

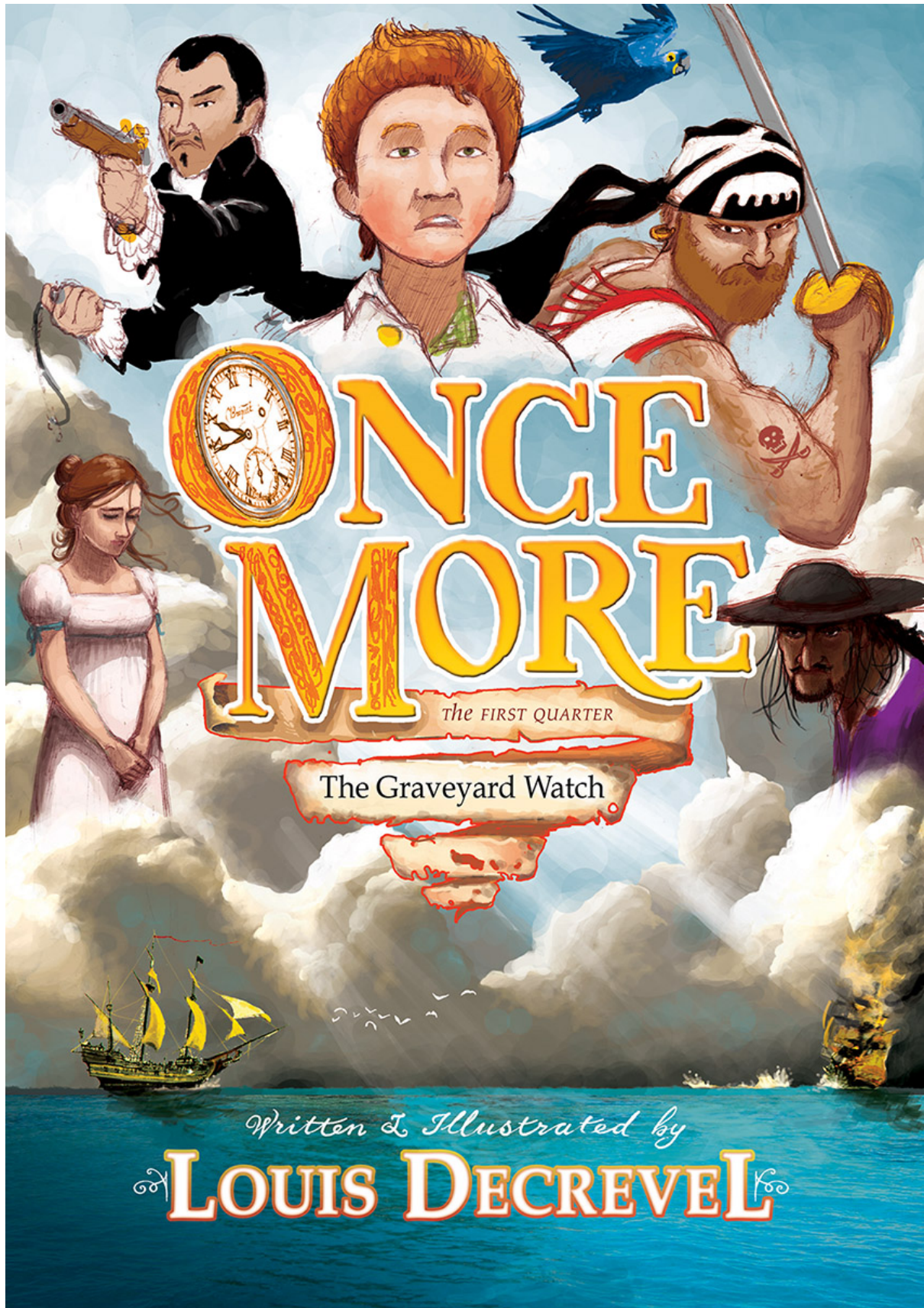
## **Louis Decrevel**

ONCE MORE (book 1 excerpt)

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*It's not Gilbert's fault the pocket watch he pilfered belongs to the most dangerous man in the Caribbean, but ... could it really be haunted?*

## Synopsis

1792. A French spy is in the Caribbean. His pocket watch—a repeater—can literally *repeat* time, taking him back to the last quarter-hour—but only once each quarter. He also has nine lives. He teams up with a characterful West Indian apparently called ‘Evil Armhack.’

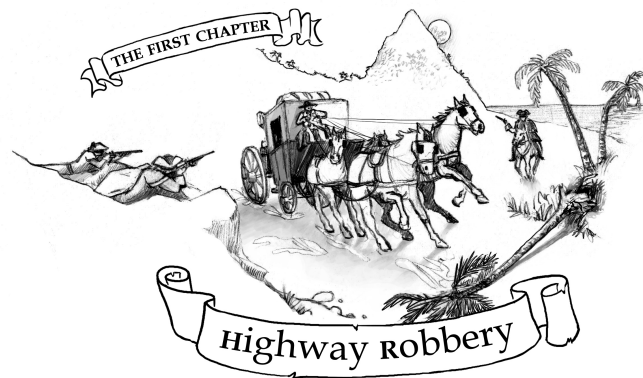
14-year-old Gilbert Gibbs picks the spy’s pocket. He discovers the watch’s power and uses it to fix his mistakes, and to impresses the governor’s daughter.

Gilbert joins the spy and Armhack aboard ship. They’re captured by pirates. Gilbert’s uncle is killed with a stray bullet, but Gilbert *repeats* and saves him. Chaos ensues. The spy loses his last life.

Gilbert and Armhack escape to an islet. Gilbert has nightmares: he *relives* the spy’s final moments. The spy’s ghost appears. His *lives* and the watch’s power came with a curse from a voodoo priestess: each death would entrap his final moments within a nearby object—the ninth object being the watch. Most of his memories are lost. But his vague memory of a great treasure inspires Gilbert.

They head to Europe with the governor’s daughter to seek the treasure, backtracking the spy’s lives through Gilbert’s dreams, with the voodoo priestess’s Dreamwalkers close behind. They discover the spy’s original uncorrupted nature, and now motivated by friendship, search for his first life. This takes them back home, where the voodoo priestess is fomenting war. They defeat her and cast the nine cursed objects into the fire, restoring the spy’s fractured soul, and setting him free.

## Once More



### CHAPTER 1:

IN MOMENTS, THE SPY WOULD BE DEAD, *again*. He frowned. He didn't want to *live*, let alone die, so far from home. The tropical humidity made his black cravat stick to his neck. He had given up swatting the mosquitoes. They seemed to multiply at night. It was as if the little bloodsuckers knew that he was on a classified errand for the king of France—as if they had been hired by the revolutionary army to hamper his progress. He grimaced at the thought. He couldn't help but imagine the revolutionaries themselves as bloodthirsty insects, buzzing maniacally around the guillotine.

He was one of the most famous men in all Europe, and the best swordsman in France, though only a handful of people would even recognise his face. People whispered when they spoke about him and the name they whispered was *Le Chat Noir*.

He had died before, of course, what—five, six times now? He had lost count, if he was being honest (which was rare). His memory had patches and holes, like a garment worn for far too long. A line of tiny black cats was inked upon the skin of his forearm, each representing a life, gone. There were four there. But he had an uneasy feeling that he had forgotten to tally a couple.

His coach-and-four rattled through the dark West Indian rainforest, bumping and jolting along an overgrown path. A tree was fallen across the track. The driver let out an oath and

pulled hard on the reins. Then he was shot. The ferns on the roadside came alive with bandits, and he collapsed, falling forward over the splashboard.

Inside the coach, *Le Chat Noir* grasped at his silver pocket-watch. “*Corbleu!*” he hissed. “We have not the time for this! The packet-boat leaves on the hour.”

“Ah,” replied his companion, a six-foot-four grenadier who barely fit inside the coach. “There are only ... ah—six of them. We should not be detained overlong.”

“All the same,” grumbled the spy, “I would sooner quit this God-forsaken island than remain another minute longer.”

The grenadier took the hint and began preparing a grenade from his haversack. He lit the fuse with the priming of his pistol and counted three seconds. He tossed it out into the darkness.

It got two of them. The blast unsettled the horses, but there was nowhere for them to go. *Le Chat Noir* slipped through the door and away from the lantern glow and was all but invisible in the darkness. In his right hand he flourished his faithful rapier and in his left he held the pocket-watch, as if he planned to defeat the remaining bandits in record time. It took seventeen seconds. Not bad for three men, but he couldn’t remember his previous best. He racked his brain. But then he heard the coach rock on its axles, and the strangled gasping of his grenadier from within. Silence. A thump on the floor of the coach and the grenadier’s mitre cap rolled out the door onto the grassy verge.

*Le Chat Noir* was halfway back to the coach when the killer emerged. It was a puzzle how they had both fitted inside, for this dirty great fellow, the last remaining highwayman, was bigger still than the dead grenadier. His shoulders rocked the doorframe. It was like seeing a bear emerge from a valise.

He leapt from the coach and the ground shook.

He wore a black eyemask like the highwaymen of English lore, though his brown-skinned face was already well-hidden behind the standfall collar of a dirty greatcoat, a battered old tricorne and a grizzled dirty beard. And strangest yet, over the eyemask, perched on his broken, formerly aquiline nose, was a pair of elegant, round, gold-rimmed spectacles, through which he peered at the spy.

*Le Chat Noir* discovered himself staring agape at the man-mountain. Was this fear that he felt? It was new and made his stomach heavy and he did not like it at all. But was he not *Le Chat Noir*? He cleared his throat. “Your reason for holding up my coach,” he articulated in good English, “was based upon a—monetary incentive, I presume?”

The highwayman didn’t clear his throat. “And yore excuse fer killin’ all o’ me mates dead,” he growled, in terrible English, “were self-defence?”

“No,” laughed the spy, flourishing his sword elegantly. “Practice.”

The highwayman pulled a pistol from his coat and fired.

And *Le Chat Noir* fell to the ground, dead.

Even heroes—and anti-heroes—have their time, and then their time is up. The highwayman snatched the silver pocket-watch from the dead man’s fingers. He turned around to examine his prize in the moonlight. It would fetch a tidy sum back in old London town, he reckoned.

Then there was a sword point pressed into his back, and a French voice said: “I am in something of a hurry.”

“Oi!” boomed the highwayman, swivelling around and brandishing an old cutlass. “Aye just shot ye!”

“I am—” the spy deliberated over the words, “—difficult to kill.”

“We’ll see about that, mate!” growled the highwayman.

And with that, rapier and cutlass met. *Le Chat Noir* stepped in with a classic manoeuvre that had killed a hundred times before. But the highwayman, with surprising agility, matched every step, parried the thrust, and pushed his own advantage, sending the spy on a hasty retreat, stumbling backwards over a root in the mud.

“You dare—!” cried the spy.

“Ha!” the highwayman bellowed. “Ye be the short-heeled wench who slipped! T’is hardly even wet!”

The spy jumped up, gained a better footing and struck again, this time stabbing at the highwayman’s hand.

“Yah!” cried the bandit, flicking his arm and dropping the pocket-watch. He scowled and licked the wound. And then—he turned and slashed his heavy cutlass viciously. He sent the spy’s rapier flying and with a hefty shove, pushed the spy to the ground, again.

*Le Chat Noir* coughed and spluttered, and wiped his mouth with a muddy sleeve. “*Bête homme*,” he spat. “Idiot.”

The highwayman pulled another pistol from his somewhere in his coat and pointed it at the spy. This time *Le Chat Noir* did panic. He had been careless. How many lives could he afford to lose? “P-please,” he stammered, “I am no mere traveller ... I—I am important—significant.”

“Ye’re significant enough to carry a shiny timepiece, mate, and it’s such that Aye covet.”

“The watch,” *Le Chat Noir* smiled and shook his head. “A mere ... trinket—of personal

value. Nothing more. On the coach, however, you will find my sea-chest. Beneath the black frock coat is a purse of valuables. Here, I give you the key freely—if you let me live. Otherwise I throw it into the darkness.”

The highwayman growled and clawed his beard again. He snatched the key and strode towards the light of the carriage lanterns.

As soon as he was gone, *Le Chat Noir* was feeling around in the mud, frantically looking for the thing that could save his life. *Voilà!* His trembling fingers touched the thin silver chain and he drew it in, clasping the pocket-watch with shaky hands. That was too close. His heartbeat began to settle. He was about to press the button on top of the watch when he heard the sound of booming laughter, and he hesitated for a moment. This was a mistake.

The highwayman was crouching a few yards behind the coach, reading a scrap of paper in the light of the carriage-lanterns. He looked up at the spy with a great hairy grin. “Levasseur!” he cried, “ye’ve got orders to assassinate Levasseur! The Buzzard ’imself!”

The spy kept his eyes hidden. This was a volatile game he played. That paper, of course, was supposed to be burnt to nothing. It must have been smothered when the bandits attacked. And this giant, this monster, somehow knew of his mark. *Le Chat Noir* wondered if he could use him after all. He spoke in a low voice. “What do you know of the Buzzard?”

“Aye know ’im all too well, mate! Ha! A man on a mission to kill Levasseur! Now *that’s* valuable!” The highwayman was quiet again, as he finished interpreting the blackened French handwriting. He looked up again with fire in his eyes. “Ye know where to find ’im, friend? D’ye know where ’e be?”

“Yes.”

“Then fortune’s rolled your way tonight,” boomed the highwayman, “and ye’ve got



yerself an escort. Aye'll make sure ye come to no harm 'til ye've got yer man." He pulled out a pipe and began to fill it, still chuckling.

*Le Chat Noir* rasped his cheek and gazed up at the starry sky, as if consulting the zodiac. Then he pointed to the grenadier's lifeless body through the open coach door. It wore a red and white uniform.

*Spy*: I want you to wear—that.

*Highwayman*: Like 'ell!

*Spy*: You killed my grenadier. Don't you know who I am?

*Highwayman*: Well, Aye 'eard 'im call ye *Leshanwah*, but that don't mean nought to me.

*Spy*: You have not heard of *Le Chat Noir*? Ignoramus! Pah! Well, if you wish to travel by my side, you will not be doing it looking—and smelling—like that. You will wear this uniform, you will use my cologne, and you will tell me your name.

*Highwayman (grinning)*: Armhack, mate—Mr. Evil Armhack.

*Spy (frowning)*: Evil ... Armhack? This is not a real name.

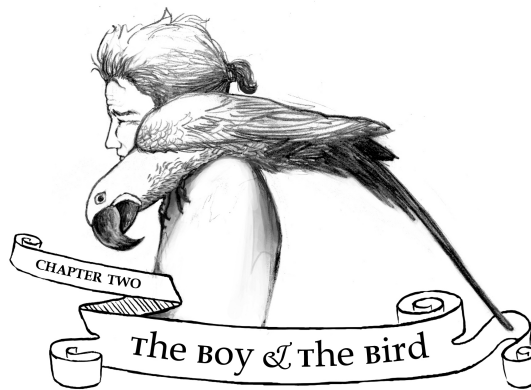
Armhack got a vicious look and suddenly whacked the spy on the forehead.

*Le Chat Noir* was caught off guard, again, and stumbled to the mud. He jumped up in a rage, only to see the highwayman's open palm, a bloodstain and a squished mosquito.

The spy thought of the Revolutionaries, the English, the Buzzard. There were many people against him. It could not hurt to have one more on his side. He should have kept note to get another cat inked on his arm, but one more little death slipped his memory.

He was *Le Chat Noir*—The Black Cat. The spy with nine lives.

And if he had been paying attention, he would've known that his lives were running out.



## **CHAPTER 2:**

**THE MONTH** was October, and the year was 1792. One of those rare periods of history when the English and the French were *not* at war. As strange as it sounds, this was nearly as significant in the Caribbean as in Europe, because island colonies like Saint Vincent were the rope in the great and terrible tug back and forth of war. In the eighteenth century alone, Saint Vincent had changed nationality no less than four times. It was currently as British as roast beef (with perhaps a dab of French mustard), and would jolly well *stay* British, if Gilbert Gibbs had anything to do with it.

Gilbert woke up with the light of the dawning sun and sat on the edge of his bed. It would be another perfect Caribbean day. He splashed water on his rosy cheeks and tied the back of his curly ginger hair into a short stub, like many boys his age. He pulled his trousers on, and suddenly remembered the object he had stolen the night before. With trembling fingers he withdrew it from his pocket and looked it over in the privacy of his room. He let out a gasp. It was exquisite.

The silver pocket-watch gleamed in the morning light. The delicate porcelain face bore its maker's mark, *Bréguet*, and two bronze hands were adorned with *fleurs-de-lys*, the symbol of French aristocracy. Although it was protected by a smooth, low-domed crystal, a few hairline cracks ran across the white dial, and on the reverse of the watch, the silver casing was

blackened as if by fire. Even so, thought Gilbert, it must be worth a pretty penny. On the end of the chain, there was a fob seal—for pressing into sealing wax—in the shape of a cat. Gilbert rubbed his bleary eyes to make out the time. It seemed to be around five-forty-something, but he was still waking up, and couldn't get his brain to focus. But hang on—it was a repeater! The watch could chime the last hour and quarter-hour and tell him what the time was. He pressed the button on top with his thumb.

Gilbert woke up—again—with a start. He was in bed and the watch quivered and chimed in his hand. It had all been a dream, and he must have pressed the button in his sleep. How curious. He counted the chimes as the repeater mechanism whirled. Five normal *dings* for the hours, and two shriller *tings* for the quarters: five-thirty. He looked through his window to find the sun's first rays barely illuminating the sky.

Gilbert was almost fifteen years old, though he looked about twelve. In the court of the gods, Puberty is a jester. Gilbert made up for his small size and cheek-pinching cuteness with fiery red hair, glowing red cheeks and a dazzling mind. His pluck came from his Scottish father, and his English mother shared his easy-going nature, but where his cleverness came from was a puzzle to them both. If anything, it seemed to come indirectly from his uncle.

The sun was well above the hills by the time Gilbert had made his way through the winding cobblestone paths of Kingstown—the capital of Saint Vincent—to Uncle Bill's cluttered workshop. Uncle Bill to Gilbert, but to everyone else, he was the famous sea captain Bill Snelgrave, veteran of the 'Battle of the Saints' and inventor extraordinaire.

Gilbert twisted the latch and pushed open the familiar door of his uncle's workshop. Desks were littered with compasses, barometers and chronometers, scattered papers and open books. Ropes, pennants and flags hung from the rafters and scale models of ships and steam-engines were arranged haphazardly against one another. On the walls hung carved wooden

artifacts, overlapping maps and charts. Normally, Gilbert could spend hours poring over his uncle's collection, but not today.

As soon as he had shut the door behind him, an enormous blue devil landed on his shoulder with an ear-splitting screech. Gilbert froze stiff and winced as the creature dug its claws in.

"*Anodorynchus Hyacinthinus*," said the captain, "Latin, of course. It's a hyacinth macaw. Well, that is ... a parrot. Can ye hold still, lad? I must clip its feathers ere it escapes."

Gilbert wouldn't mind the bird escaping. The captain leant in with the clippers, and stretched out the macaw's wing. It was huge. Just that one wing was more than two feet wide.

"I don't understand why yer wings weren't clipped afore ye was sent to us," said Uncle Bill. "Ye be a first-rate specimen, that's for sure, but what earthly good is a wedding gift that flies away?" He pressed the clippers together on the bird's flight feathers, but it flapped its great wings and the clippers were knocked to the ground.

"*Rawk!* Flustered fussock!" squawked the parrot.

Gilbert snorted. The parrot had been taught some London street slang—and it had just called his uncle a drunk fat woman.

Uncle Bill was shocked. He raised his finger at the parrot, and was about to say something disciplinary, but the parrot latched onto the inviting knuckle and bit down, hard. The hyacinth macaw is the largest parrot in the world, and has enough mandible strength to bite through a broomstick. A finger is no problem.

"Yah!" cried the captain as his finger was clipped. Blood went everywhere. The bird flew straight back to the safety of its cage, and Uncle Bill hopped around the room, holding his maimed hand. He tried to curse, but he was out of practice. "How dare ye—ye ... ye *flustered*

*fussock!*”

Gilbert quickly found a handkerchief and gauze, and helped bind his uncle’s bleeding stump. The captain’s temper soon subsided under Gilbert’s gentle care. After a few minutes he leant down to retrieve his left-hand index finger from the floor and he plopped it in a jar of what smelt like whisky. It floated eerily. The blood clouded the liquid alcohol before the dismembered thing settled at the bottom, pointing at the bird in a ghostly accusation.

“I wish I knew who sent us that creature,” frowned the captain. “Verily, it seems more of a prank than a gift. What good be it, Gil?”

“It is a very handsome bird, sir,” suggested Gilbert, cautiously flicking the latch on the cage, and locking the bird inside. The bird’s feathers were the most brilliant blue he had ever seen, and its cheek patch was like yellow gold.

“True enough, Gil,” returned his uncle. “Yet somehow I feel it would be handsomer yet—without that look in its eye.”

Gilbert sighed and looked to his shoe-buckles. “Uncle,” he asked, tentatively, “what would be the worth of a bird like this?”

“Hum. Well, in terms of money, lad ... I suppose ... exotic parrots being highly sought-after back in England, I would put it at no less than twenty pound. Think ye I should sell it?”

“No, no—you are in no need of cash, sir. I am merely comparing prices, uh, out of curiosity. What would be the worth of a—a French pocket-watch ... for example?”

“Ah, now ye’re closer to my field of expertise. I do admire the intricate mechanics of a pocket-watch, and a French one, ye say? Did ye know that some watches can take a whole team o’ workers nearly four years to produce? Can cost *two years*’ of an average man’s wages—but more like five or six years on what I’ll be paying you! If ye was thinking of

buying one, lad, well ... I do happen to have a pair, and if ye'd like to work towards—"

"No, no," said Gilbert, holding up his hands. "I don't want one ... I don't need it—I mean ... I already have—" He immediately regretted his words.

The captain frowned. "How have you a pocket-watch, boy? Yer parents aren't in a position to afford such niceties."

"No, they didn't ... I, ah," Gilbert gulped, "I—I *found* it, last night. At the wedding party." He withdrew the silver watch to show his uncle.

The captain's eyes grew large. "A repeater! A *Bréguet* repeater! Lad, forget what I said about four years' work and two years' wages. This be both more complicated and more expensive. But ye found it last night, ye say? Tell me what happened, boy. Precisely how and where did ye come across such a thing?"

Gilbert sighed. "Alright," he said. "It all started at the *Farmer George*."