



The Hemp (A Virginia Legend)

By STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

Illustrations by John Wolcott Adams

THE PLANTING OF THE HEMP

C*APTAIN HAWK* scourged clean the seas
(Black is the gap below the plank)
From the Great North Bank to the Caribbees
(Down by the marsh the hemp grows rank).

*His fear was on the seaport towns,
The weight of his hand held hard the downs.
And the merchants cursed him, bitter and black,
For a red flame in the sea-fog's wrack
Was all of their ships that might come back.*



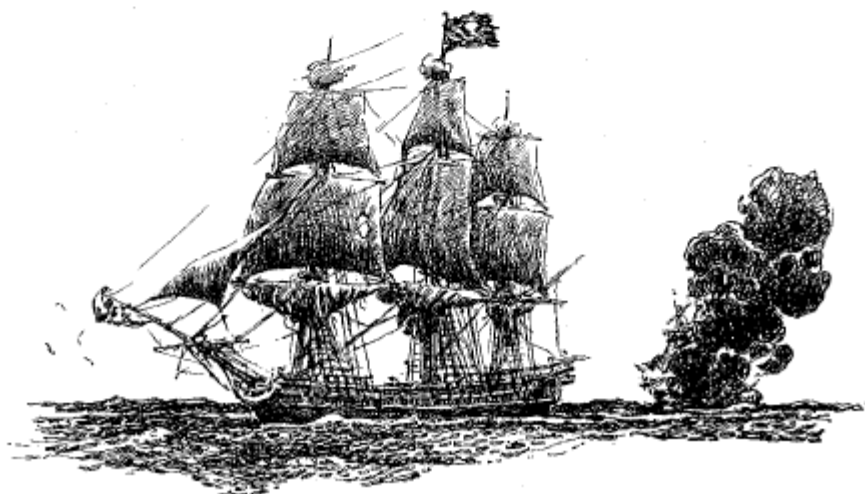
*For all he had one word alone,
One clod of dirt in their faces thrown,
"The hemp that shall hang me is not grown!"*

*His name bestrode the seas like Death.
The waters trembled at his breath.*

*This is the tale of how he fell,
Of the long sweep and the heavy swell,
And the rope that dragged him down to hell.*

The fight was done, and the gutted ship,
Stripped like a shark the sea-gulls strip,

Lurched blindly, eaten out with flame,
Back to the land from where she came,
A skimming horror, an eyeless shame.



And Hawk stood upon his quarter-deck,
And saw the sky and saw the wreck.

Below, a butt for sailors' jeers,
White as the sky when a white squall near:
Huddled the crowd of the prisoners.



Over the bridge of the tottering plank,
Where the sea shook and the gulf yawned blank,
They shrieked and struggled and dropped and sank,

Pinioned arms and hands bound fast.
One girl alone was left at last.



Sir Henry Gaunt was a mighty lord,
He sat in state at the Council board ;

The governors were as naught to him,
From one rim to the other rim

Of his great plantations, flung out wide
Like a purple cloak, was a full month's ride.

Life and death in his white hands lay,
And his only daughter stood at bay,
Trapped like a hare in the toils that day.

He sat at wine in his gold and his lace,
And far away, in a bloody place,
Hawk came near, and she covered her face.

He rode in the fields, and the hunt was brave,
And far away his daughter gave
A shriek that the seas cried out to hear,
And he could not see and he could not save.

Her white soul withered in the mire
As paper shrivels up in fire,
And Hawk laughed, and he kissed her mouth,
And her body he took for his desire.



THE GROWING OF THE HEMP

SIR HENRY stood in the manor room,
And his eyes were hard gems in the gloom.

And he said, "Go dig me furrows five
Where the green marsh creeps like a thing alive—
There at its edge, where the rushes thrive."

And where the furrows rent the ground,
He sowed the seed of hemp around.

And the blacks shrink back and are sore afraid
 At the furrows five that rib the glade,
 And the voodoo work of the master's spade.

For a cold wind blows from the marshland near,
 And white things move, and the night grows drear,
 And they chatter and crouch and are sick with fear.

*But down by the marsh, where the gray slaves glean,
 The hemp sprouts up, and the earth is seen
 Veiled with a tenuous mist of green.*

And Hawk still scourges the Caribbees,
 And many men kneel at his knees.



Sir Henry sits in his house alone,
 And his eyes are hard and dull like stone.

And the waves beat, and the winds roar,
 And all things are as they were before.

And the days pass, and the weeks pass,
 And nothing changes but the grass.

*But down where the fireflies are like eyes,
 And the damps shudder, and the mists rise,
 The hemp-stalks stand up toward the skies.*

And down from the poop of the pirate ship
A body falls, and the great sharks grip.

Innocent, lovely, go in grace!
At last there is peace upon your face.

And Hawk laughs loud as the corpse is thrown,
"The hemp that shall hang me is not grown!"

Sir Henry's face is iron to mark,
And he gazes ever in the dark.

And the days pass, and the weeks pass,
And the world is as it always was.

*But down by the marsh the sickles beam,
Glitter on glitter, gleam on gleam,
And the hemp falls down by the stagnant stream.*

And Hawk beats up from the Caribbees,
Swooping to pounce in the Northern seas.

Sir Henry sits sunk deep in his chair,
And white as his hand is grown his hair.

And the days pass, and the weeks pass,
And the sands roll from the hour-glass.

*But down by the marsh in the blazing sun
The hemp is smoothed and twisted and spun,
The rope made, and the work done.*

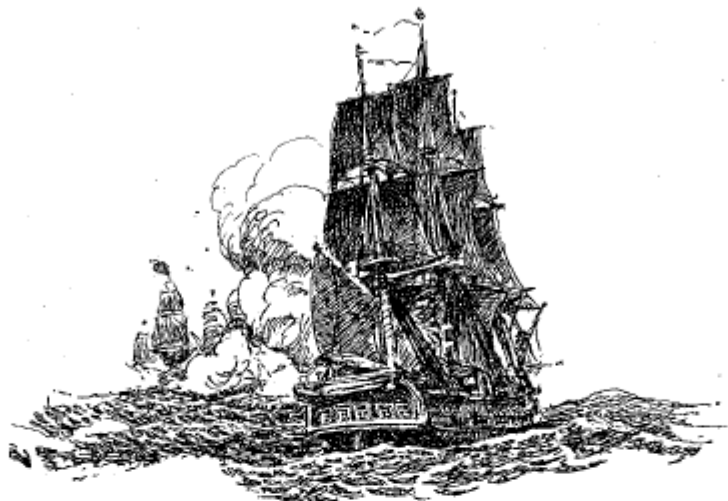


THE USING OF THE HEMP

CAPTAIN HAWK scoured clean the seas
(Black is the gap below the plank)
From the Great North Bank to the Caribbees
(Down by the marsh the hemp grows rank).

He sailed in the broad Atlantic track,
And the ships that saw him came not back.

And once again, where the wide tides ran,
He stooped to harry a merchantman.



He bade her stop. Ten guns spake true
From her hidden ports, and a hidden crew,
Lacking his great ship through and through.

Dazed and dumb with the sudden death,
He scarce had time to draw a breath



Before the grappling-irons bit deep,
And the boarders slew his crew like sheep.

Hawk stood up straight, his breast to the steel;
His cutlass made a bloody wheel.

His cutlass made a wheel of flame.
They shrank before him as he came.

And the bodies fell in a choking crowd,
And still he thundered out aloud,

"The hemp that shall hang me is not grown!"
They fled at last. He was left alone.

Before his foe Sir Henry stood.
"The hemp is grown, and my word made good!"

And the cutlass clanged with a hissing whirl
On the lashing blade of the rapier.

Hawk roared and charged like a maddened buck.
As the cobra strikes, Sir Henry struck,

Pouring his life in a single thrust,
And the cutlass shivered to sparks and dust.

Sir Henry stood on the blood-stained deck,
And set his foot on his foe's neck.

Then from the hatch, where the rent decks slope,
Where the dead roll and the wounded grope,
He dragged the serpent of the rope.

The sky was blue, and the sea was still,
The waves lapped softly, hill on hill,
And between one wave and another wave
The doomed man's cries were little and shrill.

The sea was blue, and the sky was calm;
The air dripped with a golden balm.
Like a wind-blown fruit between sea and sun,
A black thing writhed at a yard-arm.

Slowly then, and awesomely,
The ship sank, and the gallows-tree,
And there was naught between sea and sun—
Naught but the sun and the sky and the sea.

*But down by the marsh where the fever breeds,
Only the water chuckles and pleads;
For the hemp clings fast to a dead man's throat,
And blind Fate gathers back her seeds.*

