



Curse of the Captain's Coin

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CHAPTER 1 : PORT JOHNSON

I walked up the dirt track carrying what few possessions I owned tied up in a checkered cloth. In my palm, sweaty but reassuringly warm, was the coin that should buy my passage onto a ship, off this awful island, and away from the orphanage forever. The coin was large and heavy and very special indeed: it was my ticket to an apprenticeship with the Raiders Guild!

Each year, the secretive Guild accepted twelve boys or girls onto its training programme. It was a hard apprenticeship, and full of danger, but if I survived and passed my exams each year, in just 5 years I would be a genuine sea rat and a water wolf. I'd be a bona fide buccaneer. A pirate.



So - you may be wondering - how did an orphan like me, born on a deserted island and left for dead in a cave, how did I expect to secure a place with the elusive Raider's Guild? How could an orphan, without even a pair of socks or a family name, get one of these precious few places? The answer: the gold doubloon. Boys or girls would trick and lie, steal and fight, even kill, to get their hands on one, as it was all you needed to gain a place. There were twelve doubloons in total and each year, every child with a doubloon who arrived at the witch's cave on Little Gasparilla on the 5th Friday of the longest month, would be accepted onto the gruelling course.

Right now I had only a few days to get to Port Johnson and find a boat that would take me to Little Gasparilla in time for the start of the pirating season. The road to Port Johnson had been long and full of peril, but I was almost there. I supposed that finding a ship to take me to Little Gasparilla would be easy, after all it was likely to be like a second home to the hundreds of scoundrels, thieves and blaggards who made Port Johnson their home.

As I reached the top of the coastal hill, I began to see the chaotic beauty of Port Johnson stretch out before me. I was in luck: there seemed to be a number of suitable looking boats in dock. The harbour master's office was just a few feet away at the crest of the hill, and I went to make my introductions.

"So you'll be wanting a ship, then, young one?" snorted the small man behind the desk, after he had listened to my story, "I can sort thee out, I knows a captain looking for hands, but it'll cost: cash or chores."

I didn't need to look to know that I had no money besides my doubloon, and I needed that as my pass into the Raiders Guild."

"It'll have to be chores, good sir," I replied as I turned my empty pockets inside out.

"Right, then listen 'e careful-like. What's I needs is some favours doing around the town. Get thee to the munitions store, up to see the meteorologist, down to Betty at the tavern, and finally, go to Joe at the vittles hut."

Four tasks, I thought, that shouldn't be too much trouble...

To complete all of the harbour master's chores, I would have to walk down the few hundred winding steps that skirted the steep hill and the dunes. From there I would be immediately in the midst of Port Johnson.

The pirate code meant that cabin girls and boys were always safe from harassment and injury in what would otherwise be the lethal alleyways of the port but, as I was yet to be employed by any captain, I would really have to watch my step; it would not be unusual for a stranger like me to find themselves thrown under the boardwalk if they happened to get under the feet of a sailor in a bad mood.

The munitions hut was first - easily recognisable by the cannon mounted on the first floor balcony. I made my way in past the barrels full of rusting cutlasses and piles of round black cannonballs.

TASK 1 : ADDITION

“You must be Sam”, said the lady behind the wide counter, “You’re just in time for the stock-take. There’s ten sums for you to finish. You can use your fingers if you like, but I’d really rather look at your workings,” she snapped, “Because why should I trust you?”

“Charming,” I thought, as I opened her list.



1. Add 34 pistols to 142 pistols.
2. Add 453 shotgun shells and 266 shotgun shells.
3. Sum of 18 short knives, 36 medium knives and 12 long blades.
4. 987 cannonballs inside and 456 outside, how many altogether?
5. Three boxes of cutlasses, with 34, 67 and 98 in each.
6. £123.60 in the desk and £88.90 in the money jar.
7. Total cost for a sword (£32), a pistol (£86.50) and a knife (£14.30).
8. Four bags of rifles with 49, 54, 112 and 86 in each.
9. The total number of guns (pistols and rifles from Q1 and Q8).
10. 4346 bullets in the barrel, 9056 in the box and 365 in the drawer.

I left the dark building feeling satisfied but with numbers still cartwheeling around my brain. Off to the weather station for the harbour master's weather report, which would mean walking up to the meteorologists tower, a precarious structure on a rocky outcrop at the edge of the port.

TASK 2 : SUBTRACTION

"Sam. Is that short for Samuel or Samantha?" asked the bearded gentleman sitting behind a pile of rolled up charts with what looked like a kind of giant thermometer sitting on his lap.

"I'm quite clearly a..." I tried to answer, before being interrupted.

"But, I suppose it really doesn't matter. Boys good as girls when it comes to plundering, ain't that right?" I tried to reply but, again, was too slow, "Calculate the temperatures and wind measurements and then read them out, please. Use paper to show your workings, I will need to check them - this isn't a maths lesson, after all."



1. Tuesday was 8° less than 34° on Monday. What was the difference in temperature?
2. The night temp on Thursday was 26° less than the 31° in the daytime.
3. What is the change in sea temperature, from 14.5° to 3.6° ?
4. What is the difference between this year's Record High on the island of 103° and Record Low on the island of 37° ?
5. What is the average sunrise temp of 84° minus the average sunset temp of 69° ?
6. Wind gusts of 135mph against gusts of 87mph: what's the difference?
7. This year we had two hurricanes. The wind strength of hurricane Bob was 128.3mph and the wind strength of hurricane Jeff was 142.6mph. Which was stronger and by how much?
8. What's the difference in elevation (height above sea level) from Port Johnson (23ft) to mount Strong (816ft)?
9. How many more steps are there from the port to the weather station (942 steps) than from the port to the harbour master 's office (375 steps)?
10. What was the average of these three temperatures: 24° , 11° and -7° ?

By the time I had finished, the weather man was snoring so I left my calculations on a pile of sea charts and edged quietly outside. To my dismay, I could see it was already getting dark; it seems as though the harbour master's chores were taking me more time than I had planned, he had better know a good captain. Next up was a visit to Betty at the tavern, and it looked as though it was just getting rowdy.

TASK 3 : MULTIPLICATION

Despite a reputation for drinking all day and most nights, the pirate's tavern was practically empty.

"Oh good," said a bubbly voice, "you can help me set up for the evening. I've put together a list of questions to help us get ready."

"But, where is everybody?" I asked.

"Emergency meeting of course, my love. Hurry now - they'll all be here soon enough!" I didn't have enough time to ask for more information about the supposed emergency before she'd shoved the list in my hands.



1. There are 12 small tables, each need 4 chairs around them. How many chairs is that?
2. A chair can seat one person, a bench can sit three. If there are 48 chairs and six benches. How many people can sit at once?
3. Last night there were 9 people in, they each used a spoon, a knife and a fork. How many pieces of cutlery is that?
4. The old sailor drank four ales a day, every day for a week. How many is that?
5. Every glass that smashed costs £7 to replace, how much does it cost to buy 16 new glasses?
6. Every day we sell 23 eel pies, how many will we sell in the month of January?
7. It usually takes 23 minutes to clean each of the bedrooms, how long does it take to clean all twelve?
8. Every shelf has 36 tankards on, if there are 6 shelves and 5 extra tankards in the sink, how many are there in total?
9. There are four panes of glass in each of the windows. There are 10 windows downstairs and 11 windows upstairs, how many panes of glass is that altogether?
10. A packet of peanuts contains 39 nuts and yesterday we sold 62 bags! How many nuts is that?

I had barely finished the final problem when the stampede started. It felt as though every man, woman and child had decided to descend on the tavern all at once. It would have been the perfect opportunity to ask some questions, but I still had one final task and it was getting very late.

'Joe at the vittles hut' was what the harbour master had said, I thought 'vittles' was another word for food, and I remember I'd seen a shop selling food and drink on my way in, earlier that day.

TASK 4 : DIVISION

"Please help!" came a pathetic, soft voice from behind a sack of coffee beans in the dark warehouse, "I can't do it on my own."

"I'm here to help," I called back.

Before I knew what was happening, a thin shape had leapt from the shadows, wrapped an apron around my waist, and dropped a fishing net hat on my head.

"Hygiene," hissed the voice from the shadows and I never saw him again.



1. The eggs must be sorted into boxes of 6, there are 48 eggs here so how many boxes are needed?
2. We need packed lunches for the fishermen and there are 36 apples left. If there are 9 fishermen, how many apples do they each get?
3. There was a new delivery of 8 litres of milk. We have a whole crate full of 100ml jars, how many can we fill with the milk?
4. In the store room is a giant bag of nuts which we sell to the tavern. There are two 3kg bags. We need to sort the nuts into smaller, 250g bags. How many can we fill?
5. We've got 650g of sugar left and have to sort it into 10 identical smaller packets, how much sugar will there be in each packet?
6. New ropes have arrived and need to be sent over to the ships who need it. There's 132m of rope and each ship needs 12m, how many ships can we supply?
7. Before they head out to sea, the ships in the harbour need their deliveries of rum. There are 9 ships who need it and we have 306 gallons of rum. If we share it out equally, how many gallons of rum do they each receive?

8. There's been a special delivery of coffee beans. There are 33 small bags in total and they need to be shared between the tavern, the weatherman and the town's munitions. How many bags do each of them get?
9. Every house in the town needs a bag of oats. There are 24 houses and we've got 1200g of oats. How much will they each get?
10. There are 47 ripe oranges left, the shop will keep 5 of them but the rest should be shared between the 7 most respected captains. How many does each captain receive?

Once my tasks were completed, I made my way to the harbour master's office back at the top of the hill.

"Sure, I could take yer word for it, but how's I know you really done what ye say?" came the voice through the closed door after I knocked, "Write me a description of each person you done tasks fer and slip it under the door," he continued.

"But I can just tell you what they looked like," I said.

"Nah kid. You's gonna writes it down. I jus' learned to read and I likes a good story before me bedtime. I'll wait. An' don't skips no details!"

I sighed. Well, I guessed I'd just have to get writing. "Do you have a light?" I asked, "It's very dark out here now and I can barely see to write."

"Lamps on the table," he said, ""elp yerself."

WRITING TASK

Write a brief description of each of the characters you helped today. Try to focus on detailed descriptions of what they looked like and how they treated Sam.

1.

2.

3.

4.

After I'd written each of the descriptions, I pushed them under the door and could hear the hums and chuckles from what sounded like a contented harbour master.

"Good job, young Sam," he said, "you can sleep in the hammock on the veranda an' at first light I'll take'e t'see a captain."

As my eyes closed on the twinkling lights from the busy port down below, I thought excitedly of everyone I'd already met and the chance that I'd be on my way soon. I never did find out what the emergency meeting had been for, though. I hope it wasn't a storm brewing.

**TO FIND OUT WHAT STORMS ARE ON THE HORIZON FOR SAM, BE SURE TO
SIGN UP FOR THE NEWSLETTER AND WATCH OUT FOR NEXT WEEK'S
INSTALMENT...**