The Postmodern Mariner

Rhys Hughes

A short book of implausible adventures featuring absurdities, anachronisms, exaggerations, outrageous puns, pirates, mythological beings, giant cups of tea and the occasional metafictional trick

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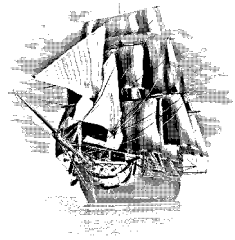
Mostly narrated by Castor Jenkins
& the
Postmodern Mariner himself



"Do you feel lucky, albatross?
Well, do ya, punk?"

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Dedicated to

the utterly lovely Adele Whittle,
may all her moons be ripe cherries

Contents

Part One

Castor Jenkins
The Münchhausen of Porthcawl

Castor on Troubled Waters 1

Canis Raver 11

The Plucked Plant 23

When Wales Played Asgård 31

Interstellar Domestic 41

The Cream-Jest of Unset Custard 53

The Day the Town of Porthcawl was Accidentally Twinned with the Capital of the Cheese and Biscuits Empire 61

Part Two

Piper at the Fates of Ooze

The Lip Service 77

Part Three

The Postmodern Mariner in Person

Rommel Cobra's Swimming Carnival 97

Part One

Castor Jenkins
The Münchhausen of Porthcawl

Castor on Troubled Waters

He's almost fifty years of age, Castor Jenkins is, which for a stereotypical Welshman must be reckoned venerable, if not ancient. Not that he takes kindly to being considered a stereotype. He likes to point out that real Welshmen *don't* live exclusively on a diet of beer and chips, nor do they avoid exercise, work and responsibility every waking minute of the day: the fact he does those things is a mark of his uniqueness and it's just a coincidence that the cliché and his individualism are the same.

But in fact there's some dispute about his true age, and it's possible he might be twice as old as he says, for something incredible happened one day that confused the issue. He was sitting in his favourite pub with his best friends, Paddy Deluxe and Frothing Harris, getting ready to play cards and win heavily, as always, when a disagreement about the integrity of past games threatened to spoil the evening. Paddy started it with a complaint about the physical condition of Castor's cards. His argument ran as follows:

"The state of your deck is abysmal, truly it is, and you might as well be playing with marked cards, for all the different beer stains on the backs, not to mention chip fat drippings, surely form patterns recognisable to you but not to us, and so allow you to know what's coming next."

"In other words, to cheat," added Frothing Harris.

Castor Jenkins announced that he resented the accusation, but his friends continued to grumble and the fuss gained

momentum and became an unbreakable refusal to play even a single round unless they used the brand new pack, fresh and unopened, that Paddy had thoughtfully brought with him. And there was talk of reimbursement for previous losses, and hints of compensation on top of that, and finally Castor was forced to back down and agree that the beer and chip stains *might* be considered to be arranged in a suspicious manner.

They played with the new pack and Castor lost every game and he soon found himself owing a sum in the region of £100 to both of them. Unable to settle up on the spot, he offered to go out and find a cash machine and return with the money as quickly as possible. His friends nodded.

"That's a reasonable suggestion," they said.

"I'll be back in ten minutes," Castor declared.

He stood and walked out and they watched him with triumph in their eyes, but it was the sort of triumph that a fish feels when it bites a worm on a hook, and so their eyes glittered sickly, waiting to see what trick was in store, for they couldn't imagine Castor would do exactly what he promised without some effort at regaining the upper hand. Ten minutes passed but he didn't appear. An attempt to contact him on his mobile phone proved futile. Paddy rubbed his nose and Harris scratched his chin, but not in that order.

An hour later Castor returned and he was breathing hard and he staggered around the room before returning to his place at the table and sitting down, still panting and mumbling to himself in a language that was either Spanish or Arabic, Paddy and Harris couldn't agree on that, before shuddering and licking his lips and tugging at his earlobes. They gazed at him in silence and he slowly regained his composure and addressed them directly. He said:

"You won't believe what has just happened to me!"

"Tell us," they replied.

"Very well," he said slowly, "but I need a drink to settle my nerves first. You don't mind if I take a sip of your beer? That's better. And yours as well? Sure, a massive gulp isn't the same as

a sip, but listen carefully: I was kidnapped! I know it sounds ridiculous but it's true nonetheless. Shortly after I left you, while walking along the esplanade, I noticed a strange vessel anchored offshore, an old fashioned galleon. Then a boat was lowered from it and began rowing closer and I soon realised there was something unusual about it."

"How unusual?" asked Paddy.

Castor lowered his voice to a whisper. "It was crewed by men dressed like pirates, with black breeches and billowing white shirts, spotted scarves tied around their heads, eye-patches and bristling beards, and many waved cutlasses in the air or carried knives between their teeth, and I imagined that a film was being made, even though I couldn't see a director or any cameras. I wanted to stay and watch, but my first duty was to get your money and so I hurried onwards."

"Very considerate of you," observed Harris.

Castor nodded. "I reached the cash machine, inserted my card, punched in my number and withdrew the crisp notes, but as soon as the money was in my hand I felt myself being lifted up and carried away. A mob of howling ruffians filled the street. They took the cash machine as well, blowing it out of the wall with gunpowder. That explosion disordered my senses, I can tell you! I was so stunned I never properly realised what was going on until it was too late. Everywhere there was chaos, broken bottles on the road, the overpowering smell of rum. When the clouds of smoke cleared I saw that they had bundled me aboard the boat.

"It was at this point I understood that these men were not actors but real pirates. As the history books tell us, pirates don't just attack other ships, they also raid coastal towns, looting and sacking. Porthcawl is a coastal town and ripe for such unwanted attentions. These pirates had obviously decided to make a rapid strike, grabbing what they could and departing before the police arrived. I imagine they were disappointed with their haul, just one cash machine and a single captive, namely myself."

"Not much of a profit there," agreed Paddy and Harris.

"True," sighed Castor, "but perhaps they needed the practise. Anyway I was taken to the galleon and locked inside a narrow cell where I lay in mouldy darkness, my mind filled with thoughts of what pirates traditionally do to prisoners, but after calming down I stopped believing I was destined to walk the plank. If they wanted me dead they would have saved a lot of effort by cutting my throat at the cash machine. So it grew increasingly likely they intended to sell me into slavery. I felt terrible, knowing that you were sitting here waiting for your money, but I had no way of getting a message to you.

"The days passed slowly, and I was sick during a horrid storm, and they gave me nothing to eat and drink but bread and water. When I asked for proper nourishment they laughed in a piratical fashion and treated all my other requests with similar contempt. I began to rot in that prison, but one morning a man more distinguished than the others opened the door and let me out. He was Captain Ribs, he announced, the leader of the pirates, and he had a proposal for me. He led me to his cabin and asked me to sit down and offered the chips and beer I craved. When I was full, he scrutinised me closely and said:

'We're a man short and to run the ship with maximum efficiency I need to find a replacement. You're the only candidate for the position and so I want to offer you the job. If you don't want it and would prefer the life of a slave in the hellish butter mines of Kowpoo, I'll understand.'

'I need to think about it. What exactly is the job?'

'Lookout. Our last lookout fell to his death last night, just like his predecessor, and the lookout before him, not to mention the lookout before *him*, and so on. Without a lookout we don't know where we're going and won't recognise it when we get there, so it's a very important post carrying a great deal of responsibility.'

"I was about to declare that I wanted nothing to do with responsibility of any kind but then it occurred to me that as a member of the ship's crew I stood a better chance of escaping and paying you the money I owed than if I ended up working in the butter mines of Kowpoo. So I accepted. Captain Ribs was

delighted and explained my new duties. I had to climb the tallest mast to the crow's nest and call down whenever I saw anything noteworthy. He gave me a comprehensive list of things considered 'noteworthy' and it consisted of the following: land, storms, whirlpools, treasure ships, rival pirates, reefs, cannibals, whales, giant squid, mermaids, lifeboats, seductive cloud formations, alterations in the shape, colour or tensile strength of the horizon line.

"My job began immediately and I climbed the rigging with a queasy stomach. Higher and higher went I, my fingers rubbed raw on the rough cords, my feet slipping, the sweat pouring off my brow in droplets as thick and yellow as chip oil, but determined to reach the top without admitting defeat. I got there safely, in case you're wondering. The crow's nest was hardly bigger or more secure than a large wok with slippery sides and the precariousness of my position generated little or no contentment in my heart. I wondered how long it would be before I too fell to my doom. Fortunately the sea was calm at this particular time and I was able to discharge my duties to a satisfactory degree. Whenever I spied an object on the surface of the ocean I checked the list to see if it merited a shout. 'Large floating log' did not, but 'Large floating log with a man sitting on it' did. And so it went."

Paddy interrupted the story by asking, "How did you sleep?"

"Badly is the honest answer," sighed Castor, "but I was able to curl myself into a ball tight enough to fit the crow's nest. It was cold at night, even in the tropics, maybe because I was so high up. Don't ask how food and drink was delivered to me: if you do that, I'll also have to explain how I relieved myself! While my fellow pirates far below gorged themselves on watermelon and toast spread with butter from Kowpoo, and drank rum and lime juice, I went largely without, but there were occasions when I was allowed to descend. Each time we docked at a port, I had permission to go ashore with the rest of the crew."

"How many ports did you visit?" wondered Harris.

"Too many to remember! We sailed around the world several

times and stopped off in Bombay, Rangoon, Surabaya, Shanghai, Osaka, Lima, Montevideo, Luanda and the strange seaside towns that dot the coasts of Lowest Bo, Zing and the Mediocre Utopia, among others. Once we even docked at Tenby in Wales and I saw a chance to jump ship and make my way back to Porthcawl on a bus, with a change at Swansea, but Captain Ribs detained me and so the opportunity was lost. He had something important to say and I had no choice but to let him say it.

'Look here, Master Jenkins,' he began, 'of all the lookouts I've ever employed you are the best by far. You always shout out at the earliest moment, you never make mistakes and you haven't yet fallen to your death. You are so perfect I wish I could keep you forever! Promise me that if you ever marry and have a son, you'll name him after yourself and bring him up to be exactly like you in every way. That's how highly I regard you. I hope your friends appreciate you?'

'That they do,' I assured him.

"And so I remained in the service of Captain Ribs and my work got harder rather than easier. He was driven by some unspecified urge, a quest he was unable to articulate even to himself, and I could never work out if his ultimate goal was a distant country, a horde of treasure, international notoriety or some way of forgetting his past. Whatever it was that motivated him also drew us along, in his spiritual wake, as it were, until we became like sacrificial victims who desire our own demise. I recall with a shiver certain adventures in abandoned temples on overgrown islands, engagements with intelligent apes armed with blowpipes, races against ghost ships.

"We committed our fair share of atrocities. We were pirates, never forget that, and I feel terrible shame at some of the things we did. We pillaged the coastal settlements of a dozen nations. Once we discovered the factory where calendars are made, there's only one in the whole world, and sabotaged the delicate machinery by throwing a spanner into the works, a spatula actually. Another time we sailed the wrong way up a river during a charity raft race, scattering the entrants like the smug middle

class skittles they were. It was a violent career and I risked a horrid injury every single working day.

"On one occasion we sailed up a narrow channel between two obstacles that struck terror into my heart. The first was a vast iceberg, the second was a smoking volcano newly arisen from the sea. The waters of the channel churned awfully and our vessel swayed from side to side, almost capsizing, and I felt like the weight at the end of a metronome pendulum. As we passed the crater of the volcano, the top of the mast and the crow's nest dipped into the sulphurous flames. Contact lasted only an instant but it was long enough for my clothes to burst into fire. Fortunately the mast then dipped the other way and quenched me on the surface of the iceberg with a gigantic hiss. Such extreme occurrences were quite commonplace!

"This life might have gone on forever, or at least until Captain Ribs led us to our deaths, but one cloudy morning I had an encounter that changed everything. The clouds were thick but very low, practically resting on the surface of the sea, but the top of my mast protruded above them. I was able to look out across a vast fluffy expanse and the effect was very soothing. To my astonishment I noticed a man standing on the clouds far away, but this was just an optical illusion. As he approached it became obvious he was a lookout like me, balanced in a crow's nest at the top of a tall mast. We waved to each other. The situation was very dreamy: we seemed to float like angels, the ships below us completely forgotten, and the serenity of the scene distracted us from performing our duties. Suddenly I realised we were on a collision course!

"It was too late to shout down a warning. The snapping of wood and popping of nails was background music to my prolonged descent into the ocean. I was flung out of my nest far into the mass of clouds and through them into the cold salty water. I thrashed and gasped, my senses reeling, my eyes stinging, and by sheer luck my flailing hands grasped a barrel that had floated free from one of the holds. I hauled myself up, sat astride it and found myself blinking into the face of a beautiful

woman. We were the only survivors and she permitted me to share her barrel in return for keeping her company. I entertained her as best as I could by telling her strange but true tales until we were cast ashore on a desert island."

"What tales did you choose?" asked Paddy Deluxe.

Castor Jenkins sniffed. "I can't rightly recall. I think that my encounter with the King of the bicycle-centaurs was one. I mended his puncture in return for my life, as it happened. Anyway, we lived on the desert island, the woman and I, in a sort of paradisal harmony, eating fruit, walking on the beach at night and laughing at the stars. For some reason she found the constellations funny, especially Gemini and Cassiopeia, who knows why? Her name was Charlotte Gallon and she was the captain of the other ship, also a pirate vessel. We became intimate and our first child was born less than a year after our shipwreck. I kept my promise to Captain Ribs and named the boy Castor.

"Sometimes the tide brought useful objects to us. Flotsam and jetsam included tennis rackets, old shoes, waterlogged books, rusty batteries, broken stools and a fondue set. Only one empty bottle was ever washed up on our sands, oddly enough, and only one pencil. I tore one of the blank pages out of one of the books, dried it in the sun and composed a message on it. This was our only chance at contacting the outside world but instead of writing HELP and appealing for rescue I decided to contact my best friends, Paddy Deluxe and Frothing Harris, because I respected them so much, and I did this even though Charlotte told me it was a waste. I hurled the bottle into the sea and watched it bob along."

"What did you write?" cried Frothing Harris.

"I merely repeated what Captain Ribs had said to me. I told my two friends how highly I valued them, went into detail about what superb fellows they were, and urged them to name their own sons after themselves, if they ever had any, and to bring them up to be *exactly* like their fathers. That message seemed more important to me than any request to be picked up by a passing ship and delivered safely back into the comforting lap of

civilisation."

"We never received the bottle," said Paddy Deluxe.

"Yes you did," stated Castor.

"I assure you we didn't. No message at all!"

Castor pursed his lips. "The ocean is wide and one might think that messages in bottles just drift around forever, but in fact there's an organised system at work to ensure they reach the persons they are intended for. A secret place exists where every bottle with a message is kept until it can be delivered properly. I learned this from a fellow who interviewed me after I escaped the island, calls himself the Postmodern Mariner, an investigative journalist who specialises in the mysteries and dramas of the sea. Anyway, to return to the point, my two best friends *did* receive my message, and they acted upon it too, which is how we are able to have this conversation right now.

"Confused, are you? Let me explain that I dwelled with Charlotte and my son on that island for years and years. An oil tanker eventually picked us up. I worked our passage back to the mainland but I never returned to Wales. I married Charlotte and we lived in relative happiness, with only one argument, until I was accidentally killed by a thrown saucepan, which is how that argument ended. After my funeral, my son went on a touching quest. I had already told him everything and he planned to seek out my two dear friends and settle my debts with them. He searched the pubs of Porthcawl for a long time.

"Finally he entered the pub where that card game had taken place all those decades previously. And here I am! Yes, I'm not the first Castor Jenkins but the second, his son, grown to the precise age my father was when he left to use the cash machine. Remember that I was brought up to exactly resemble him in every way!"

"You *are* him!" blurted Paddy.

"You left one hour ago, not fifty years," added Harris.

Castor sadly shook his head. "I have some sad news. Paddy Deluxe and Frothing Harris are dead and buried. They were your fathers and they raised you in the way my message urged them

to do, with the same names and identical thought processes. That's the reason for your identity confusion. It was my father who left this pub to obtain money for your fathers, but it is the son who returns to pay the sons. The time difference also explains why you'll find no evidence of a pirate raid when you walk home tonight: that incident happened a generation ago and the damage has long since been repaired. Now to more pressing matters! How much was owed in total?"

"One hundred pounds," answered Paddy and Harris together.

"Would you like that sum in today's money?"

"Of course!" came the roar.

Castor reached into his pocket and withdrew a single coin, a tarnished penny, which he slapped down on the table. "There you go. That penny was in my father's possession during the original card game. Because of inflation over half a century it is worth £100 *in today's money*."

Paddy Deluxe and Frothing Harris were speechless.

"I'm glad everything is settled," said Castor. "By the way, the machinery in the calendar factory was never fixed and the wrong year has been printed on every calendar ever since. Curious, don't you think? Don't trust dates from now on, whatever you do. I'm off to the bar for a drink. Then we can toast our ancestors. Come now, my friends, restrain yourselves! Are we not gentlemen? Fighting over a penny is most undignified!"

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