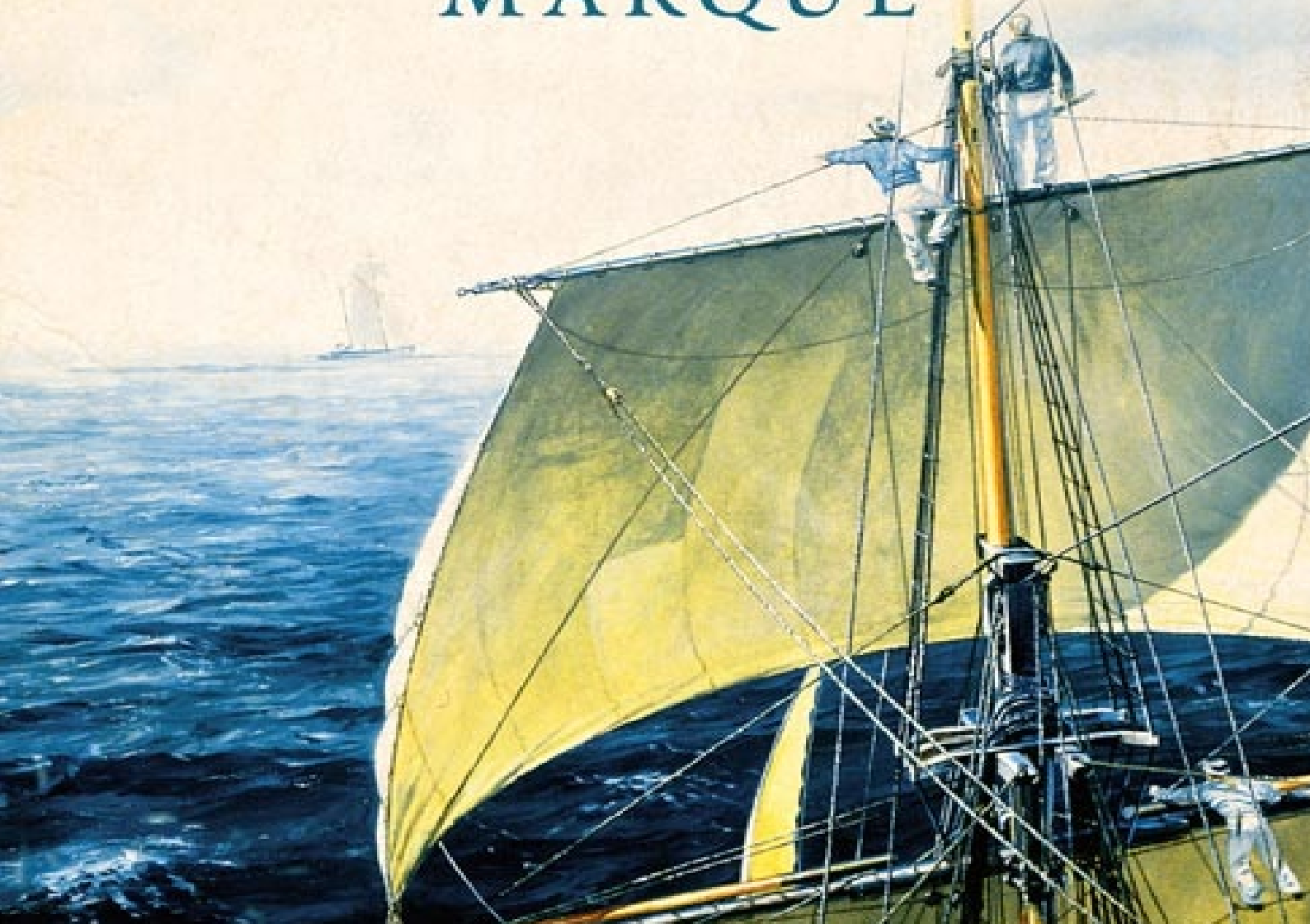


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THE TIMES

PATRICK O'BRIAN

THE LETTER OF
MARQUE



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The Letter of Marque

HARPER

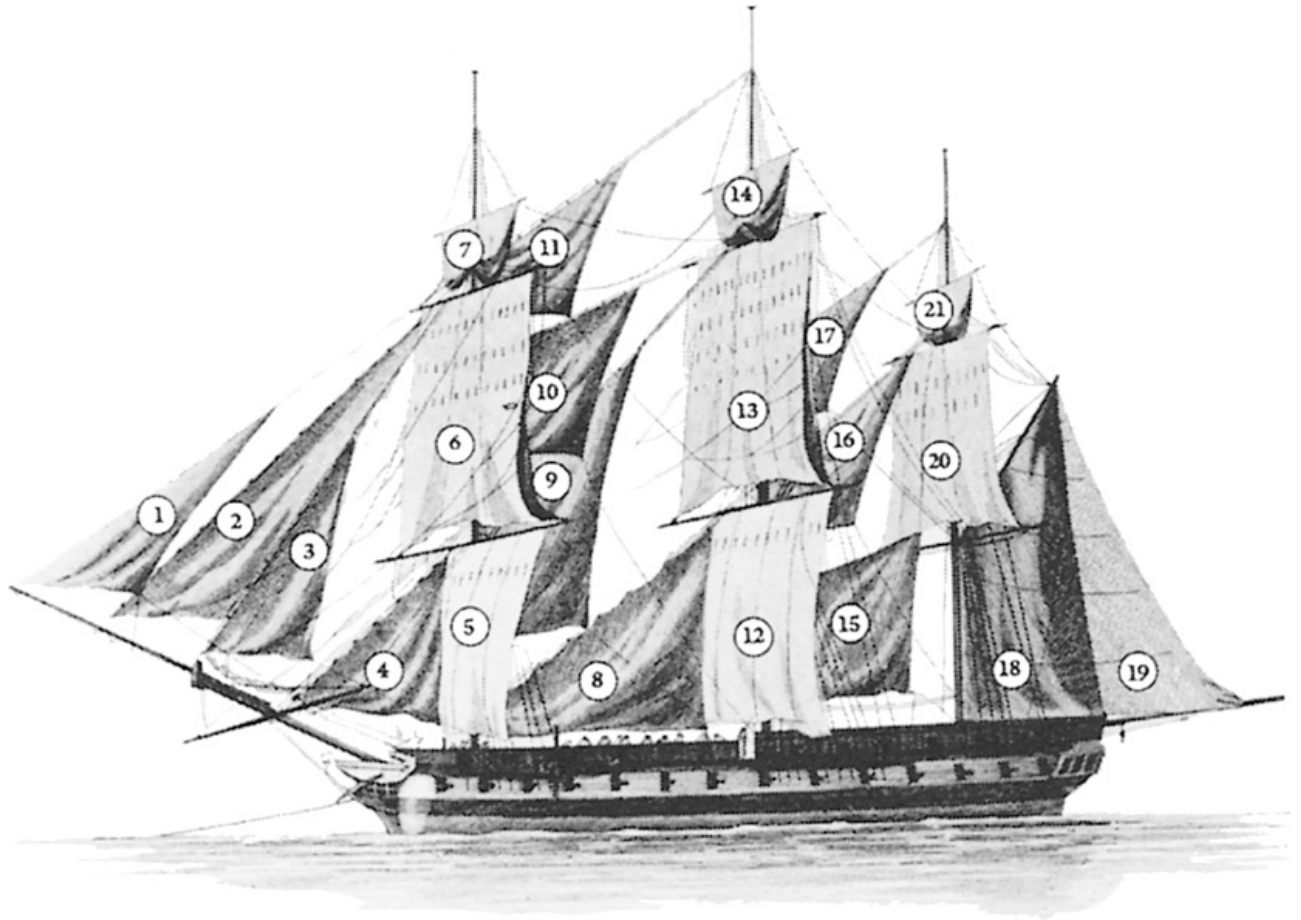
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Jack Aubrey's Ships – Brian Lavery
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The sails of a square-rigged ship, hung out to dry in a calm.



- 1 Flying jib
- 2 Jib
- 3 Fore topmast staysail
- 4 Fore staysail
- 5 Foresail, or course
- 6 Fore topsail
- 7 Fore topgallant
- 8 Mainstaysail
- 9 Main topmast staysail
- 10 Middle staysail
- 11 Main topgallant staysail
- 12 Mainsail, or course
- 13 Maintopsail
- 14 Main topgallant
- 15 Mizzen staysail
- 16 Mizzen topmast staysail
- 17 Mizzen topgallant staysail
- 18 Mizzen sail
- 19 Spanker
- 20 Mizzen topsail

Illustration source: Serres, Liber Nauticus.

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Chapter One

Ever since Jack Aubrey had been dismissed from the service, ever since his name, with its now meaningless seniority, had been struck off the list of post-captains, it had seemed to him that he was living in a radically different world; everything was perfectly familiar, from the smell of seawater and tarred rigging to the gentle heave of the deck under his feet, but the essence was gone and he was a stranger.

Other broken sea-officers, condemned by court-martial, might be worse off: indeed, two had come aboard without so much as a sea-chest between them, and compared with them he was uncommonly fortunate, which should perhaps have been a comfort to his mind – it was none to his heart. Nor was the fact that he was innocent of the crime for which he had been sentenced.

Yet there was no denying that materially he was well off. His old but beautiful frigate the *Surprise* had been sold out of the service, and Stephen Maturin had bought her as a private ship of war, a letter of marque, to cruise upon the enemy; and Jack Aubrey was in command.

She was now lying at single anchor in Shelmerston, an out-of-the-way port with a awkward bar and a dangerous tide-race, avoided by the Navy and by merchantmen but much frequented by smugglers and privateers, many of whose fast, rakish, predatory vessels could be seen along the quay. Turning in his mechanical walk on the starboard side of the quarterdeck, Jack glanced at the village and once again he tried to make out what it was that made Shelmerston so like the remaining pirate and buccaneer settlements he had seen long ago in the remoter West Indies and Madagascar when he was a youngster in this same *Surprise*. Shelmerston had no waving coconut-palms, no brilliant coral strand; and yet there was this likeness; perhaps it lay in the large and flashy public houses, the general air of slovenliness and easy money, the large number of whores, and the feeling that only a singularly determined and well-armed press-gang would ever make an attempt upon it. He also noticed that two boats had put off for the *Surprise* and that each was stretching out to reach her first: neither however contained Dr Maturin, the ship's surgeon (few people knew that he was also her owner), who was to come aboard today. One of these boats was coxed by an extraordinarily pretty girl with dark red hair, newly come upon the town and enjoying every minute of it; she was a great favourite with the privateersmen and they responded to her shrill cries so heroically that one broke his oar. Although Jack Aubrey could never fairly have been described as much of a whoremonger, he was no celibate and from his earliest youth until the present he had taken the liveliest pleasure in beauty, and this spirited girl half standing and all alive with excitement, was absurdly beautiful; but now he only observed the fact, and in a genuinely indifferent tone he said to Tom Pullings, 'Do not let that woman come aboard: take only three of the very best.'

He resumed his pensive walk while Pullings, the bosun, the gunner and Bonden, his own coxswain, put the men through their paces. They had to lay aloft, timed by a log-glass, loose and furl a topgallant sail, then traverse and point a great gun, fire a musket at a bottle

hanging from the fore-yardarm, and tie a crowned double wall-knot before the eyes of a crowd of thorough-going seamen. Ordinarily, manning a ship, a King's ship, was an anxious business, with the impress-service doing what it could, with humble prayers for a draft of sometimes criminal nondescripts from the receiving-ship, and with the boats cruising in the Channel to take hands out of homeward-bound merchantmen or to raid towns along the coast, often with so little success that one had to put to sea a hundred short of complement. Here in Shelmerston on the other hand the *Surprise* might have been fitting out in Paradise. Not only were all marine stores delivered the same tide by the willing and competitive chandlers whose well-furnished warehouses lined the quay, but the hands needed no pressing at all, no solicitation at the rendezvous, no beating of the drum. Jack Aubrey had long been known among seamen as a successful frigate-captain, a fighting captain who had been exceptionally fortunate in the article of prize-money, so fortunate that his nickname was Lucky Jack Aubrey; and the news that his own frigate, a remarkable sailer when skilfully handled, was to be converted into a letter of marque with himself in command brought privateersmen flocking to offer their services. He could pick and choose, which never happened aboard King's ships in wartime; and now he lacked only three of the number he had set as the proper complement. Many of the foremast jacks and petty officers were old *Surprises* who had been set free when the frigate was paid off and who had presumably avoided the press since then, though he had a strong suspicion that several had deserted from other King's ships, in some cases with the connivance of particular friends of his – Heneage Dundas, for example – who commanded them: and there were of course the personal followers such as his steward and coxswain and a few others who had never left him. Some of the men he did not know were from merchant ships, but most were smugglers and privateersmen, prime seamen, tough, independent, not much accustomed to discipline, still less to its outward, more ceremonial forms (though nearly all had been pressed at one time or another), yet eager and willing to serve under a captain they respected. And at this point Jack Aubrey was, in a privateersman's eye, an even more respectable commander than he himself might have supposed: he was leaner than he had been but he was still uncommonly tall and broadshouldered; his open, florid, cheerful face had grown older, less full; it was now lined and habitually sombre, with a touch of latent wickedness, and anyone used to the abrupt ways of the sea could instantly tell that this was not a face to be trifled with: if such a man were put out the blow would come without a moment's warning and be damned to the consequences – dangerous because past caring.

The *Surprise* now probably had a more efficient, more professional ship's company than any vessel of her size afloat, which might well have filled her captain's heart with joy: and indeed when he reflected upon the fact it did bring a certain amount of conscientious pleasure and what joy the heart could hold; this was not very much. It might have been said that Jack Aubrey's heart had been sealed off, so that he could accept his misfortune without its breaking; and that the sealing-off had turned him into a eunuch as far as emotion was concerned. The explanation would have been on the simple side, yet whereas in former times Captain Aubrey, like his hero Nelson and so many of his contemporaries, had been somewhat given to tears – he had wept with joy at the masthead of his first command; tears had sometimes wetted the lower part of his fiddle when he played particularly moving passages and cruel sobs had racked him at many a shipmate's funeral by land or sea – he was now a

hard and dry-eyed as a man could well be. He had parted from Sophie and the children at Ashgrove Cottage with no more than a constriction in his throat which made his farewell sound painfully harsh and unfeeling. And for that matter his fiddle lay there still in its wadded clothed case, untouched since he came aboard.

‘These are the three best hands, sir, if you please,’ said Mr Pullings, taking off his hat. ‘Harvey, Fisher and Whitaker.’

They touched their foreheads, three cousins with much the same long-nosed, weather-beaten, knowing faces, all smugglers and excellent seamen – none others could have passed the short but exceedingly severe examination – and looking at them with a certain mitigated satisfaction Aubrey said ‘Harvey, Fisher and Whitaker, I am glad to see you aboard. But you understand it is only on liking and on passing the surgeon?’ He glanced again at the shore, but no surgeon’s boat did he see. ‘And you understand the terms of pay, shares, discipline and punishment?’

‘We do indeed, sir. Which the coxswain read them out to us.’

‘Very well. You may bring your chests aboard.’ He resumed his steady to and fro repeating Harvey, Fisher, Whitaker: it was a captain’s duty to know his men’s names and something of their circumstances and hitherto he had found little difficulty even in a ship of the line with six or seven hundred aboard. He still knew every one of his Surprises of course, shipmates not only in the last far Pacific voyage but sometimes for many years before; but the new men escaped his memory most shamefully and even his officers called for an effort. Not Tom Pullings, naturally, once one of Aubrey’s midshipmen and now a half-pay commander in the Royal Navy, perfectly unblemished but with no hope of a ship, who, on indefinite leave from the service, was acting as his first mate; nor the second and third mates, both of them former King’s officers with whom he had been more or less acquainted and whose court-martial were clear in his mind – West for duelling and Davidge for an unhappy complex affair in which he had signed a dishonest purser’s books without looking at them – but he could remember his bosun only by the association of his massive body with his name, Bulkeley; fortunately no carpenter ever objected to being called Chips nor any gunner Master Gunner; and no doubt the unfamiliar petty officers would come in time.

To and fro, to and fro, looking towards the shore at each turn, until at last the seaweed high on his cable and the run of the water told him that if he did not get under way precisely soon he would miss his tide. ‘Mr Pullings,’ he said, ‘let us move outside the bar.’

‘Aye aye, sir,’ said Pullings, and he cried ‘Mr Bulkeley, all hands to weigh anchor.’

The quick cutting notes of the bosun’s call and the rush of feet followed instantly, a fair proof that the Shelmerston men were well acquainted both with the frigate’s draught and their own uneasy bar. The messenger was brought to, the capstanbars were shipped, pinned and swifted as briskly as though regular Surprises alone were at it; but as the capstan began to turn and the ship to glide across the harbour towards her anchor, some of the hands struck up the shanty

Walk her round and round she goes

Way oh, way oh

which had never happened in her life as a King’s ship, working songs not being countenance

in the Royal Navy. Pullings looked sharply at Jack, who shook his head and murmured 'Let them sing.'

So far there had been no bad blood between the old Surprises and the new hands and he would give almost anything to prevent it arising. He and Pullings had already done their best by mixing the gun-crews and the watches, but he had no doubt that by far the most important factor in this strangely peaceful relation between two dissimilar groups was the unparalleled situation: all those concerned, particularly the Surprises, seemed amazed by it, uncertain what to say or what to think, there being no formula to hand; and if only this could last until some three- or four-day blow in the chops of the Channel or better still until a successful action began to weld them into a single body, there were fair prospects of a happy ship.

'Up and down, sir,' called West from the forecastle.

'Foretopmen,' said Jack, raising his voice. 'D'ye hear me, there?' They would have been mere blocks if they had not, for the 'there' came back loud and clear from the housefronts to the bottom of the bay. 'Away aloft.' The foreshrouds were dark with racing men. 'Let fall: let fall.'

The topsail flashed out; the larboard watch sheeted it home and without a word they ran to the halliards. The yard rose smoothly; the foretopsail filled; the *Surprise* had just enough way on her to trip her anchor, and in a pure, leisurely curve she stood for the bar, already a nasty colour in the green-grey sea, with white about its edges.

'The very middle of the channel, Gillow,' said Jack to the man at the wheel.

'The very middle it is, sir,' said Gillow, a Shelmerstonian, glancing left and right and easing her a spoke or so.

In the open sea the *Surprise* folded her wings again, dropped the anchor from her cathead and veered away a reasonable scope and rode easy. It had been a simple operation, one that Jack had seen many thousand times, but it had run, perfectly smoothly, without the slightest fuss or fault, and it pleased him. This was just as well, since for some considerable time a feeling of indignation at Maturin's lateness had been growing in him: his huge misfortune he could, not accept, then at least endure without railing or complaint, but small things were capable of irritating him as much as ever they did – indeed a great deal more – and he had prepared a curt note for Stephen, to be left on shore, appointing another rendezvous in a fortnight's time.

'Mr Davidge,' he said, 'I am going below. If the Admiral should come round the headland pray let me know directly.' Admiral Russell, who lived at Allacombe, the next cove south by one, had sent word to say that wind and weather permitting he would give himself the pleasure of waiting on Mr Aubrey in the course of the afternoon and that he hoped Mr Aubrey would spend the evening at Allacombe with him: he sent his compliments to Mr Maturin, and if he was aboard, would be delighted to see him too.

'Directly, sir,' said Davidge, and then more hesitantly, 'Just how should we receive him, sir?'

'Like any other private ship,' said Jack. 'Man-ropes, of course, but nothing more.' He had a horror of 'coming it the Royal Navy'; he had always disliked the close imitation of naval ways by the East India Company and some other large concerns and by the bigger, more ambitious privateers; and at present he was dressed in a frieze pilot-jacket and tweed pantaloons. On the other hand he was perfectly determined that the *Surprise*, though shorn of

pennant, gold lace, Royal Marines and many other things should still be run man-of-war fashion in all essentials and he was fairly confident that the two were not irreconcilable.

He would have given an eye-tooth to avoid this meeting with Russell. But he had served under the Admiral as a midshipman; he had a great respect for him and a lively sense of gratitude, since it was to Russell's influence that he owed his lieutenant's commission. The unfortunate invitation had been as kindly phrased and as kindly meant as possible; it could not in decency be refused; but Jack most heartily wished that Stephen had been there to help him through the evening. At present he had no small social gaiety to draw upon and he dreaded the presence of other guests, particularly naval guests – the sympathy of any but his most intimate friends, the supercilious, distant civility of those who did not like him.

In the great cabin he called 'Killick. Killick, there.'

'What now?' answered Killick in an ill-tempered whine from where Jack's cot was slung and for form's sake he added 'Sir.'

'Rouse out my bottle-green coat and a decent pair of breeches.'

'Which I've got it here, ain't I? And you can't have it these ten minutes, the buttons a- being to be re-seated.'

Neither Killick nor Bonden had ever expressed the slightest concern about Captain Aubrey's trial and condemnation. They had the great delicacy of feeling in important matters that Jack, after many, many years experience and very close contact, had come to expect on the lower deck; there was no overt sympathy whatsoever apart from their attentive presence and Killick was if anything more cross-grained than he had been all these years, by way of showing that there was no difference.

He could be heard muttering in the sleeping-cabin – God-damned blunt needle – if he had a shilling for every button that fat-arsed slut at Ashgrove had put on loose, he would be a rich man – no notion of seating a shank man-of-war fashion – and the twist was the wrong shade of green.

In time however Captain Aubrey was dressed in newly-brushed, newly-pressed clothes and he resumed his habitual solitary pacing on the quarterdeck, looking now at the land, now at the cape to the southward.

Ever since Stephen Maturin had become rich he was troubled from time to time by fits of narrowness. Most of his life he had been poor and sometimes exceedingly poor, but except when poverty prevented him from satisfying his very simple needs he had taken little notice of money. Yet now that he had inherited from his god-father (his own father's particular friend, his mother's third cousin once removed, and the last of his wealthy race), and now that the heavy little iron-bound cases holding don Ramón's gold were so crowding his banker's strong-room that the door could scarcely be closed, a concern with pence and shillings came over him.

At present he was walking over a vast bare slightly undulating plain, going fast over the short turf in the direction of the newly-risen sun: brilliant cock-wheatears in their best plumage flew on either side; countless larks far overhead, of course; a jewel of a day. He had come down from London in the slow coach, getting out at Clotworthy so that he could cross country to Polton Episcopi, where his friend the Reverend Nathaniel Martin would be waiting for him; and there they would both take the carrier's cart to Shelmerston, from which

the *Surprise* was to sail on the evening tide. According to Stephen's calculation this would save a good eleven shillings and fourpence. The calculation was wrong, for although he was quite able in some fields, such as medicine, surgery and entomology, arithmetic was not one of them, and he needed a guardian angel with an abacus to multiply by twelve; the error was of no real importance however since this was not a matter of true grasping avarice but rather of conscience; as he saw it there was an indecency in wealth, an indecency that could be slightly diminished by gestures of this kind and by an outwardly unaltered modest train of life.

Only slightly, as he freely admitted to himself, for these fits were spasmodic and at other times he was far from consistent: for example, he had recently indulged himself in a wonderfully supple pair of half-boots made by an eminent hand in St James's Street, and in the sinful luxury of cashmere stockings. Ordinarily he wore heavy square-toed shoes made heavier still by sheet-lead soles, the principle being that without the lead he would be light-footed; and indeed for the first three miles he had fairly sped over the grass, taking conscious pleasure in the easy motion and the green smell of spring that filled the air. Yet now, perhaps a furlong ahead, there was a man, strangely upright and dark in this pale horizontal landscape inhabited only by remote amorphous bands of sheep and by high white clouds moving gently from the west-south-west: he too was walking along the broad drift, marked by the passage of flocks and the ruts of an occasional shepherd's hut on wheels, but he was walking more slowly by far, and not only that, but every now and then he stopped entirely to gesticulate with greater vehemence, while at other times he would give a leap or bound. Ever since Maturin had come within earshot he had perceived that the man was talking, sometimes earnestly, sometimes with extreme passion, and sometimes in the shrill tones of an elegant female: a man of the middling kind, to judge by his blue breeches and claret-coloured coat and of some education, for at one point he cried out 'Oh that the false dogs might be choked with their own dung!' in rapid, unhesitating Greek; but a man who quite certainly thought of himself alone in the green morning and who would be horribly mortified at being overtaken by one who must have heard his ejaculations for the last half hour.

Yet there was no help for it; the halts were becoming more frequent, and if Blue Breeches did not turn off the path very soon Stephen must either catch him up or loiter at the wretched pace, perhaps being late for his appointment.

He tried coughing and even a hoarse burst of song; but nothing answered and he would have had to sneak past with what countenance he could had not Blue Breeches stopped, spun about, and gazed at him.

'Have you a message for me?' he called, when Stephen was within a hundred yards.

'I have not,' said Stephen.

'I ask your pardon, sir,' said Blue Breeches, with Stephen now close at hand, 'but as I was expecting a message from London, and as I told them at home that I should be visiting my delly, I thought. .. but sir,' he went on, reddening with confusion, 'I fear I must have made a sad exhibition of myself, declaiming as I walked.'

'Never in life, sir,' cried Stephen. 'Many a parliament-man, many a lawyer have I known harangue the empty air and thought nothing of it at all, at all. And did not Demosthenes address the waves? Sure, it is in the natural course of many a man's calling.'

'The fact of the matter is, that I am an author,' said Blue Breeches, when they had walked on a little way; and in answer to Stephen's civil enquiries he said that he worked mostly on

tales of former times and Gothic manners. 'But as for the number that you so politely ask after,' he added with a doleful look, 'I am afraid it is so small that I am ashamed to mention it: I doubt I have published more than a score. Not, mark you,' he said with a skip, 'that I have not conceived, worked out and entirely composed at least ten times as many, and of this very sward too, excellent tales, capital tales that have made me (a partial judge, I confess) laugh aloud with pleasure. But you must understand, sir, that each man has his particular way of writing, and mine is by saying my pieces over as I walk – I find the physical motion dispels the gross humours and encourages the flow of ideas. Yet that is where the danger lies: if it encourage them too vigorously, if my piece is formed to my full satisfaction as just now I conceived the chapter in which Sophonisba confines Roderigo in the Iron Maiden on pretence of wanton play and begins to turn the screw, why then it is done and finished; and my mind, my imagination will have nothing more to do with it – declines even to write it down, or, on compulsion, records a mere frigid catalogue of unlikely statements. The only way for me to succeed is by attaining a near-success, a *coitus interruptus* with my Muse, if you will forgive me the expression, and then running home to my pen for the final consummation. And this I cannot induce my bookseller to understand: I tell him that the work of the mind is essentially different from manual labour; I tell him that in the second case mere industry and application will hew a forest of wood and carry an ocean of water whereas in the first. .. and he sends word that the press is at a stand, that he must have the promised twenty sheets by return.' Blue Breeches repeated his Greek remark, and added, 'But here, sir, our ways must part; unless perhaps I can tempt you to view my dell.'

'Is it perhaps a druidical dell, sir?' asked Stephen, smiling as he shook his head.

'Druidical? Oh no, not at all. Though something might be made of druids: *The Druidical Curse*, or *The Spectre of the Henge*. No, my dell is only a place where I sit and contemplate my bustards.'

'Your bustards, sir?' cried Stephen, his pale eyes searching the man's face. '*Otis tarda?*'

'The same.'

'I have never seen one in England,' said Stephen.

'Indeed, they are grown very rare: when I was a little boy you might see small droves of them, looking remarkably like sheep. But they still exist; they are creatures of habit, and I have followed them since I was very young, as my father and grandfather did before me. From my dell I can certainly undertake to show you a sitting hen; and there is a fair chance of two or three cock-birds.'

'Would it be far, at all?'

'Oh, not above an hour, if we step out; and I have, after all, finished my chapter.'

Stephen gazed at his watch. Martin, an authority on the thick-kneed curlew, would forgive him for being late in such a cause; but Jack Aubrey had a naval regard for time – he was absurdly particular about punctuality to the very minute, and the idea of facing a Jack Aubrey seven feet tall and full of barely-contained wrath at having been kept waiting two whole hours, a hundred and twenty minutes, made Stephen hesitate; but not for very long. 'I shall hire a post-chaise at Polton Episcopi,' he said inwardly, 'a chaise and four, and they will make up the time.'

The Marquess of Granby, Polton's only inn, had a bench along its outer wall, facing the

afternoon sun; and on this bench, framed by a climbing rose on the one hand and honeysuckle on the other, dozed Nathaniel Martin. Swallows, whose half-built nests were taking form in the eaves above, dropped little balls of mud on him from time to time, and he had been there so long that his left shoulder had a liberal coating. He was just aware of the tiny impact, of the sound of wings and the tumbling, hurried swallow-song, as well as the remoter thorough-bass of a field full of cows beyond the Marquess's horsepond; but he did not fully wake to the world until he heard the cry 'Shipmate, ahoy!'

'Oh my dear Maturin,' he exclaimed, 'how happy I am to see you! But' – looking again – 'trust no accident has occurred?' For Maturin's face, ordinarily an unwholesome yellow, was now entirely suffused with an unwholesome pink; it was also covered with dust, in which the sweat, as it ran down, had made distinct tracks or runnels.

'Never in life, soul. I am so concerned, indeed so truly distressed, that you should have had to wait: pray forgive me.' He sat down, breathing fast. 'But will I tell what it is that keeps me?'

'Pray do,' said Martin, and directing his voice in at the window, 'Landlord, a can of ale for the gentleman, if you please: a pint of the coolest ale that ever you can draw.'

'You will scarcely believe me, but peering through the long grass at the edge of a dell and we in the dell looking outwards you understand, I have seen a bustard sitting on her eggs not a hundred yards away. With the gentleman's perspective-glass I could see her eye, which is a bright yellowish brown. And then when we had been there a while she stood up, walked on to join two monstrous tall cocks and a bird of the year and vanished over the slope, so that we could go and look at her nest without fear. And, Martin, I absolutely heard the chicks on those beautiful great eggs calling peep-peep peep-peep, like a distant bosun, upon my word and honour.'

Martin clasped his hands, but before he could utter more than an inarticulate cry of wonder and admiration the ale arrived and Stephen went on, 'Landlord, pray have a post-chaise put to, to carry us to Shelmerston as soon as I have drunk up this capital ale: for I suppose the carrier is gone long since.'

'Bless you, sir,' said the landlord, laughing at such simplicity, 'there ain't no shay at Polton Episcopi, nor never has been. Oh dear me, no. And Joe Carrier, he will be long of Wakeley's by now.'

'Well then, a couple of horses, or a man with a gig, or a tax-cart.'

'Sir, you are forgetting it is market-day over to Plashett. There is not a mortal gig nor tax-cart in the village. Nor I doubt no horse; though Waites's mule might carry two, and the farrier dosed him last night. I will ask my wife, Anthony Waites being her cousin, as you might say.'

A pause, in which a woman's voice could be heard calling down the stairs 'What do the gentlemen want to go to Shelmerston for?' and the landlord came back with the satisfied expression of one whose worst fears have been realized. 'No, gentlemen,' he said. 'Not the least hope of a horse; and Waites's mule is dead.'

They walked in silence for a while, and then Stephen said, 'Still and all, it is only a matter of a few hours.'

'There is also the question of the tide,' observed Martin.

‘Lord, Lord, I was forgetting the tide,’ said Stephen. ‘And sailors do make such a point of it.’ A quarter of a mile later he said, ‘I am afraid my recent notes may not have given you quite all the information you might have wished.’ This was eminently true. Stephen Maturin had been so long and so intimately concerned with intelligence, naval and political, and his life had so long depended on secrecy that he was most unwilling to commit anything to writing; and in any event he was a most indifferent correspondent. Martin said ‘Not at all,’ and Stephen went on ‘If I had had any good news for you, believe me, I should have brought it out with great joy directly; but I am obliged to tell you that your pamphlet, your very able pamphlet, inveighing against whoredom and flogging in the service, makes it virtually impossible that you should ever be offered a naval chaplaincy again. This I heard in Whitehall itself, I grieve to say.’

‘So Admiral Caley told my wife a few days ago,’ said Martin with a sigh. ‘He said he wondered at my temerity. Yet I did think it my duty to make some kind of a protest.’

‘Sure, it was a courageous thing to do,’ said Stephen. ‘Now I will turn to Mr Aubrey. You followed his trial and condemnation, I believe?’

‘Yes, I did; and with the utmost indignation. I wrote to him twice, but destroyed both the letters, fearing to intrude and hurt with untimely sympathy. It was a very gross miscarriage of justice. Mr Aubrey could no more have conceived a fraud on the Stock Exchange than rather less so, indeed, he having so very little knowledge of the world of commerce, let alone finance.’

‘And you know he was dismissed from the service?’

‘It cannot be true!’ cried Martin, standing there motionless. A cart plodded by, the driver staring at them open-mouthed and eventually turning bodily round so that he might stare longer.

‘His name was removed from the post-captains’ list the Friday after.’

‘It must have gone near killing him,’ said Martin, looking aside to conceal his emotion. ‘The service meant everything to Mr Aubrey. So brave and honourable, and to be turned away...’

‘Indeed it killed his joy in living,’ said Stephen. They moved on slowly, and he said ‘But he has great fortitude; and he has an admirable wife –’

‘Oh, what a present comfort a wife is to a man!’ exclaimed Martin, a smile breaking through the unaffected gravity of his expression.

Stephen’s wife, Diana, was not a present comfort to him but a pain at his heart, sometimes dull, sometimes almost insupportably acute, never wholly absent; he said composedly, ‘There is much to be said for marriage. And they have these children, too. I have hopes for him, particularly as when he was removed from the service so also was his ship. His friends have bought the *Surprise*; she has been fitted out as a private man-of-war, and he commands her.’

‘Good Heavens, Maturin, the *Surprise* a privateer? Of course I knew she was to be sold out of the service, but I had no notion of. .. I had supposed that privateers were little disreputable half-piratical affairs of ten or twelve guns at the most, luggers and brigs and the like.’

‘To be sure the most part of those that ply their trade in the Channel are of the description, but there are foreign-going private men-of-war of much greater consequence.’

the nineties there was a Frenchman of fifty guns, that wrought terrible havoc on the eastern trade; and you can scarcely have forgotten the prodigious fast-sailing ship that we chased day after day and so very nearly caught when we were coming back from Barbados – she carried thirty-two guns.’

‘Of course, of course: the *Spartan*. But she was from America, was she not?’

‘What then?’

‘The country is so vast that one has an indistinct notion of everything being on a large scale, even the privateers.’

‘Listen, Martin,’ said Stephen, after a slight pause. ‘Will I tell you something?’

‘If you please.’

‘The word privateer has unpleasant echoes for the seaman, and it might be thought injurious, applied to the dear *Surprise*. In any case she is no ordinary privateer, at all. In an ordinary privateer the hands go aboard on the understanding of no prey, no pay; they are fed but no more and any money must come from their prizes. This makes them unruly and contumelious; it is their custom to plunder without the least mercy and strip the unfortunate victims; and in the case of the most wicked and brutal it is said that those prisoners who cannot ransom themselves are thrown overboard, while rape and ill-usage are commonplace. In the *Surprise* on the other hand everything is to be run on naval lines; the people are to be paid; Captain Aubrey means to accept only able seamen of what he considers good character; and those who will not undertake to submit to naval discipline are turned away. He sails with his present crew directly, on liking, for a short cruise or two – one to the westward and another to the north, probably the Baltic – and those that are found not to answer will be put on shore before the main voyage. So bearing all this in mind, perhaps you would be well advised to refer to her as a private man-of-war, or if you find that disagreeable, as a letter of marque.’

‘I am grateful for your warning, and shall try not to offend; yet surely there will be very little occasion for my calling her anything, since however far removed she may be from an ordinary – from the objectionable class of ship – even the best-ordered private man-of-war can hardly require a chaplain? Or do I mistake?’ The urgency of his desire to be told that he *did* mistake was so evident in his lean, unbeneficed, anxious face that it grieved Stephen to have to say, ‘Alas, there is, as you know, a very absurd superstitious prejudice among seamen: they believe that carrying a parson brings bad luck. And in an enterprise of this kind bad luck is everything. That is why they seek to ship with Lucky Jack Aubrey in such numbers. But I did not mean to trifle with you when I asked you to meet me at Polton: my intention was to learn whether your projects, plans or desires had changed since last we met, or whether you would be willing to let me ask Mr Aubrey if he would appoint you surgeon’s assistant. After these preliminary cruises the *Surprise* is bound for South America, and on such a long voyage there have of course to be two medical men. Your physical knowledge already exceeds that of most surgeon’s mates; and I should infinitely prefer to have a second who is also a civilized companion, and a naturalist into the bargain. Do pray turn it over in your mind. If you could let me have your answer in a fortnight’s time, at the end of the first cruise, you would oblige me.’

‘Does the nomination depend on Mr Aubrey alone?’ asked Martin, his face fairly glowing.

‘It does.’

‘Then may we not perhaps run a little? As you see, the road is downhill as far as the eye can reach.’

‘On deck, there,’ called the lookout at the masthead of the *Surprise*. ‘Three sail of ships four – five sail of ships fine on the starboard bow.’ They were hidden from the deck by the high land to the north ending in Penlea Head, but the lookout, a local man, had a fine view of them, and presently he added in a conversational tone, ‘Men-of-war; part of the Breton squadron, I fancy. But there’s nothing to worry about. There ain’t no sloops nor frigates, and they are going to wear.’ The implication was that if they had been accompanied by sloops or frigates, one might have been detached to see what could be snapped up in the way of merchandise pressed out of the ship lying there off Shelmerston.

Soon after this they appeared from behind Penlea: two seventy-fours, then a three-decker probably the *Caledonia*, wearing the flag of a vice-admiral of the red at the fore, then two more seventy-fours, the last quite certainly the *Pompée*. They wore in succession and stood away into the offing with the topgallant breeze two points free, making a line as exact as if it had been traced with a ruler, each ship two cable’s lengths from its leader; in their casual thrown-away beauty they must have moved any seaman’s heart, though most bitter and wounding one excluded from that world. Yet it had to happen sooner or later, and Jack was glad that the first shock had been no worse.

This particular misery had many aspects, not the least being his sharp, immediate practical realization that he was the potential prey of his own service; but he was not much given to analysing his feelings and once the squadron had disappeared he resumed his dogged walk fore and aft until as he turned he caught sight of a lugger hoisting her sail in the harbour. A small figure was waving something white in the bows, and borrowing Davidge’s telescope he saw that the waver was Stephen Maturin. The lugger went about to cross the bows on the starboard tack and Stephen was made to get out of the way – to sit upon a lobster-pot amidships; but even so he continued his thin harsh screeching and the waving of his handkerchief; and to Jack’s surprise he saw that he was accompanied by Parson Martin, come to pay a visit, no doubt.

‘Bonden,’ he said, ‘the Doctor will be with us very soon, together with Mr Martin. Let Padeen know, in case his master’s cabin needs a wipe, and stand by to get them both aboard dry-foot, if possible.’

The two gentlemen, though long accustomed to the sea, both had some mental disabilities, some unhappy want of development, that kept them from any knowledge of its ways; they were perpetual landlubbers, and Dr Maturin in particular had, in his attempts at coming up the side, fallen between more ships and the boat that was carrying him than could well be numbered. This time however they were ready for him, and powerful arms heaved him gasping aboard, and Jack Aubrey cried ‘Why, there you are, Doctor. How happy I am to see you. My dear Mr Martin’ – shaking his hand – ‘welcome aboard once more. I trust I see you well?’ He certainly saw him cold, for Martin was exhausted and the sea-damp breeze had pierced his thin coat through and through during the passage from the shore; and although he smiled and said everything proper, he could not keep his teeth from chattering. ‘Come below,’ said Jack, leading the way. ‘Let me offer you something hot. Killick, a pot of coffee and bear a hand.’

‘Jack,’ said Stephen, ‘I do most humbly beg your pardon for being late; it was my own fault entirely, so it was – a gross self-indulgence in bustards; and I am most infinitely obliged to you for waiting for us.’

‘Not at all,’ said Jack. ‘I am engaged to Admiral Russell this evening and shall not sail until the beginning of the ebb. Killick, Killick, there: my compliments to Captain Pulling who is in the hold, and there are some friends of his come aboard.’

‘Before dear Tom appears,’ said Stephen, ‘there is one point that I should like to settle. The *Surprise* needs a surgeon’s mate, especially as I may have to be absent some part of the time, early on. You are acquainted with Mr Martin’s competence in the matter. Subject to your consent, he has agreed to accompany me as my assistant.’

‘As assistant-surgeon, not as chaplain?’

‘Just so.’

‘I should indeed be happy to have Mr Martin with us again, above all in the physical line. For I must tell you, sir’ – turning to Martin – ‘that even in a King’s ship the hands do not take kindly to the idea of having a parson aboard, and in a letter of marque – why, they are even more given to pagan superstition, and I fear it would upset them sadly. Though I have no doubt that in case of accident they would like to be buried in style. So that as long as you are on the ship’s books as assistant-surgeon, they will have the best of both worlds.’

Pullings hurried in, with the friendliest welcome; Padeen tried to find out in his primitive English whether the Doctor would like his flannel waistcoat; and Davidge sent word that the Admiral’s cutter would be alongside in five minutes.

The Admiral’s cutter came to the larboard side to avoid all ceremony, and with an equal lack of pomp Stephen was handed down the side like a sack of potatoes. ‘It is very kind of you to invite me too, sir,’ he said, ‘but I am ashamed to appear in such garments: never a moment did I have to shift since I arrived.’

‘You are very well as you are, Doctor, very well indeed. It is only myself and my wife Polly, whom you know, and Admiral Schank, whom you know even better. I had hoped for Admiral Henry, who is very much in the medical way, now that he is at leisure; but he was bespoke. Left his best compliments, however, and I have his latest work for you, a very pretty book.’

The pretty book was called *An Account of the Means by which Admiral Henry has Cured the Rheumatism, a Tendency to Gout, the Tic Douloureux, the Cramp, and other Disorders; and likewise which a Cataract in the Eye was removed*, and Stephen was looking at the pictures while Polly, an enchanting young person whose black hair and blue eyes brought Diana even more strongly to mind, played some variations on a theme by Pergolesi, when Admiral Schank woke up and said ‘Bless me, I believe I must have dropped off. What were we saying, Doctor?’

‘We were speaking of balloons, sir, and you were trying to recollect the details of the device you had thought of for doing away with the inconvenience, the mortal inconvenience of rising too high.’

‘Yes, yes. I will draw it for you.’ The Admiral, known throughout the service as Old Purchase because of his ingenious cot that could be inclined, raised, lowered, and moved from point to point by the man who lay in it, even a feeble invalid, with the help of double and triple pulleys, and many other inventions, drew a balloon with a network of lines round

the envelope and explained that by means of a system of blocks it was designed to diminish the volume of gas and thus its lifting-power. 'But, however, it did not answer,' he said. 'The only way of not going too high, like poor Senhouse, who was never seen again, or Charlton, who was froze, is to let out some of the gas; and then if the day cools you are likely to come down with shocking force and be dashed to pieces, like poor Crowle and his dog and cat. Were you ever in a balloon, Maturin?'

'I was in one, sure, in the sense that the car contained me; but the balloon was sullen and would not rise, so I was obliged to get out and my companion was wafted off alone, landing three fields away, just inside the County Roscommon. Though now they are grown so fashionable again, I hope to make another attempt, and to observe the soaring flight of vultures close at hand.'

'Was yours a fire-balloon or one filled with gas?'

'It was meant to be a fire-balloon, but the turf was not as dry as it should have been and that day there was a small drizzle wafting across the whole country, so though we blew like the Boreas we could never make it really buoyant.'

'Just as well. If you had gone up, and if the envelope had taken fire, as they so often do, you would have spent your last few seconds regretting your temerity. They are nasty, dangerous things, Maturin; and although I do not deny that a properly anchored gas-balloon let up to say three or four thousand feet might make a useful observation-post for a general, I do believe that only condemned criminals should be sent up in them.'

A pause, and Admiral Schank said, 'What has happened to Aubrey?'

'Admiral Russell has taken him into the library to show a model of the *Santissima Trinidad*.'

'Then I wish he would bring him back again. It is several minutes past supper-time and Evans has already looked in twice – and if I am not fed when I am used to being fed, you vultures ain't in it: I tear my companions and roar, like the lions in the Tower. I do hate unpunctuality, don't you, Maturin? Polly, my dear, do you think your guardian is too poorly? The clock struck a great while ago.'

In the library they stood gazing at the model, and Admiral Russell said, 'Everyone I have spoken to agrees that the Ministry's action against you, or rather against your father and his associates, was the ugliest thing the service has seen since poor Byng was judicially murdered. You may be sure that my friends and I shall do everything we can to have you reinstated.' Jack bowed, and in spite of his certain knowledge that this was the worst thing that could possibly be done, far worse than useless, since the Admiral and his friends belonged to the Opposition, he would have made a proper acknowledgment if the Admiral had not held up his hand, saying 'Not a word. What I really wanted to say to you was this: do not mope; do not keep away from your friends, Aubrey. By people who do not know you so well, it might be interpreted as a sense of guilt; and in any case it makes for brooding and melancholy and the blue devils. Do not keep away from your friends. I know several who have been hurt by your refusal, and I have heard of more.'

'It was very handsome of them to invite me,' said Jack, 'but my going must have compromised them; and there is such competition for ships and promotion nowadays that I would not have my friends in any way handicapped at the Admiralty. It is different with you, sir: I know you do not want a command, and an Admiral of the White who has already

refused a title has nothing to fear from anyone, Admiralty or not. But I will follow your advice as far as –'

'Oh sir,' said Polly in the doorway, 'the kitchen is all in an uproar. Supper was half on the table as the great clock struck and now it is half off again, while Evans and Mrs Payr wrangle in the corridor.'

'God's my life,' cried the Admiral, glancing at the library timepiece, a silent regulator. 'Aubrey, we must run like hares.'

Supper wound its pleasant course, and although the soufflé had seen better times than claret, a Latour, was as near perfection as man could desire. At the next stroke of the clock Polly said good night; and once again the particular grace of her curtsey, the bend of her head, gave Stephen a vivid image of Diana, in whom grace stood in lieu of virtue, though indeed she was usually honourable according to her own standards, which were surprisingly rigorous in some respects. It was pretty to see how Polly blushed when Stephen opened the door for her, she being still so young that it was a great rarity in her experience; and when the men sat down again Admiral Russell took a letter out of his pocket and said 'Aubrey, I know how you value Nelson's memory, so I mean to give you this; and I hope it will bring you good fortune in your voyage. He sent it to me in the year three, when I was with Lord Keith in the Sound and he was in the Mediterranean. I will read it to you first, not so much out of vainglory, as because he wrote it with his left hand, of course, and you might not be able to make it out. After the usual beginning it runs "Here I am, waiting the pleasure of these fellows at Toulon, and we only long to get fairly alongside of them. I dare say, there would be some spare hats, by the time we had done. You are a pleasant fellow at all times, and, as Commodore Johnstone said of General Meadows, *I have no doubt but your companions would be delightful on the day of battle to your friends, but damned bad for your enemies.* I desire my dear Russell, you will always consider me as one of the sincerest of the former." ' He passed it, still open, across the table.

'Oh what a very handsome letter!' cried Jack gazing at it with a look of unfeigned delight. 'I do not suppose a handsomer letter was ever wrote. And may I really have it, sir? I am most exceedingly grateful, and shall treasure it – I cannot tell you how I shall treasure it. Thank you, sir, again and again' – shaking the Admiral's hand with an iron grasp.

'They may say what they like about Nelson,' observed Old Purchase, 'these fellows are ready with their first stones. But even they will admit that he put things very well. My nephew Cunningham was one of his youngsters in *Agamemnon* and Nelson said to him, "There are three things, young gentleman, which you are constantly to bear in mind. First, you must always implicitly obey orders, without attempting to form any opinion of your own respecting their propriety. Secondly, you must consider every man your enemy who speaks against your King: and thirdly, you must hate a Frenchman as you do the Devil." '

'Admirably well put,' said Jack.

'But surely,' said Stephen, who loved un-Napoleonic France, 'he cannot have meant of Frenchmen?'

'I think he did,' said Schank.

'It was perhaps a little sweeping,' said Russell. 'But then so were his victories. And really upon the whole, you know, there is very little good in the French: it is said that you can learn a great deal about a nation from its proverbial expressions, and when the French wish'

describe anything mighty foul they say, “sale comme un peigne”, which gives you a prett idea of their personal cleanliness. When they have other things to occupy their mind they say they have other cats to whip: a most inhuman thing to do. And when they are going to put ship about, the order is “à-Dieu-va”, or “we must chance it and trust in God”, which gives you some notion of their seamanship. I cannot conceive anything more criminal.’

Jack was telling Admiral Schank how Nelson had once asked him to pass the salt in the civillest way imaginable, and how on another occasion he had said ‘never mind about manoeuvres; always go straight at ’em’, and Stephen was about to suggest that there might be some good Frenchmen, instancing those who had made this sublime claret, when Admiral Russell, returning from a brief reverie, said, ‘No, no. There may be exceptions, but upon the whole I have no use for them, high or low. It was a French commander, of excellent family and these things go with them, that played me the dirtiest trick I ever heard of in war, a trick as loathsome as a French comb.’

‘Pray tell us, sir,’ said Jack, privately fondling his letter.

‘I will only give you the briefest summary, because if you are to sail on the turn of the tide I must not keep you. It was when I had the *Hussar* – the old *Hussar* – at the end of the last American war, in eighty-three, a neat weatherly little frigate, very like your *Surprise* though not quite so fast on a bowline: Nelson had the *Albemarle* on the same station, and we got along admirably well together. I was cruising rather north of Cape Hatteras, in sounding – fresh gale in the north-north-west and hazy February weather – and I chased a sail standing to the westward with the starboard tacks on board. I gained on her and when we were quite near – damned murky it was – I saw she was under jury-masts, uncommon well set-up, and that she had some shot-holes in her quarter. So when she showed an English ensign reversed in her main shrouds and English colours over French at the ensign-staff it was clear that she was a prize to one of our ships, that she had been battered in the taking, and that her prize crew needed help – that she was in distress.’

‘It could mean nothing else,’ said Jack.

‘Oh yes it could, my dear fellow,’ said the Admiral. ‘It could mean that she was commanded by a scrub, a dishonourable scrub. I stood under her lee to hail and ask what they needed, and jumping up on to the hammock-netting with my speaking-trumpet to make them hear over the wind I saw her decks were alive with men – not a prize-crew at all but two or three hundred men – and at the same moment she ran out her guns, putting up her helm to lay me athwart hawse, carry away my bowsprit, rake me and board me – there were the boarders by the score in her waist all on tiptoe, all a-grinning. Still with my speaking-trumpet up I roared out “Hard a-weather” and my people had the sense to shiver the after-sails even before I had time to give the order. The *Hussar* obeyed directly, and so we missed most of the raking fire, though it did wound my foremast and carry away most of its starboard shrouds. We were both by the lee forward, almost aboard one another, and my people hurled cold round-shot down at their boarders – with prodigious effect – while the Marines blazed away as quick as they could load. Then I called out “Boarders away,” and hearing this the scrub put up his helm, wore round and made sail before the wind. We pelted away after him. After an hour’s brisk engagement his fire slackened and he clapped his helm a-starboard, running to windward on the larboard tack. I followed him round to jam him up against the wind, but alas there was my foremast on the point of coming by the board

bowsprit too – and we could not keep our luff until they were secured. However, we accomplished it at last, and we were gaining on the Frenchman when the weather cleared and there to windward we saw a large ship – we soon found she was the *Centurion* – and to leeward a sloop we knew was the *Terrier*; so we cracked on regardless and in a couple of hours we were abreast of him – gave him a broadside. He returned two guns and struck his colours. The ship proved to be *La Sybille*, thirty-eight – though he threw a dozen overboard in the chase – with a crew of three hundred and fifty men as well as some American supernumeraries, and the scrub in command was the comte de Kergariou – Kergariou de Socmar, as I recall.’

‘What did you do to him, sir?’ asked Jack.

‘Hush,’ said the Admiral, cocking an eye at Schank. ‘Old Purchase is fast asleep. Let them creep away, and I will run you back to your ship; the breeze serves, and you will not lose a minute of your tide.’

Chapter Two

Dawn found the *Surprise* far out in the grey, lonely waste that was her natural home; a fine topgallant breeze was blowing from the south-west, with low cloud and occasional wafts of rain but promise of a better day to come; and she had topgallantsails abroad although it was so early, for Jack wished to be out of the ordinary path of ships on their way to or from the various naval stations. He had no wish to see any of his men pressed – and no King's officer could resist the temptation of such a numerous, hand-picked crew of able seamen – nor had he any wish to be called aboard a King's ship to show his papers, give an account of himself and perhaps be treated in an off-hand manner, even with familiarity or disrespect. The service was not made up solely of men with a great deal of natural or acquired delicacy and he had already had to put up with some slights; he would get used to them in time, no doubt, but for the present he was as it were flayed.

'Get under way, Joe,' said the quartermaster, turning the watch-glass, and a muffled forward padded forward to strike three bells in the morning watch. The master's mate heaved the log and reported six knots, two fathoms, a rate few ships could equal in these conditions and perhaps none surpass.

'Mr West,' said Jack to the officer of the watch, 'I am going below for a while. I doubt the breeze will hold, but it looks as though we may have a pleasant day of it.'

'It does indeed, sir,' replied West, ducking his head against a sudden shower of spray, for the *Surprise* was sailing close-hauled south-south-east with choppy seas smacking against her starboard bow and streaming aft, mixed with the rain. 'How delightful it is to be at sea once more.'

At this early stage Jack Aubrey was three persons in one. He was the ship's captain, of course; and since no candidate he could approve had appeared among the many who came forward, he was also her master, responsible for the navigation among other things; and he was her purser as well. Officers commanding vessels sent on exploration were usually the pursers too, but this role had never fallen to Jack, and although as captain he had always been supposed to supervise his pursers and required to sign their books, he was astonished at the volume and complexity of the necessary accounts now that he came to deal with them in detail.

There was already light enough to work at the stern window of the great cabin – a curving series of panes the whole width of the ship that gave him a certain pleasure even in the worst of his unhappiness, as indeed did the cabin itself, a singularly beautiful room with scarcely a right-angle in it – curved deck, curved deck-head, inclined sides – and with its twenty-four feet of breadth and fourteen of length it provided him with more space than all the other officers together; and this was not everything, since out of the great cabin there opened two smaller ones, one for dining, the other for sleeping. The dining cabin, however, had now been made over to Stephen Maturin, and when breakfast arrived, Jack, having dealt with almost a third of the invoices, advice-notes and bills of lading, nodded towards its door

and asked 'Is the Doctor stirring?'

'Never a sound, sir,' said Killick. 'Which he was mortal tired last night, like a foundered horse. But maybe the smell will wake him; it often does.'

The smell, a combination of coffee, bacon, sausages and toasted soft-tack, had woken him in many latitudes, for like most sailors Jack Aubrey was intensely conservative in the matter of food and even on very long voyages he generally contrived, by carrying hens, pigs, a hare, a goat and sacks of green coffee, to have much the same breakfast (apart from the toast) on the equator or beyond the polar circles. It was a meal that Maturin looked upon as England's chief claim to civilization; yet this time even the coffee did not rouse him. Nor did the cleaning of the quarterdeck immediately over his head, nor the piping-up of hammocks, the seven bells nor that of all hands to breakfast at eight, with the roaring, rushing and bellowing that this always entailed. He slept on and on, through the gradual dropping of the wind and through the wearing of the ship to the larboard tack, with all the hauling, bracing round and coiling down that accompanied the manoeuvre; and it was not until well on in the forenoon watch that he emerged, gaping and stretching, with his breeches undone at the knee and his wig in his hand.

'God and Mary with you, gentleman,' said Padeen, who had been waiting for him.

'God and Mary and Patrick with you, Padeen,' said Stephen.

'Will I bring a clean shirt and hot water for shaving, now?'

Stephen considered, rasping his chin. 'You might bring the water,' he said. 'The weather calm, I find, the motion slight, the danger inconsiderable. As for the shirt,' he went on, raising his voice to overcome the cheerful conversation of a working-party eleven inches above him, 'as for the shirt, I have one on already, and do not mean to take it off. But you may desire Preserved Killick to favour me with a pot of coffee.' The last was said still louder and in English, since there was a strong likelihood that Killick, always intensely curious, would hear it.

Some time later, shaved and refreshed, Dr Maturin came on deck: that is to say he walked out of his cabin by the forward door, along the passage to the waist of the ship and so up the ladder to the quarterdeck, upon which the captain, the first mate, the bosun and the gunner were in consultation. Stephen made his way to the taffrail and leaned there in the sun, looking forward the whole length of the ship, some forty yards, to the point where the rising bowsprit carried it farther still; the day had indeed turned out to be pleasant, but the breeze was on the wane and in spite of a noble spread of canvas the *Surprise* was making no more than two or three knots, with barely a tilt on her deck.

Everything looked superficially the same – the familiar sun-filled white curves above, the taut rigging and its severe shadows – and he had to search for some while before he could tell where the essential difference lay. It was not in the lack of naval uniforms, for except the flagships and some others, commanded by very 'quarterdeck' captains, it was now quite usual for officers to wear nondescript working clothes unless they were invited to dine in the cabin or were engaged upon some official duty; and as for the hands, they had always dressed as they pleased. Nor was it the absence of a man-of-war's pennant streaming from her masthead which he would never have noticed. No: part of it lay in the absence of the Marines' scarlet coats, always a striking patch of colour against the pale deck and the unemphatic variations of the sea, and in that of boys of any kind, ship's boys or young gentlemen on the

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