***Treasure Island***

***Chapter 23:***

# *The Ebb-Tide Runs*

***Brief Summary:***

* Jim finds that Ben Gunn's boat is light and floats well, but it's really hard to handle. He's really struggling to get the boat to go in the right direction.
* Luckily for Jim, the current brings his tiny boat right to the *Hispaniola*.
* Jim realizes that if he cuts the cope while it's pulled tight, it'll snap back and pull both him and his boat out of the water.
* Again, luckily for Jim, the current shifts the *Hispaniola* so the rope is slack and he can cut it without danger.
* During all this, Jim hears voices coming from the cabin of the ship.
* He overhears Israel Hands talking to another pirate, the man with the red nightcap (kind of like the hat Santa Claus wears) who was the only surviving attacker on the fort earlier in the day.
* They're incredibly angry and drunk.
* On shore Jim can see a campfire with the remaining pirates. Someone is singing that old shanty "Dead Man's Chest."
* Jim saws through the last strands of rope attaching the *Hispaniola* to its anchor.
* He's having trouble rowing his little boat away from the much-larger ship because of the strong currents.
* Jim grabs hold of a loose piece of rope.
* He suddenly feels curious: what's happening in the cabin?
* He climbs up for a last look.
* He only has time to glimpse Israel Hands and the red-hatted pirate trying to strangle each other. The fact that they're fighting like this is lucky – it means neither of them have noticed that the *Hispaniola* has started to move quickly on the current.
* Jim's little boat suddenly lurches: it's being carried in the wake of the *Hispaniola*.
* Jim worries that he's going to be swept out to open sea.
* The *Hispaniola* turns so sharply that even the two fighting drunks inside realize something is wrong.
* Jim tries to hide in the bottom of his boat, sure that he's about to run aground on rocks and die.
* He finally grows so exhausted that he falls asleep in his boat and dreams of his old life back at the Admiral Benbow Inn.

***Synopsis:***

Jim finds the coracle hard to sail, as it steers unreliably, but he eventually manages to reach the anchored ship. Grasping the hawser, or anchor rope, Jim takes out his knife and starts cutting, being careful not to let the cord snap at him when it breaks. Waiting for the wind to lessen the rope’s tension so he can finish cutting it, he sits and listens to the rude oaths and drunken nonsense coming from the pirates’ ship. One sailor is singing a morbid sea song about a ship setting out with a crew of seventy-five and returning with only one alive.

When there is a breeze, Jim is able to cut the last fibers of the rope and set the Hispaniola adrift. On a whim he clutches the trailing rope and hauls himself to window-level, peering in to see why no one has noticed the sudden motion of the ship. He discovers that the pirates are distracted, as Hands and another sailor are wrestling. Suddenly flung back into the coracle, Jim is startled to find that he has drifted near the pirates’ campfire on shore. Sure of imminent death, he commends his soul to God and falls asleep in the coracle, dreaming of home.

***Critical Study:***

Trying to navigate the tiny, lop-sided vessel is frustrating (Chapter 23, "The Ebb-Tide Runs"), but the quickly ebbing tide carries Jim to the ship, where he grabs the hawser, feeling it taut as the tide pulls the Hispaniola upon its anchor. When a puff of wind moves the vessel slightly, causing the hawser to slacken, he cuts all but two strands of the rope and waits for another breeze to slacken it again. And, as he waits, he hears the voices of two men in the cabin — Israel Hands and one other, who had been in the fight earlier that day. They are drunk and quarrelling loudly. Jim cuts through the rest of the hawser and the schooner begins to turn slowly, threatening to overturn his boat. Furiously, he paddles alongside to the ship's stern, and then on impulse he grabs a line trailing from the ship and pulls his boat closer, until at last he can stand and look partially into the cabin through the stern window. There he sees Hands and the other man wrestling drunkenly but powerfully, each attempting to strangle the other. As he watches, the motion of the ship changes, and he perceives that it has been caught in the swiftly ebbing tide and is spinning toward the open sea. In a moment the two men aboard the Hispaniola discover, belatedly, the dangerous situation they are in and run on deck. Jim's boat, caught in the wake, is drawn along with the ship, and Jim is sure he'll be killed when the ship eventually hits the powerful breakers at the end of the narrows. He is powerless to do anything. He lies down in the boat and, despite (or perhaps because of) his fear, drifts into sleep.***Significance:***

The next chapter begins as Jim is in the coracle, having trouble steering towards the larger Hispaniola. Fortunately for Jim, the tide sweeps him to the boat. Jim is able, after waiting for the boat to slacken the howser, to cut all but two threads of the rope that anchor the Hispaniola, and then he waits for the next breeze. While he is waiting, Jim listens to the voices coming from the ship's cabin. Immediately, he recognizes one as Israel Hand, the other he only identifies as wearing a red nightcap. Clearly, from the sounds of their angry voices, the men sound tipsy. Once again, a breeze comes up and puts the rope in a perfect position and Jim cuts through the rest of the rope. Upon this action, the Hispaniola begins to slowly spin and sway with the current. As he is shoving away from the bigger boat in the smaller oracle, Jim catches a rope and hoists himself into a position where he observes the two sailors in a physical struggle, a struggle that to Jim appears deadly.

Jim gets back into the coracle, which is following the wake of the bigger schooner, and heads for shore, where he comes near the campfire and hears the pirates singing. All of the sudden, the Hispaniola changes the course because the current has turned in and is sweeping both the coracle and the bigger boat out to sea. Having nothing else to do, Jim lies in the bottom of his boat, which is tossing in the turbulent waves. Although he expects to be killed at sea, Jim is eventually rocked to sleep and dreams of his home and the Admiral Benbow.

One of the main theme's of the book that begins to become apparent later in the book is the role of fortune in Jim's ability to become a hero. In this chapter, this theme is manifested by his ability to cut the ship away. Although he was not able to steer the small ship himself, because of the tide, he still reached is destination and was able, somehow, to cut the ship loose. Why is he not a strong hero, able to do whatever he wishes because of his own power? Cunningly, Stevenson does not allow this omniscient power because he is the hero of a young boy's novel and by making him able to be the hero only through fortune and luck, Jim is closer to the ordinary boy and the implied audience of the book can better relate.

The other theme that is evident in this part of the book is primitive forces impinging on the civilized world. Because the book is know set on an island, it is clear that nature, and not man, is in charge. In the vivid language that describes the sea, in the fact that Jim cannot alone control his own destiny, he must allow on nature's whims to carry them where they may, and on the point that he is able to escape the control of the group, all represents that savagery is winning out in the battle against civilization.

Another aspect to note in this chapter is again Robert Louis Stevenson's brilliant use of figurative language in describing the forces that control Jim, namely the ocean, and the pirates that he sees on both the shore and the ship. By using words and phrases such as, "the tall schooner and the little dancing coracle," as well as others, the reader can feel themselves caught up in the current, and can feel the tightness of the rope, the breezes, the sea spray, and the rocking of the boat.

***Notes:***

Jim takes Gunn's coracle (small round paddle boat) and heads out to the *Hispaniola*. The coracle proves hard to manage, but Jim eventually reaches the hawser—a thick rope mooring the schooner to her anchor.

Once the hawser is cut, the ship immediately begins to spin with the current, yet no watchman aboard seems to notice. Maneuvering to get the coracle out of danger, Jim's hand encounters a light cord trailing down from the ship. On impulse he pulls himself up to peek into the main cabin. A glance shows him Israel Hands and a sailor wearing a red stocking cap "locked together in deadly wrestle, each with a hand upon the other's throat." Jim drops back into the coracle. Moments later, the schooner lurches violently, alerting the two watchmen to the danger.

Jim suddenly realizes that the ship is not drifting toward shore but out to open sea. The current is dragging along the coracle, as well.

Jim knows that, if the pirates sail off on the ship, the honest men will be marooned. In his decision to cut the schooner free of her anchor (with the hopes that she will beach herself), Jim acts independently, yet on behalf of the group, with the goal of saving them. As has happened before on this adventure, Jim breaks the rules. This time, however, it is the self-directed, measured action of an adult. He breaks the rules for a precise reason and for the greater good.

Jim's later peek through the *Hispaniola'*s cabin window serves him well. As usual, climbing the rope is an impulsive act, compelled by curiosity. Yet, his glimpse of Israel Hands and the red-capped man shows him how things are going with the pirate crew. This will prepare him for a later encounter with Hands.

***Summary and Analysis Part by Part:***

***Summary Part 1:***

[Jim](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/treasure-island/characters/jim-hawkins) paddles the lop-sided but buoyant coracle towards the ocean, until the Hispaniola rises up in front of him. He manages to grab the hawser (mooring cable), but realizes that if he cuts the ship from the anchor, he and the coracle would be knocked right over by the ship. He slowly cuts one strand at a time and then waits to sever the final strands until a breeze will point the ship in the opposite direction than himself.

***Analysis Part 1:***

Jim has learned a great deal about how ships function and is aware of how powerful and dangerous they can be, especially when compared to the small, rickety boat where he finds himself. He’s also developed enough expertise to know how to manage the ship’s ropes and pulleys.

***Summary part 2:***

[Jim](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/treasure-island/characters/jim-hawkins) hears the voices of [Israel Hands](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/treasure-island/characters) and another pirate, both drunk and apparently angry and yelling at each other. He can also hear someone singing a sailor’s song on shore. Finally, a breeze comes and Jim cuts the final strands. The ship begins to spin around, following a current, while Jim struggles to get clear of it. He sees a small cord trailing overboard, and hardly knowing what he’s doing, he catches hold of it and raises himself to peer through the cabin window. He sees Hands and his companion wrestling each other—helping him understand why they’re not alarmed at the ship now moving briskly.

***Analysis Part 2:***

Having observed the pirates’ drunken antics for so long, Jim now can predict to a certain extent how they will act whenever rum is involved. Here, Jim simultaneously listens to the pirates and pays attention to the wind in order to find the best, safest way onto the ship possible—acting with exceptional resourcefulness yet again. Everyone is well aware that no one outside the captain’s team has the ability to steer the ship, and now that fact is clearer than ever.

***Summary Part 3:***

[Jim](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/treasure-island/characters/jim-hawkins) drops back to his seat and hears the now-familiar sailor’s song again from the shore. Suddenly the coracle lurches to the side, and the Hispaniola begins to tilt as well: it starts spinning not towards the shore but to the open sea. The two pirates aboard, by their shouts, seem to have realized what’s happened. Meanwhile Jim lies down flat in his boat, certain he’s about to die. But nothing happens, and as he rocks back and forth he grows weary, finally falling asleep.

***Analysis Part 3:***

Although Israel Hands and his mate are both too drunk and too unfamiliar with the workings of a ship to pay close attention, even they can sense that something is wrong. Here, finally, Jim’s courage escapes him, and he can think of nothing better to do than simply wait out the rocking until the situation improves.