

‘Back at port.’

‘And Biddle?’

‘Hobart.’

‘Who are you?’

‘We agreed to run these out to you – in return for a favour.’

‘Favour?’

‘Our boat got hit by a whale. Flat Chat’s fixing it.’

‘You’ll be lucky if he gets around to it before Christmas. Lazy prick. All right then. I’ll get the boys to help you.’

‘What sort of wrecks are you looking for? Mister ...?’ said Wally.

‘Welby.’ He looked at them strangely. ‘Dr Welby. Who told you about wrecks?’

‘Flat Chat.’

‘He’s wrong. I’m an oceanographer. The *Mary Dear*’s leased by the CSIRO to study the continental shelf. Sonar, imaging – that sort of thing. And a word to the wise ... don’t believe anything Connor tells you.’

Welby disappeared.

Almost immediately, two members of the crew were looking down at them from the deck. They lowered the cable of a crane. Chris and Wally caught up the four rope stays attached to the palette and dropped them over the hook of the crane. Minutes later, the bottles were on board.

‘Tell Connor we need the same again – tomorrow if possible. We’ll return these ones later.’ And without another word they vanished too.

‘Great manners,’ muttered Wally. ‘Not so much as “Have a cuppa... Don’t mind if I do...” It was more “Piss off now before we blow you out of the water...” I reckon something funny’s going on.’

‘Could be,’ said Chris, gunning the engine of the workboat, ‘but at least we’ll get back much faster than we came, without all that weight.’

‘Say Chris, what about a quick look at Babel Island?’

‘Why?’

‘What if Obi One’s right? Doesn’t it tempt you?’

‘You’re an idiot. And *he*’s crazy.’

‘Flat Chat said Obi One’s mad. Welby said don’t believe Flat Chat. If Welby’s right, then Flat Chat is lying about Obi One. Therefore Obi One is telling the truth ...’

‘Shut the hell up, Wally. Let’s just make it a quick visit.’

And he turned the boat towards the island.

Climbing to the top of Babel Island was not easy. But at the top, the view was spectacular. They could see for literally miles up and down the coast. Even Lady Barren was visible in the distance.

Up close, Babel House was imposing. Surmounting the highest outcrop of

rock on the easterly side of the island, it rose up with all the grandeur of a palace in the middle of nowhere. No money had been spared in its construction. The ancient stone walls, though discoloured by mould and half covered in ivy, were obviously still as strong as when they were built. Birds nested in the roof. The paths were cracked and full of weeds. The garden overgrown. A well in a defile below the house was the only structure nearby.

‘Why would anyone live here?’

‘Someone who hated the rest of the world...?’

‘Or feared it?’

‘A lunatic?’

‘A criminal?’

They walked around it. The front portico, a grand affair with stone balustrade, looked out to sea. It was clear that this had been the mansion of a wealthy man. The door was huge – and locked. The windows were covered with shutters – and secured from the inside. The house was as secretive as its late master. A puzzle lost in time.

‘What’s that?’

Wally pointed. Not far from the house, overlooking the sea, was an upright stone. They walked down to it.

The lettering was weathered, but the inscription was still readable.

*Here lies the body of  
Graham Babel  
1778-1856  
beloved of all his friends and shipmates  
great seafarer and noble soul*



‘But I thought he was lost at sea ...’ said Chris. ‘So how come there’s a grave at all?’

‘Obi One told us that. But Obi One could have been lying, and Flat Chat telling the truth. Or Welby telling us whoppers.’

‘Shut up Wally...’

‘And what about these?’

On the back of the gravestone were mysterious letters and symbols.



‘Decoration.’

‘You reckon?’

‘Who cares? Let’s get back to the boat. We’ve only got a couple of hours to reach Lady Barron before nightfall.’

‘I’ll take a picture.’

‘Why?’

‘They remind me of something. Dunno what.’ He took out his digital camera, and shot a couple of pictures.

‘Good. Let’s go.’ And Chris headed off down the hill towards the boat. Half way down, he turned to check on Wally. No sign of him.

‘WALLY!!!’

‘Coming...’

Wally appeared, scrambling through the long grass. Minutes later, they were back in Flat Chat’s boat and Chris was gunning the engine. They were soon on their way back.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘I found another grave., lower down.’

‘So?’

‘Someone called Mary Welsh.’

‘Who was she?’

‘Dunno – maybe his housekeeper?’

‘What is it, Wally?’ Wally was staring at the screen of his camera.

‘What did you make of the symbols on the gravestone?’

‘Nothing.’

‘What if I told you it was cipher? Or code, as you would call it.’

‘I’d say you were crazy too. If it’s code, what does it say?’

‘Buggered if I know. But it’s a message of some kind.’

‘About what?’

‘Dunno.’

‘Great.’

‘Except that I know who it’s from...’

‘Who?’

‘Babel.’

‘To whom?’

‘To Babel’s shipmates. And since they’re long gone - maybe to us.’

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## 5 The first code

Back at Lady Barron, things were unchanged. *La Mouette* was still in the water.

‘Welby might be right,’ said Chris, scratching his head. ‘No sign of any action on the boat...’

‘Maybe he’s got a plan. Or needs supplies. Or something...’

‘Or maybe he’s been drinking all day...’

‘Let’s find out.’

‘How?’

‘Where would he be?’

‘You’re right. Time to eat anyway.’

Sure enough, at the tavern, Flat Chat was once again propping up the bar.

‘Should we ask about the boat?’ said Wally.

‘No point. He’s shit faced. He’d just fob us off.’

‘You reckon you should let your Dad know about what’s happened?’

‘He’d just worry about it. Only a day or so and we’ll be on our way.’

‘Maybe. What about some grub?’

‘Too right. I’ll have the beef and reef – and a bottle of Tassie pinot. What about you?’

‘Fisherman’s basket. Could you get it? I want to talk to Obi One.’

‘Why?’

‘There *is* something odd about Babel House. And as for that gravestone...’

‘Wally, you’ve been playing too many computer games. Your brain’s gone soft. This isn’t a mystery story – it’s you and me and a boat that needs fixing - pronto.’

Ten minutes later, they were tucking into their meal. The serves were gargantuan. The pinot was excellent.

‘What’d Obi One say?’

‘He wasn’t there.’

‘Good. Might stop you obsessing.’

‘Got a pen?’

Chris handed him one. Wally clicked his camera on, and studied the images from the island. He wrote down seven letters on the cardboard beer coaster. He scratched his head and took another sip.

‘What did you make of that gravestone?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Still don’t believe there’s something going on? What if I show you a cipher?’

Wally slid the coaster across. On it were written the letters he had transcribed:

# i o B t e n

‘So?’

‘Isn’t it obvious?’

‘What?’

‘The message.’

‘Wally. You’re giving me indigestion. What message?’

‘Babel’s first clue – to his shipmates. One of the simplest of all ciphers...’

‘And what does it say?’

‘It reveals his secret identity...’

‘What are these letters anyway?’

‘The odd ones on the gravestone.’

‘Odd?’

‘Look here.’ Wally showed Chris the picture. ‘The ones that stand out. The ones that look like a slip of the chisel. If you put them all together you get: i o B t e n.’

‘Which is...?’

‘Benito!’

‘Bloody oath.’

‘The chances of them spelling *that* name – accidentally – on *that* island - are a zillion to one.’

‘Maybe. Or maybe it’s *that* overactive imagination of yours!’

‘But the island is – or was – owned by Graham Babel. Why would the name of a famous pirate – even in code - show up on his gravestone?’

‘Wal. What’s all this about codes anyway?’

‘You remember that programming lecturer at uni I told you about? He decided to set us a series of puzzles, in computer code – to sharpen us up for the job ahead. He was nutty for ciphers. Told us about some of the most famous in history: starting as far back as Julius Caesar – who invented the first great military code – the ‘Caesar shift’. And poor old Mary Queen of Scots. Lost her head because of a code. And Edgar Allan Poe – who wrote one that wasn’t solved for a century or more. And the Enigma code – surely you’ve heard of that...?’

‘Wally! Enough! Spare me the detail. Have another glass, and calm down.’

Wally looked disappointed.

‘All right then. Supposing it *is* a code – just supposing – what’s its purpose? Why would a guy carve a code on his gravestone – a gravestone that wouldn’t be seen by anyone?’

‘The clue is in the third line.’

‘Which is?’

‘*Beloved of all his friends and shipmates.*’

‘And?’

‘He expected his friends and shipmates to come looking for him. Perhaps there was a pact of some kind – like a will to us. He wasn’t going to leave his ill



gotten loot to the Lost Dogs Home, was he? After his death, his old shipmates were supposed to turn up and share the treasure. So he left them the first clue – on his gravestone.’

‘But he’s been dead 150 years! And if something valuable had been found there, everyone would have heard about it. It’d be famous.’

‘He *expected* them to come. But maybe they were killed off themselves. Which means...’

‘It’s still there...’

‘As Obi One says!’

‘OK. Let’s just grant you the possibility that this theory might fly. That it’s the first clue. Recognising his name is like finding the name on the door. What next?’

‘You’re right. You need a key.’

‘I was talking metaphorically.’

‘So was I. Every code needs a key – that’s what they call it... It might be a single letter, or a book, or a grid. It needs to be known to both the coder and the other guy. That way only *they* know how to read it – it’s a mystery to everyone else.’

‘What about the marking on the other side of the gravestone?’

‘Yeah!’

‘What were they?’

Wally handed over the camera. They both stared at the strange symbols.

‘A code of some kind, obviously.’

‘Brilliant. What sort? And what does it mean?’



‘It’s got six letters.’

‘Bingo.’

‘Like Benito.’

‘True. Is it a coincidence? Probably not.’

‘If the first message is ‘Benito’, perhaps *that’s* the key...?’

‘The name is the key?’

‘Why not?’

‘Wait a minute. Perhaps it’s like the Rosetta Stone...’

‘The what?’

‘Champillion – a famous frog – the guy who cracked hieroglyphics – worked it out from a stone.’

‘Wally, what are you talking about?’

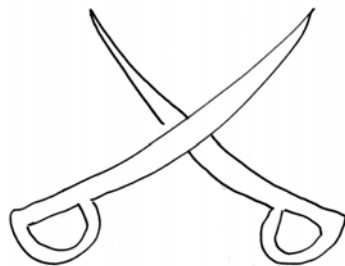
‘There was an engraving called the Rosetta Stone. It was ancient. On it were three languages: Coptic, Greek and hieroglyphics. Now Champillion could read Coptic and Greek – the guy was a genius. But the third language was in an ancient Egyptian script known as ‘holy writing’ – hieroglyphics – which no one could understand at that time. What Champillion saw was that the three messages were all the same. Like one of those signs in hospitals with a warning in Italian, and Greek, and Vietnamese – but it’s always the same sign. Champillion used the message in the two other languages to decipher the hieroglyphics – and thus crack the code.’

‘Great. So how does that help us?’

‘If ‘Benito’ is the key – then could it be that it *also* says ‘Benito’ – *in code*.’

‘And what about the other thing on the gravestone?’

‘Yeah. The picture.’



‘And the first symbol in the picture writing is...’

‘You’re right.’

‘Exactly the same as the picture on the front – below the epitaph.’

‘So the crossed swords – which are obviously significant in some way – they could be his personal sign - are also part of the code.’

‘Wally – that’s great.’

The two of them drank another glass.

‘There’s only one thing...’

‘What’s that?’

‘We don’t have a clue what it all means. If anything...’

‘But tomorrow, we can talk to Obi One again, and we might just work it out. In the meantime, I want to find out all I can about Benito. What I need is some research – we’ve got the time after all.’

'Righto. Back to the boat. I'm going to bed. I'm stuffed. And Wally...'

'Yeah?'

'Don't wake me up – even if you find a personally addressed email from Benito. Do me a favour and keep the next instalment till tomorrow.'

'Sarcastic bastard!'

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## 6 Who was the 'Bloody Sword'?

Next morning, Chris was woken by the smell of coffee. He poked his head out of the rear berth.

'G'day!' said Wally. 'Want some? And I got some croissants from the bakery.'

'You normally sleep in. It's only seven o'clock. What's the matter with you?'

'Benito!'

'Oh no... Here we go again...'

'Want to know what I found out?'

'Do I have a choice?'

Chris scrambled out and sat down. He took a swig of coffee and bit into a croissant.

'Yummy! OK then – give it to me.'

'Benito Bonito – also known as the 'Bloody Sword'...'

'Why?'

'Because of his cruelty...'

'That symbol on the gravestone – it shows two swords crossed.'

'Of course!'

'Anyway, what about him?'

'He was active from about 1818 onwards. One of the last of the old style pirates – before the Navy cleaned them up. Benito worked the Caribbean and the African coast. Spent his time knocking off Spanish ships taking all that gold back home from the mines in South America – Inca gold you might call it.'

'But who was he?'

'There's the mystery. The name is Portuguese or Italian. But one thing I read suggested that the name concealed his true identity.'

'Which was?'

'English.'

'Like Blackbeard.'

'Exactly – and dozens of others – Captain Teach (or Blackbeard), Captain Kidd, Captain Roberts (Black Bart) – all hacked to bits or hanged – except for the one or two who bought their way to freedom.'

'Come again?'

'Sir Henry Morgan, one of the most bloodthirsty of all, simply paid off the authorities, and retired in style. They never touched him, and he died of old age. Same with Madame Cheng...'

'Who?'

'The famous woman pirate. She shared her booty with the emperor and turned respectable, living a life of luxury and acted as if she'd never so much as told a white lie.'

'Like a crooked politician these days... Or, if Obi One is right, Benito in his last years.'

'That's right. But the most amazing thing is *who* he might have been...'

‘Yes?’

‘One theory is that he was Lieutenant Bennet Graham.’

‘Graham?’

‘You noticed too, eh?’

‘The name on the gravestone. Of course it was his first name, but it’s a bit of a coincidence.’

‘Sure is. But wait. If the theory is right, Graham was not only a naval man – I guess you picked that up already - but high born. Not exactly the aristocracy – but gentry. And get this – served with none other than Nelson at Trafalgar.’

‘Nelson?’

‘The famous battle in which the English under Nelson defeated Napoleon!’

‘A British naval hero?’

‘Yep. Anyway, after the battle, covered with honours, Graham was sent off to the Pacific in a ship called *HMS Devonshire*. His job was to survey the coast from Cape Horn to Panama.’

‘And?’

‘He gets to Panama, a hot spot for bad guys, and falls on evil ways. Or more exactly, meets up with some rough types. Characters an English gentleman shouldn’t be drinking with.’

‘So?’

‘There’s some doubt about whether he might have had a letter of marque..’

‘A what?’

‘A letter signed by the King, allowing him to capture the ships of the enemy – so long as he shared the booty with the Crown.’

‘Enemy?’

‘France – the old enemy. Spain certainly. If he *did* have the letter, he would have been a privateer – effectively a pirate working for the government.’

‘Capturing ships for the government?’

‘Mate, governments always want money. He would have thought of himself as a nautical tax collector. Sir Henry Morgan *had* been. *And* Captain Kidd – before he captured the wrong ship and they outlawed him.’

‘What happened to Kidd?’

‘He sailed into port thinking himself a hero, and to his horror they clapped him in irons. He ended up swinging from a rope.’

‘Nice.’

‘Rough days, buddy.’

‘But Graham and Benito – what’s going on there?’

‘My guess is that at some stage, Graham went over to the dark side. And acquired a stage name – ditching the nice sounding Bennet Graham and grabbing a swashbuckling Latin one - Benito Bonito. It *sounds* fake, doesn’t it?’

‘Bennet ... Benito ... the first three letters are the same. And four out of the six letters are the same.’

‘Bugger me. You’re right.’

‘Was there any mention of treasure?’

‘Are you kidding? Graham, or Benito as he now was, had turned to crime on the richest coast in the world. He and his men led the pirate high life – capturing anything that came by – mainly Spanish shipping in that part of the world. And much of it loaded with Inca gold. He was so feared that he got to be known as ‘the bloody sword’. And then he meets up with Thompson, and things take an even more interesting turn.’

‘Who’s Thompson?’

‘Another British captain. Quite a good guy, it would seem, until he meets Benito. And then he too turns bad. Have you heard of the “loot of Lima”?’

‘You’re joking. Well, go on – tell me - what was it?’

‘Supposedly the greatest treasure of all.’

‘And...?’

‘The time by now is 1820. A crazy revolutionary called Jose de San Martin is threatening to take over Lima. So the Spanish Viceroy decides to hide the Spanish treasure. There’s a huge collection in the cathedral at Lima. It includes a life-size statue of the Virgin Mary, made of solid gold. Current value of the whole hoard – about 60 million dollars. So the Spanish turn up at the harbour with their stuff. And guess what - the only available ship is Thompson’s. But they know him, and trust him. An honest English sea captain. So they do a deal with him - to take the treasure and get it away in time. Then bring it back when things calm down. Thompson agrees. They provide two priests and soldiers to guard it.’

‘And...?’

‘So Thompson sails off into the sunset... But wait. He meets up with Benito – another old naval mate from way back. And guess what?’

‘What?’

‘Thompson’s good intentions go out the window. The temptation is too great. The priests and the soldiers have their throats slit and get dumped overboard.’

‘Thompson?’

‘Benito – probably...’

‘The Bloody Sword...’

‘Just so.’

‘So Benito/Graham and Thompson head off to Cocos Island.’

‘What?’

‘A tiny island west of Panama – long associated with pirates. Great natural harbour. Water. A place to hide things.’

‘So they hide the treasure...’

‘As you do...’

‘The loot of Lima...?’

‘Yes. It’s all looking good for them, until – heading away again for more adventures – they’re spotted by a Spanish man-of-war.’

‘Not good?’

‘Disastrous. The two of them are wanted men by this time. The Spanish seize the ship. They know who they’ve caught. And they sentence them to death...’

‘End of story...’

‘Not quite. They do a deal. Agree to reveal where they’ve hidden the treasure. So they’re taken back to Cocos, under armed guard this time.’

‘So the Spanish recover the loot?’

‘No.’

‘Let me guess. The bad guys make a run for it?’

‘Right. They tear off into the jungle, and disappear. The Spanish search everywhere, but can’t find them. They eventually sail off.’

‘And?’

‘A whaler comes by a few weeks later and picks them up – just in time, because they’re starving by this stage. And so they escape again. Some time later they capture another ship – the *Relampago* – and off they go. Now at this point the trail becomes really confusing...In fact, both men seem to disappear from the pages of history.’

‘Obviously, they go back to Cocos and help themselves to the loot.’

‘No. There are certainly tales of treasure on Cocos Island. For over a century people have been searching there – looking for the Lima treasure.’

‘But?’

‘It isn’t there. No one has ever found it. I reckon they moved it. They’d already been nearly busted once, and barely got away with their lives. My hunch is that they went back and shifted it – to a spot as far away from Panama, and Europe, as possible. Somewhere the British Navy would be unlikely to look.’

‘Queenscliff?’

‘Hardly. Port Phillip was by then a minor colony. The Navy would have been in and out constantly. Maybe that legend about the navy seeing Benito refers to an incident – another near miss. No, I think the two amigos went right to the arse end of the world, to a place already lousy with crooks, but English speaking, where Graham and Thompson could pass themselves off as legitimate gentlemen – and completely cover their tracks...’

‘Tassie?’

‘Spot on. Bought up big – a type of crude money laundering – the Mafia still do it. Established businesses or bought farms. And stashed the bulk of the loot on their own property. Or *under* it.’

‘Babel Island. A privately owned island, with views up and down the coast as far as the eye could see. So if any pirate hunters called, they could make themselves scarce. Wally. We need to see Obi One’s map.’

‘Right enough. But first - I’ve got one last surprise for you.’

‘Which is?’

‘The name of Thompson’s ship. The one that took the loot of Lima away for, and from, the Spanish.’

‘No idea. Tell me.’

‘The *Mary Dear*.’

‘What?’

‘Exactly!’

‘What are the chances of that sort of coincidence?’

‘Uncountable.’

‘But what does that mean about Dr Welby?’

‘Stuffed if I know...’

‘What are they *really* looking for out there – so close to Babel Island?’

‘If Canobi knows – and it’s not exactly a secret around here - then others know too. Let’s see if we can get a look at his map.’

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