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*BLUE
WATER*

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BLACK DROP

BLUE WATER

LEONORA NATTRASS



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

IN 1793 WAR BROKE out between Britain and Revolutionary France. In 1794, John Jay, an envoy from the United States, arrived unannounced in Europe, on a mission to repair the strained relations between his country and Great Britain, or, alternatively, to seek an alliance with the French. The British Government, eager to avoid war on a second front, entered into negotiations of a new *Treaty of Amity and Commerce* with their old colony.

The Jay Treaty was signed in November 1794 and dispatched by sea, aboard the *Tankerville* packet ship, for urgent ratification by the American Congress.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

THE POLITICIANS AND THEIR CIRCLE

Lord Grenville, Foreign Secretary in Downing Street
Laurence Jago, a disgraced Foreign Office clerk in his
secret employ
Mr Gibbs, Laurence's dog
William Philpott, loyalist journalist and staunch defender
of the Jay Treaty
Theodore Jay, son to the American envoy John Jay,
and bearer of the Treaty home to Philadelphia
Peter Williams, slave, valet and secretary to the Jay family
Frederick Jenkinson, War Office official

THE CREW OF THE *TANKERVILLE*

Captain Morris, of Flushing, Falmouth
Mr Peters, his sensible first mate
Mr Trevenen, his handsome second mate
Mr Rogers, his choleric third mate
Mr Kidd, the surgeon
Mr Smith, the gunner
Mr Spiers, the carpenter
Mr Hind, the cook
A superstitious sailmaker
Ben, the cabin boy

THE PASSENGERS

Comtesse Emilie de Salles, a French noblewoman fleeing
Revolutionary France

Maximilien de Salles, her nephew, a former soldier in the
French Royalist army

Obadiah Fletcher, business agent to Eli Whitney and his
cotton gin

Lizzie McKendrick, an Irish actress
Bruin, her bear

THE ENEMY

Captain Benoît, of the French brig *Lovely Lass*

PART ONE

Satan, now in prospect of Eden ... at length confirms himself in evil, journeys on to Paradise, whose outward prospect and situation is described, overleaps the bounds, sits in the shape of a cormorant on the Tree of Life, as highest in the garden, to look about him.

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, The Argument, Book IV



PHILPOTT'S WEEKLY CANNON

Somewhere Off Ushant

16 December 1794

Look closely now. No, closer. Shield your eyes from the Spray and train your Gaze down to that Spot, there, in the moving expanse of Water. Do you see it? That dark Smudge, blinking in and out of the Ridge and Furrow of the English Channel, is the TANKERVILLE, a Packet Ship plying her trade for the Post Office between Falmouth and America, carrying Letters to the West Indies, Dispatches to the Captains of naval Warships, and a handful of seasick Passengers to America.

The TANKERVILLE is small and three-masted, with a blue and gold Trim. Eighty feet long by twenty wide, she is tolerably tidy, despite the Cow and the Turkeys, the piles of coiled Rope and spare Sails, and the good spread of Canvas towering near a hundred feet above our heads. If she ever escapes this d—d contrary Wind in the Channel, she will waft us three thousand miles, from Falmouth to Halifax, Nova Scotia, with stops between at Madeira, Barbados, Delaware and New York.

But to my reader, good John Barleycorn at his English Fireside, perhaps these place-names are but Words with little meaning. And so, John, for your better enjoyment, I have drawn a Map, as you can see, with the circuitous path of our Voyage marked upon it. If I were addressing the Gentry by their more comfortable Hearths, I would call the Shape of our Journey

something akin to a Chafing Dish, but for your easier understanding, I will rather call it a Swedish Turnip or Mangel-Wurzel – a bulbous Shape, to be sure, somewhat baffling to the Eye when a direct passage across the Ocean might seem vastly more convenient. But, John, there is a world of Winds and Tides quite beyond the ken of men like you and I, with which the Captain wrestles, puzzling out our Position and the consequent dispositions of Canvas, from his own admirably unpuzzled Intellects.

From the captain's log

17 December 1794

Latitude 48°, 43' N and 06°, 30' W

Off Ushant

Rose just before dawn, at eight bells in the morning watch, and occupied myself with the ship's provisions and other matters. What a blessing occupation is to a troubled digestion. Winds against us. Heavy sea.

REPORT OF LAURENCE JAGO

*For the attention of Foreign Secretary Lord Grenville,
Downing Street, London*

My Lord

You will hear as many accounts of this voyage as there are passengers aboard, but, being your eyes and ears on ship, I think it my duty to give my own report, to counter the wilder stories you will no doubt receive in good time. (I am mainly thinking of my supposed employer, Mr Philpott, and the raft of articles he means to post home for *The Weekly Cannon* when we make port.) My reputation as a disgraced clerk, dismissed from your service, has proved as useful as you hoped, for it seems scoundrels will make their feelings and plans known to such a one without much scruple.

Having nothing but time at my disposal, you may find this report overlong, for I have made copies from the captain's log and from Mr Philpott's copious writings, as well as other documents that have come to my hand and might shed light on our journey. But knowing, as we both do, how undeserved was this role you have forced me to play, you shall have your money's worth and be damned.

I

DEATH ARRIVED WITH the cormorant. It came aboard on the seventh day of our voyage, and settled itself at the bowsprit, wings akimbo, to dry its feathers in the brisk wind. It was too far from shore – probably blown out to sea by the tremendous gale we had met at the mouth of the English Channel, which kept us beating about Ushant for three full days, perilously close to the French port of Brest. The poor bird was exhausted, and not at all inclined to take to the wing again, despite all the efforts of the superstitious crew.

‘Quite the most extraordinary thing I ever heard in my life,’ Philpott remarked loudly, wedged into the open door of my cabin. As usual he wore a farmer’s suit of uncommon antiquity – long coat with flapped pockets, leather gaiters and a broad-brimmed hat – and was obliged to bellow his remarks over the roar of waters and the grate of the ship’s timbers. ‘They seem certain it’s unlucky, but there’s no agreement whether it heralds a storm, a dreadful accident or is merely the ghost of some miserable sailor doomed to roam the seas till Judgement Day.’

He stepped neatly over the piss pot, which was sliding cheerfully from fore to aft with the swoop and soar of the

ship. A count of five one way, and then five the other. I lowered my copy of *Paradise Lost* as he inserted his bulk more comfortably into the two-foot space between my bunk and the cabin wall, blocking out the only light. I could hear the cow mooing dismally from the deck above, and a faint but persistent barking, which told me my dog was annoying the turkeys again. Sometimes I feared the gobbling racket he provoked among the offended birds would tempt the crew to toss him overboard. But the cabin boy had grown attached to him and, when he wasn't teasing the livestock, Mr Gibbs followed the child about the deck all day.

'I talked to the gunner,' Philpott boomed on. 'A Mr Smith. A very sensible man, by God, and a veritable fount of information. You should seek him out, Laurence. He tells me we have left the European moon behind us in Falmouth, and the next we shall see is the American one, when we pass the Tropic of Cancer. God damn me, I have seen both these moons a hundred thousand times, in both continents, and never noticed the difference in all these years.'

Unmoored from his usual pursuits on land, where he was canny enough, Philpott's grasp on facts was growing foggy. I drew a breath to acquaint him loudly with what little I knew of astronomy, but I was distracted by a shadowy figure passing behind him, with a bucket, from the direction of Theodore Jay's cabin. The figure belonged to Peter Williams, Theodore's slave, and I therefore deduced first, that the bucket held vomit – for the American envoy's son had been spewing ever since Falmouth – and second, that Mr Jenkinson of the War Office was once more barricaded in the passengers' water closet, preventing its easy disposal. Poor Peter Williams would be obliged to take the bucket all the hazardous way to the *heads*, the open grating that jutted out to the figurehead at the very

prow of the ship. A very public water closet, and a precarious one, regularly washed clean by the waves, and just now swooping and soaring with the motion of the ship.

Philpott's mind was still on the gunner's fictions. 'He says we're bound for more wonders.'

'A second sun, perhaps?' My stomach was troubled, which made me testy, and Philpott frowned at me, his small eyes disappearing in his broad face, as a particularly violent wave made the ship shudder and almost tossed me off my bunk. Not for the first time, I envied the sailors in their hammocks, which might be less genteel but were certainly more practical.

'Not in the least. No, no, he was telling me a fine tale of their last voyage. Blown off course by a *hurricane* such as this, they found themselves suddenly becalmed in the Sargasso.'

'Alarmed in the what?'

'*Becalmed*. In the *Sargasso*. Damn me, have 'ee not heard of it?'

I suspected Mr Philpott's knowledge of the subject was only half an hour older than my own, but I only shook my head, for his face had taken on its hectoring look, and he grew, if anything, louder. 'The *Sargasso*, my boy, is a strange and cursed sea all its own, a weird vortex amid the wild Atlantic, where ships are becalmed, the compass loses its mind, and eels of enormous size and number frolic amid unnatural fields of weed.'

This was going too far, even for the gunner. 'Nonsense. We have an eel at home, in the farm pond, and it has never been known to frolic.'

Philpott turned slightly purple. 'And are you more well-acquainted with the Atlantic Ocean than Mr Smith? 'Tis absolute truth, I assure 'ee. The sea boils with snakes, and any poor soul who goes overboard is snapped up at once.'

'It would be exceeding unlucky to fall in, however, being *becalmed*.'

He ignored or did not hear my disbelief, but we were saved from further arguments by the advent of the formidable Comtesse de Salles into the mess, rapping along the passageway from her dignified seclusion in the captain's saloon, which he had rented her for a considerable sum. Her nephew, Max, had a cabin among us commoners, and she liked to keep her eye on him. Just now the mess was otherwise empty, only Max cleaning his pistols at the table. He was a vigorous man of thirty-five who looked the soldier even in his civilian clothes. He had a medal for valour pinned to his coat, a broken nose, and a scorch mark across his cheek that made me think he had peered into hell and backed out again.

'There is a sheep,' the comtesse announced in enigmatic English, as Philpott leapt to attention and I climbed down from my bunk and followed him out into the mess. When Max didn't look up, the comtesse rapped his knuckles with her cane. 'A sheep! Directly outside my window.'

Her nephew raised his eyes and spoke with his usual studied brevity. 'It's a vessel out of Liverpool, *Tante* Emilie, an Indiaman I believe. We are taking on a passenger.'

'Will you watch 'im come aboard?' She was already dressed for the deck in a voluminous cloak, though her impractical hooped skirts would make any ascent of the ladder a lengthy business.

'It's damned cold and wet.'

The comtesse gave her nephew a glare that would have discomfited a charging lion and resorted to a rapid French that, unknown to her, I perfectly understood. 'Don't be feeble, Maximilien. I have never missed a morning walk these twenty years, rain or shine.'

For so powerful a man, he gave in easily and sloped off for his boat cloak, while Philpott, comprehending the import if

not the actual words, grinned and jerked his head for us to follow the old harridan's broad beam up the ladder. I found I was still clutching the copy of Milton and was happy enough to lay it down on the mess table beside Max's pistols. The fall of man and the judgement of God had turned out to be disagreeable topics in the current circumstances of my life.

On deck, the comtesse was an imposing spectacle. The wind whipped her cloak, there was high colour in her wrinkled cheeks, and she was altogether a magnificent contrast to the half-drowned figure crawling up the ship's sloping side from a small boat which had just crossed the hundred yards of lumpy waves between us and the wallowing East Indiaman. The Indiaman looked monstrously big, with an array of real and pretended gun ports along its affluently gleaming sides.

'Sail ho!' a voice shouted down from the masthead above us, and Captain Morris glanced up from his arriving passenger to the lookout at the crow's nest, who cried out with some dark significance, 'Bearing east, north-east, sir. A French frigate.'

The crew of the small boat, hearing this information wafting down to them on the stiff breeze, found it ample reason to turn back towards the Indiaman without delay, and the poor fellow climbing up our side was left hanging perilously over the open sea. A couple of sailors hastened down to help him, and when he finally arrived on deck, dripping and frightened, he turned out to be a small, squat man in a long overcoat.

The captain was somewhat distracted.

'Mr Obadiah Fletcher, is it? Yes, yes, we were expecting you. I would make the introductions, but it seems we must be underway again directly. Welcome aboard, in any event, sir, welcome indeed.'

Fletcher was apparently too dazed by the terror of his arrival and the strange faces of the crew around him to notice

much, as the second mate kindly took him by the arm and led him below. Philpott hastened over to the side, hampered by a large wave which, if he had happened to be on fire, would have left him very adequately quenched. The captain climbed nimbly into the rigging, and the comtesse peered out into the grey mist, her vast dignity suddenly diminished. Her nephew Max was fresh from Austria, fighting for the French Royalist army. Why they were bound for America I didn't know, but if any French ship took us, they would doubtless be sent back to Paris for summary execution at the guillotine being, by birth alone, enemies of the new Republic.

I felt the usual torn mixture of kinship and repulsion as I watched Max join her at the rail, his body taut with agitation. I, too, had been ill used by a Government that should have protected me, but I had been called a traitor for sounder reasons. Moreover, the very idea of fleeing French nobility always made me uneasy. I have spoken enough foolishness in my time, to those I ought not, to render even the largest dose of Black Drop laudanum feeble against regret.

The lookout called something new from the masthead, and the captain, who had now reached the cross trees, moved his glass a point or two. The sea heaved under clouds that touched the water, and the ship wallowed in the swell, scarcely moving against the westerly wind. I followed Philpott to the rail. 'I can't see anything.'

He was looking up at the sailors crowded in the rigging, mainly visible as a congregation of bare soles. 'Still too far to see from deck, but they're saying it's there all right.'

The Indiaman was already hull up, attempting a return, back over the hard-won miles towards home. 'Damned fools,' the captain called down to the first mate at the wheel. 'They're caught on a beam reach, and the Frenchman's seen them. They

cannot possibly escape. Well, well, it's an ill wind, as they say. Come up a point, Mr Peters, and we'll creep off as best we can and hope they don't see us.'

Philpott had hastened off to the wheel and was now hobnobbing with the helmsman and eyeing the lookout at the masthead as if he meant to climb up and join him in his perch on the plunging arc of the mast. Before he could fix me with his china-blue eye, and require me to go with him, I made my way over to the other passengers who were standing at the stern. The cabin boy was prancing about his turkey crate as unsteady on the plunging deck as a new-born lamb, with Mr Gibbs bouncing and barking in enthusiastic wolfish attendance. I paused to pull the dog's ears, and he gave me a cursory lick.

Theodore Jay was emptying his guts over the stern rail. He had apparently just emerged from his bunk, and was dressed only in his shirt and breeches, his hair tousled by the stiff wind. He had lost all his young dignity and seemed abjectly grateful for any kindness when I came up to where he was standing with his black servant. Peter Williams was stiff with ill humour, his face turned away, so I took the slave's duty on myself, handing Theodore my handkerchief with which to wipe his mouth. He hesitated, glanced at his manservant, and put it back in his own pocket, likely judging Peter Williams in no mood to be presented with more of his vomit. I don't think Peter Williams had yet forgiven Theodore for the perilous dance the boy had led him these past months through the stews and prostitutes and molly houses of London.

'She's seen us.' The call from the masthead was shriller by a note or two.

'God damn their eyes. Come a point or two closer to the wind, Mr Peters.'

Theodore's skin was transparent, with none of its usual rosy glow, and his red lips were cracked by wind and salt. But I probably looked no better than he did, and quite a different man to the one he had known in London. No wig, no sober dark Whitehall suit. I was bareheaded, dressed in my farm clothes, which were the warmest things I had with me, and my green spectacles were held together at the bridge with a twist of wire. If the Government wanted me *incognito*, I was certainly obliging them. In the darkness of my cabin, My Lord, I had regretted any obligation to please you in any way, and half-thought I should pocket the parcel of money you had sent me and abscond into the American wilderness. But, like Peter Williams, who had elected to return to Philadelphia with Theodore instead of claiming his freedom in London, I found I couldn't bear to turn my back for ever on my family and those others I had once foolishly loved.

The lookout called again with more bad news. 'She's changing tack. Coming about towards us.'

Captain Morris closed his spyglass hastily and clambered down to the deck, where Philpott was standing with the comtesse, her nephew having temporarily disappeared. Philpott took the captain's sleeve. 'They have abandoned the Indiaman?'

'It seems so, and yet that vessel will be brim full of silver.'

'And what does that signify?'

'General orders to intercept the mails if we're lucky. A special interest in our cargo if we ain't.'

2

A COUPLE OF SEAMEN were preparing the mail bags for sinking, while Max de Salles looked ripe to explode with bottled-up nervous energy. He was now in earnest conversation with the fanciful gunner and the third mate and was following them towards us across the heaving deck.

‘What do you think I should do with the papers?’ Theodore asked rather more loudly than seemed prudent. ‘Should I sink them? My father bade me do it if we were taken.’

‘Not yet, surely to God.’ The French ship was less than a smudge on the horizon and, despite the general gloom, my landlubber mind couldn’t imagine it would possibly catch us. I had replied more quietly, for the gunner and third mate were uncomfortably near at hand, but they seemed absorbed in pointing out the cormorant to Max, which had now alighted at the very top of the mainmast. The third mate scowled, and the gunner waved his hands excitedly, until Captain Morris called them back to their duty in a sharp voice and they moodily obeyed. Max remained gazing skywards, scarcely an arm’s length from where we were standing.

Theodore was still worrying, still too loud. ‘Mr Monroe

wanted to show the provisions to Paris, but Father refused. He was adamant it's only for President Washington's eyes.' Monroe was the American Ambassador to the Revolutionary Government in France and hated the British as much as anyone.

'Mr Jenkinson will know what to do,' I said, quite aware that Max de Salles was near enough to hear all this if he chose. But he was still looking up into the rigging, apparently quite oblivious to us. 'Where in God's name is he?'

'Locked in the water closet again.'

In fact, the War Office official was just now appearing out of the companionway to the mess, and a moment later he was with us. Jenkinson was egg-shaped, with a pudgy hand clamped to a huge, bell-bottomed wig that would have looked out of date a hundred years ago. I had hardly spoken to him since Falmouth, partly out of discretion, not wanting my true purpose aboard ship to be generally known, and partly because the man had scarcely left his cabin. He had handed me a new set of instructions from Your Lordship the day we sailed, but he hadn't taken me into his confidence and barely acknowledged me. I had chosen to take this as proof of my importance, rather than the reverse.

Jenkinson was already addressing Theodore as he came up, with equal disregard for secrecy. 'You must give me leave to hide the Treaty at once, Mr Jay. We cannot afford any mistake in the event the French take us.'

'My father told me to throw it overboard at the first sign of trouble.'

'A measure of last resort, I assure you.' If Mr Jenkinson was an egg, he was at present an extremely harassed one, beckoning impatiently with his stubby pale fingers. 'Oh, very well, very well, I promise you I'll sink it if I must. But we shall hope for better luck than that.'

‘Luck!’ The third mate was passing. ‘There’ll be no luck till that fucking bird’s off the ship.’

‘Like Satan in Paradise,’ I remarked, to no one in particular. ‘I have just read the very passage in Milton. *Up he flew, and on the Tree of Life, the middle tree and highest there that grew, sat like a cormorant.*’ The third mate turned his eyes to me at the exact moment the bird took exception to this slander, flew down from its lofty perch, circled the deck slowly on its shaggy wings, and voided its bowels with scrupulous aim on to the left lens of my spectacles. I removed them and wiped them clean. The mate was still staring at me and I smiled to hide my discomfiture. ‘Well, Mr Rogers, is that good or bad luck, according to your sailor lore?’

The mate didn’t deign to answer, only shook his head, and turned back to where the gunner was hastening below with Max de Salles. It seemed Max had found some outlet for his restlessness, as had Philpott, who had not climbed the rigging but was now swaying away towards the companion ladder in close consultation with the comtesse.

Peter Williams roused himself from his reverie and followed the third mate with his cool gaze as the man strode off. Jenkinson, who had no time for my nonsense about birds and had not been listening, was addressing Theodore in urgent tones. ‘Come, come, Mr Jay. Do as I bid you. I shall find a *very* safe place for the papers, I assure you; one where the French will never think of looking.’

Theodore turned appealingly to Peter Williams, and then to me, but neither of us had the authority to overrule Jenkinson. In fact, as Your Lordship will remember, your secret instructions bade me obey the man in everything, so I only shrugged as Jenkinson rolled away clumsily towards the companion ladder, still clutching on to his antique wig with one hand,

while Theodore reluctantly followed. I exchanged looks with Peter Williams, who remained behind, leaning on the lurching stern rail, hands folded. After a moment's hesitation, I went to the ladder in my turn. I needed to know how I should behave in the event of capture, and Jenkinson was the only man I could ask.

Max and the gunner were already coming back up from the mess. Max's face was blazing, while the gunner was holding a pistol, which he handed to the third mate, and they hastened off forwards. 'If we can only wing it, 'twill be enough to put it overboard.' As I put my foot on the ladder, there was the sharp report of a gun, and the poor cormorant fluttered up into the rigging beside the lookout, who turned and flapped his hands, but the bird only settled again and preened its feathers with admirable sangfroid.

Below, the howl of the wind was suddenly muffled, the creak of timbers louder. The hull protested and writhed, water seeping in through the labouring joints. Philpott and the comtesse were examining each other in the gloom as I stepped off the bottom rung. They were as alike as two peas, being both pink-faced and rather stout, but the comtesse had regained some spirit and was wearing an expression that would have curdled milk, while Philpott's face was cheerful as ever, eyes gleaming beneath his broad-brimmed hat. He was, at present, bellowing at an unnecessary volume, apparently labouring under the impression that, having imperfect English, the comtesse must also be witless.

'*Madame!* You are in very great danger. If the ship is taken, you will be captured and returned to France.' He mimed the guillotine with some gusto and the comtesse scowled. I could have intervened, translated one to the other with perfect ease, but Your Lordship's instructions had flatly forbidden me from

revealing my fluency in French to anyone aboard. Philpott knew it, of course, but at this moment he was far too agitated to remember I might be useful, as he narrowly escaped decapitation himself from the wildly swinging lantern.

The noblewoman's polite English vocabulary prevented the more pungent retort she obviously had in mind, and she contented herself with a glare. 'I know this *parfaitement, monsieur*.'

'And, so, we must hide 'ee in some way.' Philpott was casting about as he spoke, but any hiding place was hard to imagine in the neat and tidy packet ship, with everything stowed away against the rough sea. Even Jenkinson's confidence he could hide the Treaty seemed misplaced. Hiding a woman was surely impossible.

At this moment, Kidd, the surgeon, appeared from his cabin beyond the bulkhead with a roll of instruments which he began methodically to set out on the mess table, while Mr Philpott explained the comtesse's predicament to him in some circuitous detail. 'Her nephew might pass for an Englishman,' he finished. 'But she cannot, with her strong French brogue. Where can I hide her?'

Comtesse de Salles bridled at the impertinence of their pity as they conferred, heads together. Worse, Kidd was cool, as though her safety was hardly his problem. 'Dress her in men's clothes.'

'Absurd.' But Philpott's eyes lit up at once.

'If we are taken, there'll be shots fired. We'll cover her in blood and lay her on the table as a wounded crewman.'

The gleam I well recognised was blossoming across Philpott's rosy face. 'I'll see what I can find.'

'No,' Comtesse de Salles said sharply, above the general racket of the groaning ship. 'No, and no.'

'But, *madame* ...' Philpott looked chagrined at any

obstruction to such a delightful scheme, while the woman's own conflicting thoughts were equally plain. Pride, warring with fear. For a moment it seemed pride would triumph, but then the ship tacked, she lost her footing, lurched, and smacked her shin on the corner of the fixed bench at the mess table. The pain decided her, though she remained magnificently dignified and spoke as if conferring a great favour.

'Very well, I permit you, *monsieur*. Make it so.'

Philpott gallantly declared his own clothes would drown her, which I highly doubted, and procured others from steerage, which anyone could have seen were far too small. Not gentlemanly, but too good for sailor's clothes, they were perhaps land-going Sunday best for a pious Methodist among the crew. When the comtesse re-emerged from her cabin, squeezed into them as tightly as Mr Jenkinson into his waistcoat, she climbed the ladder back to the deck, shoeless, her fine stockings wicking up wetness. Philpott followed, and when they were safely out of sight I went on to Jenkinson's cabin.

He opened his door just as I raised my hand to knock and, seeing my questioning look, fell back to let me enter. I didn't know what instructions he had received from the Ministry regarding me, but he was always hoarsely civil. 'Well, this is a pickle, ain't it, Mr Jago? We must ensure the papers are well hidden, for whatever the Jay boy says, I'll be damned if I'll sink them and render our whole voyage useless.' He had thrown a boat cloak about his shoulders in preparation for the numbing wind and cold on deck. 'Do you have any suggestions?'

My mind ran over the possibilities and was again defeated by the packet's spartan naval simplicity. The comtesse's cabin was bare and light from the stern windows. The mess dark, but sparsely furnished, with the row of small passenger cabins

down one side. Then the forward space of steerage where the crew slept in hammocks above their dunnage neatly stowed away in sea chests. The surgeon's cabin, and the galley. Several small hatchways to spaces under the deck where they kept provisions and ropes. And then a large hatchway down to the dark hold, and the brooding ranks of water, beer and beef casks. Nothing to deceive a searching French seaman who knew his business.

I shook my head. 'No, sir, I'm afraid I don't.'

'Well, I have a couple of ideas might fool 'em. When the deed is done, I'll let you know the upshot.'

'And if we are taken? What shall I do?'

'Nothing, Mr Jago, for as far as the world is concerned you are only a journalist in Mr Philpott's employ. I suppose, if all else fails, I'll sink the Treaty, though it will break my heart to do it and President Washington will be most displeased.' He looked about himself calculatingly, then turned to me again. 'In the event of my death, you must take it from its hiding place and go directly to the Ambassador in my stead.'

It was only then our danger really hit me. But I thought that if only one of us was to survive long enough to deliver the Treaty, it might as well be me. Jenkinson shook his head dismissively, evidently more intent on the immediate problem of hiding the thing, and I left him, finding the surgeon once more alone in the mess, pensively sharpening his saws, his drugs set out on the table. I had never thought the place where we ate our dreadful meals was also a butcher's slab for wounded sailors, but on reflection it didn't surprise me. Nothing is ever as it seems.

'Just a precaution,' he said, as I hovered at his shoulder, eyeing the bottles of rum and laudanum, the two most sovereign remedies against pain and despair. 'She's forty guns to

our eight. If she catches us, we're buggered, and no point in fighting.'

Still, I lingered.

'Something you wanted?'

I had taken too much of the Black Drop laudanum in London and had since renounced it at great cost to my health and peace of mind. A Herculean effort that would not bear repetition, and I should certainly never let the stuff pass my lips again.

'A quantity of laudanum if you'll spare it,' I said, without the slightest hesitation or shame. 'I left mine in Falmouth, in error, and have had a pounding headache this past week.' The surgeon could probably hear the tell-tale eagerness in my voice, but what was it to him? His hand reached for the flask and I watched him pour a dram into a small glass phial and push in the cork. It was a coward's refuge and would set me squarely back on the road to damnation. On the other hand, it would give me joy, a scarce commodity this past year. I didn't take it straightaway. I still had some modicum of self-control, and there was pleasure in the anticipation – the weight of its presence in my pocket.

On deck, the ship had thrown itself another point closer to the wind and was now shouldering through the waves with uncomfortable activity. The comtesse was again at the rail, though for a moment I didn't recognise her. Despite the danger of the chase, the crew were taking time from their urgent business to laugh at her gamey legs in the too-tight breeches, her pigeon breast in the too-tight coat. Philpott was also admiring her transformation as I came up, but whether she could carry off the disguise at the point of a boarding Frenchman's cutlass I rather doubted, especially as her bonnet made a mockery of the rest.

‘A fifth-rater out of Brest, ma’am,’ the third mate was volunteering as I came up beside them, clearly taking pleasure in his gloomy news. ‘A fine, large vessel bristling with cannon.’

‘*Mon Dieu!*’ She seemed to take refuge in bad temper, as another might resort to drink or opium. ‘Then we are all dead.’

‘Never in the world.’ Philpott’s button eyes disappeared as he smiled too close into her face. ‘I have been talking to the captain, and he is *quite* cheerful, I assure ’ee. ’Tis but a lumpish creature, this enemy ship. Dreadful clumsy, he says, especially with a French crew that don’t know their arse from their elbow, and with a turn of speed we’ll soon be quite clear.’

‘She’s closing,’ the lookout cried out at this juncture, discouragingly, and Ben the cabin boy leapt into the rigging, in the direction of the unlucky cormorant, now asleep with its head tucked under its wing. Perhaps he meant to shoo it skywards, as though that could possibly avert our danger. Meanwhile, Mr Jenkinson was rolling up beside us, looking haggard, all drooping jowls and large, bruised eye bags, as he removed his enormous wig and bowed to the comtesse, revealing a head as round and smooth as a billiard ball. ‘For you, *madame*.’ He bent from his invisible waist and proffered his monstrous headpiece. ‘To finish your ensemble.’

What an old fool he was, grovelling to nobility amid all this danger. The comtesse apparently thought so, too, and looked about to wave him away, but then she paused, seeming afflicted by another inward struggle. After a moment she took the article he proffered with a bad grace and a frown, probably fearing it harboured a colony of nits. But the tremendous proportions of Mr Jenkinson’s peruke seemed, at last, apt for a purpose. In place of her bonnet, it covered her own hair entirely, and with her grim old face she certainly looked the gentleman – albeit one from our grandfathers’ time. Mr

Jenkinson watched, nodded, politely tweaked the angle. There was the gleam of a satin ribbon among the luxurious curls. 'I'd be grateful if you'd keep a hand on it, *madame*. 'Tis my only one.'

I raised my eyebrows at him questioningly and made to follow him out of earshot to hear what he had done with Theodore's Treaty, but he raised a deprecating hand, suddenly grey, and trundled away hastily forwards towards the heads. The movement of the ship was certainly dreadful, and his bowels apparently brooked no argument. Looking about me, I saw that Theodore was also missing, probably occupying the passengers' water closet again, leaving the open grating at the forepeak as Jenkinson's only recourse. As I turned my eyes back out to sea, I thought I could now make out the white shape of a sail on the horizon, despite the spray and the darkening winter sky. Behind me, Max stalked away, his whole body emanating furious rage. 'To be taken here! Before we have even begun!' He was right, of course, but one thing I had learned was that fate would screw you if it could, and the only remedy for that hard-won knowledge was safely in my pocket.

From the captain's log

17 December 1794

Later

Took on a passenger from the Ponsborne, then sighted a French frigate in pursuit. Will take customary evasive action through the hours of darkness, with passengers confined below, though they will no doubt protest. Mails ready for sinking.

3

THE THREAT OF CAPTURE might have been real, but it unfolded with dreamlike slowness after that first burst of activity. We sped on through the short winter afternoon, the sky gradually deepening its shade of grey from woodsmoke to pewter, as the invisible sun declined towards the horizon. The frigate was inexorably gaining but, with the wind against both of us, it would be hours before she could make good her capture.

‘And there is all the long night to come,’ Captain Morris comforted us, as darkness fell. ‘With luck, and a little seamanship, we will escape. But we must show no lights, gentlemen – *madame* – no lights at all.’

We went below reluctantly, as if to an early grave, and settled about the mess table under the only lantern permitted. The ship groaned with the pounding waves and unexplained crashes from above deck periodically made me startle like a rabbit. Theodore was back in his bunk. The new passenger, Obadiah Fletcher, had not yet emerged from his own. Mr Jenkinson was also missing, probably in his cabin, trying a recumbent position as a remedy for nausea. Max scarcely