

# **PICARESQUE**

*or, The Pirates of  
Circumstance*

SAMPLE

*By Alan Morrison*

Alan Morrison

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## PICARESQUE

### The Crew

|                          |                                |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>Midshipman Queasy</i> | a classless accent             |
| <i>Johnny Bong</i>       | a young heroin addict          |
| <i>Green Jock</i>        | a Glaswegian heroin addict     |
| <i>Willie Grog</i>       | a gruff, aged Scot with a chip |
| <i>One-Eyed Gerard</i>   | a gravely-voiced Londoner      |
| <i>Mute Stew</i>         | an elective mute               |
| <i>Drop-in McCuckold</i> | a dapper, well-spoken cove     |
| <i>Cancerous Tone</i>    | a hands-free delusional        |
| <i>Two-Barrel Jack</i>   | a schizophrenic northerner     |
| <i>Starboard Scouse</i>  | a stuttering Liverpudlian      |
| <i>Robbie Soft</i>       | a light-voiced, gentle Scot    |
| <i>Paddy Flush</i>       | a softly-spoken Dubliner       |
| <i>Pink Peter</i>        | an effeminate Welshman         |
| <i>Bow Bell Glidey</i>   | a cheeky Cockney dodger        |
| <i>Long John Pilfer</i>  | a pugilistic Manchunian        |

Alan Morrison

|                              |                                |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>Jimmy Pin-Eyes</i>        | a young, haunted heroin addict |
| <i>Uncle Hands</i>           | an old, manipulative addict    |
| <i>Red Squirrel</i>          | an old Brighton itinerant      |
| <i>Yardarm Janner</i>        | a Cornish watchman             |
| <i>Boatswain Barnsley</i>    | a no-nonsense Yorkie           |
| <i>Squire Bible-Thumpera</i> | posh and affected vicar        |
| <i>Sky-Blue Sally</i>        | a dope-smoking night worker    |
| <i>Caroline Jib</i>          | a shy hostel volunteer         |
| <i>Skidder Skint</i>         | an alter ego of Queasy         |
| <i>Taciturn Tim</i>          | a timid illiterate             |
| <i>Midshipman Breezy</i>     | a classless accent             |

# PICARESQUE

## ACT ONE

### Midshipman Queasy.

[Well-spoken, with feeling]

Picture a church hall full with lost souls  
stacked like crates of empty milk bottles  
waiting for collection – or salvation;  
some have faces that scorch an impression  
defying the pincers of description,  
stitched with wrinkles digressing tales  
on scum-bronzed skin up to black nails;  
sun-blached eyes, saffron-faded  
as second-hand charity paperback pages,  
drained of emotion, bleached of feeling,  
appealing for help, in need of healing,  
fixed on something uncomfortable inside:  
the trait-betraying stain of trauma –  
tar-black memories that can't be effaced;  
buried deep, ingrained as lines of exhaustion  
    on the weather-pitted face,  
numbed to all but necessity and bitterness.

There isn't much left for them down here now  
save cluttered moments of inner-peace  
that soak up the sweat, ease the brow,  
numb the senses like a prescribed sleep.  
There's a sour, stale stagnancy in the air  
smelling of the linger of nicotine-musk;  
could be the thick fog of cigarette smoke  
or the smog of broken skin and follicle dust -  
whatever, it's the stench of living death,

## Alan Morrison

sweaty feet and ashtray breath...

Johnny Bong.

[*Drug-slurred, streetwise tone - Brighton accent*]

Phew, what a pong! Where's my bong<sup>1</sup>?

Green Jock.

[*Broad Glaswegian accent*]

You're no allowed it in here – tha's the rules.

Johnny Bong.

Rules is there to be broken.

Midshipman Queasy.

Like lives, smashed fast as glass;

Ground down to splinters deadly as sharps<sup>2</sup>  
that litter the floors in the piss-reeking toilets  
along with scrunched-up foil in the box<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> basically think Lewis Carroll's Caterpillar in *Alice in Wonderland* and the Arabic smoking water vessel; a similar contraption is improvised by some imbibers of cannabis

<sup>2</sup> slang for syringes

<sup>3</sup> '*scrunched-up foil...*': this stanza refers to the method of 'cooking up' (also mentioned on page 13) used by heroin addicts prior to injecting: the addict heats up the powder by warming it with a lighter or match from beneath either a metal spoon or a piece of foil, this turns the heroin into a sort of copper coloured liquid [page 3, lines 9-17] which is then syringed into a vein, a process called 'jacking up' [page 3, line 1]; hence finding the 'scrunched-up foil in the (lavatory brush) box', the 'blackened spoons' and 'chocolate wrapper' which hasn't been flushed down properly, coupled with

## PICARESQUE

where lavatory-brush follicles  
fogged in trapped fumes  
dandelion-clock by the blackened spoons –  
the air is thick with glue-like perfumes,  
self-sustaining as the scent of sick:  
the unmistakable stench of brown<sup>4</sup> –  
there's a chocolate wrapper they couldn't flush down...

mm, fishy, very fishy, [*sniffs*] I sniff  
the air with a nose like Sherlock Holmes  
in a desperate attempt to detach myself  
from all this sensory despair –  
if I could transport myself anywhere  
it would be into the rationally galoshing world  
of Conan Doyle's sleuth, but then...

### Green Jock.

Even Mr. Holmes was often found jacking-up  
filling his syringe with methodical eye  
strapping up one arm, flicking out a drop,  
bracing himself for an ephemeral high <sup>5</sup>–  
then popping in the needle in the absence of a case  
the magic fluid massaging his cadaverous face;

---

the 'glue-like' and 'fishy' odours, tells the Sherlockian Midshipman  
that someone has been using heroin in the toilet

<sup>4</sup> slang for heroin

<sup>5</sup> this alludes to Arthur Conan Doyle's super sleuth Sherlock Holmes  
and his addiction to cocaine which he syringes into himself  
whenever the absence of a case induces boredom in him; 'pea  
souper' is how Holmes often refers to the fogs of London in the  
Conan Doyle books

Alan Morrison

a brilliantine genius, vampiric thoughts in flight  
hurtling like bats in the pea-soup fog of night.

All.

[Sing:] JUST A SPOONFUL OF METAL HELPS  
THE MOLTEN BRONZE COOL DOWN...<sup>6</sup>

Midshipman Queasy.

Powder boils to copper-coin brown,  
a deadly treacle, honey the bees won't touch,  
faster and sharper than any rob of lemons,  
a syrupy black ambrosia  
with a lift higher than Olympus;  
the medicine that dare not speak its name,  
palliates more than a cough mixture can:  
ultimate cleanser of pain...  
this pitiful pit of spitting pain,  
this hinterland of human debris –  
this nitty-gritty sanctuary  
from barren pavement stamping grounds  
of daily numbing scrimping rounds.

Willie Grog.

[Gruff Scottish accent]  
Give us one of yer poems old son –  
I know, that 'pits of the Night Shelter' one...

Midshipman Queasy.

[Clears his throat - crumple of paper; reads]

---

<sup>6</sup> a parody of the song 'Just a Spoonful of Sugar' from *Mary Poppins*

## PICARESQUE

'Twenty-two stray souls locked in  
a dormitory of broken dreams,  
left to stew for seven hours  
in stale fumes of sweaty socks -  
dirty linen washed on Wednesdays,  
smelling fresh as ironed flowers.

Willie's drying out downstairs

Willie Grog.

riddled with cancer,

Midshipman Queasy.

or so he says;

Red Squirrel's hoarding his dog-ends no doubt  
to drag chronologically

Red Squirrel.

[Old gruff, wheezy, Brightonian voice]

after lights out -

Midshipman Queasy.

I'll be sweeping singed butts from under his bed  
in the morning while he's de-flea-d and fed.  
I'll be letting in the fresher air  
while church bells peal next door  
with the scabies scabs, checking for fags  
and figments stubbed out on the floor;  
sighing deeply with failing faith

Alan Morrison

as I find the ash of a burn-out eighth<sup>7</sup>.  
I try to believe in some Salvation  
as I swab the washing-rooms:  
sick in the basins, foil in the toilets,  
a lingering stench like glue  
filtering in through the dust-clogged vents  
by the plaque saying *Peace Be With You*.

[*Sound of aerosol spray*]

futility is the room spray of these dorms  
cursing all it deodorizes;  
addicts and misfits find their sanctuaries  
in the shadows of their vices –  
a picture of Christ hangs on the pale wall  
caught by the dimmers embracing them all.’

[*The residents clap him*]

There’s no escape from those in need  
of a soup ladle of saintliness  
to scoop their way, show their lost flock  
some other Salvation than the Short Sharp Shock.

*One-Eyed Gerard.*

[*Gruff cockney accent*]

It’ll take more than Chrischins to get me to me knees –  
n’ I don’t like the ones wiv the janglin’ keys  
in their blackshirts n’ walkie-talkies...

---

<sup>7</sup> portion of cannabis

## PICARESQUE

### Green Jock.

It's still better than being Inside, or in Borstal:  
you can tank up on booze, keep up with the football.

### One-Eyed Gerard.

'N when the TV conks out and goes on the blink?

### Willie Grog.

You can think. You've got time and space to think.

### Midshipman Queasy.

The tick of the clock.  
The tick of the clock thinking.

### One-Eyed Gerard.

The pitiless tick of time beating by.

### Willie Grog.

Sheer sheer waste of human life.

### Midshipman Queasy.

Heave in, heeeave out,  
but time still heave-hoes by  
to the lethargic churn of rattling chests  
wheezing like accordions,  
chattering catarrh, grinding away  
like the church organ next-door;  
grinding like their fidgeting, itching teeth  
creaking like masts in the wind.

## Alan Morrison

Nicotine's coated more fortunate tongues  
than these washed-up boys  
who smoke like chimneys  
and cough like concertinas.

Breathe in deeply air that is smoke  
choking them, consuming their lungs,  
those heaped-up on life's lowest rungs.  
Fog swallows them now – they're lost  
Just like Coleridge's ancient crew<sup>8</sup> –  
through the thick nicotine mist  
a Skull & Crossbones shimmers through...

[*As a resonant whisper*] This is all so picaresque<sup>9</sup>.  
They're a motley crew on board this ship  
spinning yarns to the cut of their jibs<sup>10</sup>,  
how they salvaged scars – there's a welter  
of porky tales on the ship *Nightshelter*.

### One-Eyed Gerard.

I'm One-Eyed Gerard with me trademark patch  
and craggy, scarred physog<sup>11</sup> to match;  
fearful sailors say my reckless father

---

<sup>8</sup> the cursed crew in Coleridge's *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) who are doomed to starvation except for the 'ancient mariner' himself, who is to be lost forever on the waves as a punishment for shooting an albatross, the corpse of which he wears round his neck

<sup>9</sup> pi-kə-a-resk', adj. (of a style of fiction) Dealing with adventures of rogues, pirates etc. (Spanish derivation)

<sup>10</sup> type of physiognomy; features; 'jib' is a triangular staysail

<sup>11</sup> slang for physiognomy

## PICARESQUE

carved it out when I was just a boy  
and replaced with a marble – my only toy.  
Most know not to rouse me: they recognize  
the vibes I gives off and the look in me eye-s...

Midshipman Easy.

he told me his father met a watery grave:

One-Eyed Gerard.

[*Sinisterly*]

a bath stirred with volts while he was having a shave...

[*sarcastically*]

suddenly and accidentally...

Midshipman Queasy.

...as if by magic...

One-Eyed Gerard.

if you know what I mean...

Midshipman Queasy.

he muttered under his guilty breath  
tapping his luminous all-knowing nose  
like a told-you-so ghost, see-through as meths<sup>12</sup>...

Mmmm, suspicious, suspicious, suspicious -  
better leave him be. He has his issues.

*Big Issues.*

---

<sup>12</sup> methylated spirits

Alan Morrison

Mute Stew can only sign his name  
upside down on the gangrene-green/  
bruise-blue benefit form<sup>13</sup> informing  
us in spidery scribbles

Mute Stew.

[*Youngish voice*]

I'm mute...

Midshipman Queasy.

Drop-In McCuckold in a dapper suit slung  
out by his Missus mutters under his breath...

Drop-in McCuckold.

[*Well-heeled Brighton accent*]

no offence to the rest but I'm not used to this sort of  
digs...

Midshipman Queasy.

There's Cancerous Tone, whose dog and bone<sup>14</sup>  
always rings in his head to an...

Cancerous Tone.

[*Coughing*]

...I ain't at 'OME...

---

<sup>13</sup> alludes to the old green and blue coloured benefit forms filled in  
prior to a full application

<sup>14</sup> Cockney rhyming slang for 'phone'

## PICARESQUE

Midshipman Queasy.

Holding his hand to his ear in the shape  
of a handset, he'll croak

Cancerous Tone.

...I ain't *in*, so ring off...

Midshipman Queasy.

Please leave your message after the cough

[*Tone coughs*]...

Two-Barrel Jack cuts you little slack  
if you dish him out traces of animal fat  
in his tin of rinsed rice...

Two-Barrel Jack.

[*Intense whispery Northern accent*]

...do you think I'm daft?  
tryin' to contaminate me ...

Midshipman Queasy.

...designs spacecraft

Two-Barrel Jack.

...to counteract the alien invasion, 'see:  
if I do them designs they'll postpone their fleet  
'n keep their mother ship safely moored in the sky  
till I can figure out how to make them fly...

Alan Morrison

Midshipman Queasy.

Then he'll nod over my shoulder at a man who isn't  
there  
twitch and then mutter

Two-Barrel Jack.

...I'm onto you, beware...

Midshipman Queasy.

When the calmer cove comes over him,  
he'll show you his collection  
of historic coins in plastic  
thumb-printed protection –  
but when the thunder tumbles him,  
he'll arch a tidal mile  
dashing angst on you:

Two-Barrel Jack.

...I know what you're all thinking –

Midshipman Queasy.

...then, his shackles quaking:

Two-Barrel Jack

I *am* NOT a paedophile!

Midshipman Queasy.

...his every limb and timbre indignantly shivering  
till shrunken reassurances send his twitches sinking...  
The time he shakily declared, his wits running aground:

## PICARESQUE

### Two-Barrel Jack.

I want to kill myself and then everybody else...

### Midshipman Queasy.

Dumbstruck, I blurted crassly: *You mean the other way  
round...*

*If you killed yourself first, then how could you kill us?*

### Two-Barrel Jack.

Oh aye ...

### Midshipman Queasy.

Pinned him down with pedantry's portcullis.

Starboard Scouse the stuttering headbutter  
asserts

### Starboard Scouse.

[*Strong Liverpudlian accent with stutter*]

I've g-got obsess-ssive  
c-com-p-pulsive dis-s-order:<sup>15</sup>  
means I have to do everything t-twice,  
including breakin' b-bottles over me' mates' heads –  
'see, my comp-p-p-ulsion's also a vice!

---

<sup>15</sup> OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder) is a nervous illness in which the sufferer is afflicted by intrusive morbid and destructive thoughts (obsessions) which dominate the mind and sometimes drive one to perform strange behavioural rituals as a control response (compulsions) either in mind or body

Alan Morrison

Midshipman Queasy.

Robbie Soft, girth the size of a haggis;  
bulky and hairy as an Aberdeen Angus –  
he'll offer you a sweet if you tell him a joke  
but he'll have a wee sulk if he settles for less...

Robbie Soft.

[*Light Scottish accent*]

I wasn't always on this scale  
with the blubber of a beached-up whale,  
you could once mark me absent  
when I was in the Black Watch<sup>16</sup>,  
sporran on me' crotch,  
aye, and much stronger accent...

Midshipman Queasy.

Mouthy, glow-in-the-dark Green Jock,  
luminous with jaundice from a dirty needle –

Green Jock.

'am allrayt thoo,

Midshipman Queasy.

he'll claim, a living lava lamp,

Green Jock.

despite mu' wee glow.

---

<sup>16</sup> 3rd Battalion, Royal Regiment of Scotland

## PICARESQUE

Midshipman Queasy.

Unflustered, fresh-faced Paddy Flush  
immaculately turned out, turned-in,  
post-solvent silver hair, with his  
smiling eyes, touch of blarney,  
and tendency to blush...

Paddy Flush.

[Soft, calm Dublin voice]

You're not seriously expecting me  
to eat this are you?

Midshipman Queasy.

he'll calmly ask  
with a hint of rising Irish ire,  
holding aloft a slice of charred toast...

Paddy Flush.

It's turned to soot, can you not see that?  
Would you eat something burnt that black?

Midshipman Queasy.

I already had, in fact...

Paddies, Taffies, Manchunians, Jocks,  
Scousers, Geordies, Brummies, Yorkies,  
Janners, Tanners, Yardies, Cockneys,  
all the ingredients for a Molotov  
of fists, not forgetting the canned Glaswegians

Alan Morrison

from the Gorbals' schools of grog<sup>17</sup> and knocks...

They lost their shelter for the night for a fight:  
drunken, disruptive, the Glaswegian boys  
dosed up on old Dutch Courage, while mine  
simmered soberly close to the boil;  
I served as philanthropist-cum-putter out -  
they got me outside, punched out both my lights!  
By the time police truncheon-d by to arrest  
the bruising pugilists, I forgot whose fists  
black and blued me; each claimed the blame  
shouting

All.

[*Shouting in Glaswegian accents*]

I DID IT! I'M SPARTACUS!

Midshipman Queasy.

They couldn't hear themselves: they shouted out my  
name...

Yardarm Janner.

Bain't *your* name bay, bain't anyone's b'mizzen<sup>18</sup>;  
it's they abstraction for self-sacrifice i'n'um?

Midshipman Queasy.

I limped in next shift, an outcast concussed,  
my timbres shivering with trepidation till

---

<sup>17</sup> alcohol, usually rum in a sailor's case

<sup>18</sup> the mast of a sailing ship



Alan Morrison

Willie Grog.

What der you expect, yer limp-wristed Taffrail<sup>23</sup>?  
Hang out our hearty sleeves for a Shanker<sup>24</sup> sail?

Midshipman Queasy.

Matily they let old Willie burp back in  
[Willie burps in background and then lets out a satisfied sigh]  
with whisky-yellowed tache, barred for one night  
for a show of his fists in protecting me from  
those tattooed Jocks' anchoring blows –  
had it not been for Willie, I'd have hit the deck  
been trampled to pulp under steel-capped toes  
a garrotting albatross about my neck  
before I'd a chance to roll into an urchin  
my physsg be stamped wedge-shaped as a sturgeon.

Willie Grog

[Sounding very groggy]

Och it was nothin' lad, I'd do it again –  
those boys 'ad it comin' – just like that little nonce<sup>25</sup>,  
Little Phil Horatio, stiff as a bowsprit<sup>26</sup>  
jibbed by martingales<sup>27</sup> in his bed,  
tugging his rigging in the toilet cubicle –  
old Willie 'll give him head!

---

<sup>23</sup> a pun on Taff (the river Taff), a nickname for Welsh people; a taffrail was the rail around the stern of a sailing vessel

<sup>24</sup> the back sail near the stern of a ship

<sup>25</sup> slang for a paedophile

<sup>26</sup> a pole extending forward from the vessel's prow

<sup>27</sup> rigging

## PICARESQUE

### Midshipman Queasy.

Society's pirates, roguish, toothless,  
knuckles with *Night of the Hunter*<sup>28</sup> tattoos,  
every Man Jack of them, every scurrilous cove,  
every life-wrecked mariner sitting there  
on a deck set adrift in the foggy air  
veering close to jaded shores  
where invisible Banshees send voices, chores,  
temptations of self-sacrifice, self-mutilation,  
mass murder, dark rampage – and for what Cause?  
Have martyrs ever needed a cause?

### Green Jock.

Of course, of course –  
but no' as much as a get-out-clause –  
ask any of 'em, they'll tell you:  
ask Thomas Becket, Thomas More,  
St. Thomas, St. James, St. Anyone!  
Ask Vincent Van Gogh, the Art Martyr,  
but you'll have to shout 'cos he cannay hear!  
Though he's willing to lend a half ear –  
or ask Jesus Christ if you wish...  
...but you'll have to shinny<sup>29</sup> up the Crow's Nest<sup>30</sup> first  
and cast a good eye Above...

---

<sup>28</sup> in the 1955 Charles Laughton film *Night of the Hunter*, a psychotic preacher played by Robert Mitchum has the words LOVE and HATE tattooed on his knuckles

<sup>29</sup> climb rapidly

<sup>30</sup> a structure in the upper part of the mainmast of a ship that is used as a lookout point

Alan Morrison

Midshipman Queasy.

below decks the manacled mutineers  
clank their chains like flagons of grog  
and sing

All.

[Speaking rather than singing]

CHEERS, CHEERS, HERE'S TO DAMNATION!  
DRINK TO THE DEVIL AND THE LOSS OF  
SALVATION!  
YO-HO-HO AND SOME BLOW<sup>31</sup> AND A BONG!  
CHEERS, CHEERS, CHEERS!

Midshipman Queasy.

Bound to Botany Bay<sup>32</sup>, for all they care,  
quite content in their groggy despair,  
pissed as weasels, sozzled<sup>33</sup> as swordfish,  
cloudy-headed, pie-eyed, plastered –  
at least when they cook up they'll feel well-fed –  
glutted, sated, nicely filled up –  
makes a change from parched and starved...  
they'll sip they'll sop they'll slop they'll sup  
'til they're all nicely fattened up...  
One or two are plain fed up,  
sick to the empty pits of their stomachs,

---

<sup>31</sup> cocaine, specifically powdered cocaine you snort

<sup>32</sup> the bay in Australia where 18<sup>th</sup> century British convicts were taken  
for sentences of hard labour

<sup>33</sup> 19<sup>th</sup> century slang for being drunk

## PICARESQUE

down in the dumps with the rest of the rubbish –  
but things'll be put right with a bit of spit and polish.

Fed up

One-Eyed Gerard.

– to the back teeth with housing advice,

Midshipman Queasy.

Fed up

Green Jock.

– to the eyeballs with demands of the dole,

Midshipman Queasy.

Fed up

Willie Grog.

– to the armpits with broken promises –

Midshipman Queasy.

the only things as broken as the promises are  
themselves –

potted specimens piled on life's shelves:  
failures, users<sup>34</sup>, the used, abused, depressed,  
wasters of fortune, the luckless, the ill,  
schizoes, obsessives, compulsives, depressives,  
walking panics, dope-fiends, addicts  
– whether to liquids, gambling or pills –

---

<sup>34</sup> drug addict

## Alan Morrison

aye, they're all here in this Social Museum  
stuffed full with Substances, impotent potions,  
suspended in alcohol, pickled in brine  
for land-loving Tsars<sup>35</sup> and Christians to view them.

### Green Jock.

Doesn't do to be too sensitive in our position –  
whatever one's disposition  
this isn't the place for sensitive thoughts  
shattered as instantly as glass...

---

<sup>35</sup> in this context, the name given to the heads of government focus groups who pursue outreach initiatives on drugs and homelessness