

## THE NIGHT TRADERS – by Noel Harrower

### Chapter 1 The voice in the sea-mist.

I woke with a start. That dream again - the high voice calling out to me through the sea fog and the wild eyes of the stranger peering at me. Why am I still haunted? Perhaps it is because that incident marked the end of my childhood. It was certainly the start of my great adventure.

If I'm to tell the tale, I must begin on the day when I was very young and asked my father why our home in Exmouth was called "The Globe Inn". In reply, he took me outside, pointed to the big sign hanging over the archway and said proudly, "Because this is the place all Exmouth travellers start from, wherever they're going, and it's also where the coaches bring people, wherever they've come from."

I looked at the sign, with its round painting of the great Atlantic, with the shape of the Americas on one side and of Europe and Africa on the other, and asked him if Sir Walter Raleigh from East Budleigh had set out from the Globe when he sailed to America. My father laughed. "No," he said, "the Globe was not built in Queen Elizabeth's time, and I'll tell you this. It wasn't until another Devon man called Sir Francis Drake sailed right round the world that we knew it was round. Then the rich people, who wanted to travel, made a globe and painted the lands and the seas on it."

I pondered those words and thought that, when I grew up, I'd be rich and sail right round the world too. But, alas, I never became wealthy enough to do this and have spent most of my time here in Exmouth. I've lived quite comfortably, though, and my big adventure began in 1801, as I'll tell you now.

The morning of that February day began well enough, with the arrival of the mail coach from Exeter and the bustle of travellers. There was a packet on that coach addressed to "The Misses Parminter, care of Mr. Joseph Westcombe, landlord of the Globe Inn, Exmouth."

My father told me to deliver the parcel that day, and I was glad to be given the task. I knew the two quaint ladies by sight but had never been to their eccentric circular house, built on a hill behind our town, and I relished the thought of going inside and perhaps being able to look out at the commanding views through the big diamond shaped windows. I secretly decided to ride there over the Woodbury Common, rather than climb up the Long Causeway and go along the main road. It would give me the chance for a canter or possibly a gallop, if Baron was prepared for this.

The packet had come from London. It seemed to contain a box, but what was in it was no business of mine. I put the parcel into a pannier bag, strapped it tightly to the saddle and determined to enjoy my afternoon of freedom from tasks around the inn. I pressed my heels into the horse's shanks and off we clattered by the market hall on the strand, turning right by the great tree and along the new parade, which ran beside

the high bank at the water's edge and led to Pratt's landing, where the ferry across the Exe was moored.

I knew this spot well, for facing the quay was the Glenorchy Meeting House, where my family attended services on Sundays, and next door was the schoolhouse, where I had learned my letters from Revd. Robert Winton, who was also the minister. The Misses Parminter used to come by boat to the services there. My father had often told me how, over twenty years ago, one Lady Glenorchy had come to stay in Exmouth in an attempt to improve her health through the fresh sea air. Finding no church here to her liking, Lady Glenorchy and her earnest young chaplain had set up some Sunday services in the long room at the Globe Inn, much to the annoyance of the church wardens at Littleham. They had urged the press gang to turn out and note the names of the men who came. Infuriated by this, the lady had set up this meeting house, which now attracted many of the prominent people in the town.

The road I followed ran through Withycombe village, where the mill had its great water-wheel turning. Beyond, lay the open common, where we had our canter across the heath. I approached Parminter House from the east, going along Summer Lane. Dismounting, I took out the parcel, and knocked on the door.

It was opened by a maidservant, who would have taken it and closed the door in my face, but as luck would have it, Miss Mary, the younger Miss Parminter, overheard and invited me to have a drink of chocolate and a home-made muffin. I had never drunk chocolate, although I had once seen my mother mix it to serve to some rich ladies in our upper lounge. She had told me it was an expensive drink for the gentry and not for the likes of us, so I gratefully accepted this opportunity. The chocolate did not arrive quickly, for Miss Mary called her older cousin, Miss Jane, and the two spinster ladies opened the parcel first, with a great deal of excitement. There was a jewelled box inside containing a collection of seashells, sent by an uncle of theirs who had been sailing in foreign parts.

The ladies were delighted and said they would add them to their great collection, and then they took me to see the circular, decorated ceiling at the very top of the house, which is crammed with shells of all shapes and sizes. They told me that many of them had been collected from beaches abroad when they went on their grand tours, before this type of travel had stopped because of our war with France.

I listened politely to their tales and got the opportunity to look through the windows. The views were extensive. I could see the spires of the great cathedral in Exeter to the north, the winding River Exe to the east, Woodbury Common with its woods and heaths to the west, and Exmouth and the open sea to the south, where I noticed a mist beginning to roll in.

“I chose the hilltop site myself”, said Miss Jane proudly “and the house was designed on my own orders. The exterior is like one I saw when I did my grand tour of Italy.” They both went on to describe some of the great houses they had seen and to tell me about the wonders of exotic places in France and Italy. Then they took me on a little tour of the rooms.

“The wonderful thing is that Cousin Jane decided to have a circular house, so that our windows would follow the sun. Our breakfast room catches it in the morning, our sitting room in the afternoon, and we can watch wonderful sunsets from our dining room in the evening.”

When the chocolate and muffins arrived the ladies were well into this discourse, sometimes reminding each other of different places they had seen, and occasionally chipping in with “No, cousin, that was in Switzerland” or “You are mistaken. cousin, because I remember that was the time when you lost the parasol.” I felt as if I were one of the gentry myself, sipping chocolate and listening to these exotic stories, but then I realised that time was melting away, and recalling that a mist was rolling in from the sea, I made my excuses and rose to go.

Clouds were gathering and the light was beginning to fade when we opened the door, and the ride home was very different. I decided to use the main road from Exeter, and followed it down the hill and through the farmland, but the mist was now moving in from the river and the marshes. I turned left into Gipsy Lane, and was plunged into a deep fog by the Withy brook near the grounds of the big hall. Baron took fright, refusing to go forward. I dismounted and led him gently on, but it was difficult to be sure where the road ran through the dim light.

Suddenly a voice spoke into my very ear. Startled, I nearly collided with a stranger. “The wind blows from the south”, a man called in a strange, high tone. I was dumbfounded. Surely he must have heard the horse’s hooves, but he didn’t cry out in alarm. It was as if he were expecting someone, and the words made no sense. There was no wind – only mist.

“I’m sorry,” I stammered. “I didn’t know there was anyone there.” And suddenly I saw a face close to my own – the podgy face of a youngish man, with the wild eyes of a fanatic. A second later, the man had gone. I stood transfixed and said “Where are you? I can’t see for this mist.” But there was no reply, although I thought I heard the sound of someone breathing. Baron was alarmed and took some soothing, and it was several minutes before we could continue to walk together along the path. The mist cleared a little, and there was no sign of the stranger. We made our way forward and I arrived home to find my mother bothered that I was late and worried by the mist.

I did not say anything about the stranger. I almost thought he was a phantom, or a creature of my own imagination. But the next day, I knew he was real enough, for I saw him in broad daylight climbing into the Exeter mail coach. He was a stodgy man with a dissipated face and closely cropped hair, but was well dressed, and sat inside the coach, so I knew he had money in his pocket. He did not recognise me, but I felt a shiver down my spine. “He was waiting for someone by the Withy Brook,” I told myself. “He must have spoken some agreed pass words. Otherwise, they make no sense.”

I suspected that he was connected with one of the local smuggling gangs. I had lain in the heather more than once at night to watch their secret meetings, but these were things we did not speak about. Many folk thought the night traders harmless, but my

father had always shaken his head over them and there was something especially sinister about this stranger. I quietly determined to watch for a sight of him again.

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## Chapter 2 The home of the smugglers

A few days later I was startled by a very different stranger. I was watering the horses when the clatter of hooves made me turn to see an army officer who had ridden into our inn yard. A tall man in the uniform of the dragoons dismounted and hailed me.

“Can you take me to the landlord, boy?” he called.

My father was quick to arrange accommodation for the captain, who told us that he would be staying for some time. “My men are setting up camp at the Gun Cliff”, he explained. “We’ve orders to stay in the town until further notice.”

A thought shot through my mind, that these soldiers must be here to look out for the smugglers who organised secret hauls on dark nights. I knew of one family in particular that were involved in this illegal trade and they seemed harmless folk to me, although my father did not approve of them.

As soon as I could slip away, I ran out of the door, and across the Strand towards Lobster Hole beach beyond. “Will Mutter is sure to be there somewhere,” I thought.

Will was a lad about my own age, a harum-scarum, cheery, barefoot boy who ran errands around the town for a penny and wouldn’t harm a soul. My mother had told me years ago that I was not to play with him because his father, Abe, ran a rough cider shop, often filled with dubious customers. I liked Will, though. He had taught me to swim and to handle a small boat, and we had many adventures down on the beach.

At first I couldn’t see Will around, so I ran across the field towards the other beach with the sand dunes. Passing the Gun Cliff, a rocky outcrop beyond the high beacon road, I looked up and, sure enough, I saw soldiers pitching tents on the sloping green. I found Will further along, below the Maer, deftly mending a lobster creel.

He was alarmed by my news. “We’ll go an’ see Pa,” he said. “Come with me. Most like, he’ll want to ask yer questions.” Will led me across the salt marsh, picking his way carefully, for he knew where to tread, and then he plunged down the lime-kiln lane, which was a notorious smugglers’ path, avoided by all good townsfolk at night - “in case you might see something you’d rather not”, as people said in quiet tones.

The lane brought us straight to the cider shop, a thatched cob cottage, with a big stone parlour, where sailors and rough men who worked in the lime-kilns met at night to carouse and tell their tales. I had never been inside before, but there was Will’s mother, Mrs Abe, as she was known, with a baby at her breast, and two toddlers by her skirt, and in the centre of the stone-flagged floor stood a tell-tale cask of brandy. Abe was up a ladder stowing something away in the thatch, but he came down quickly enough when Will told him about the soldiers.

“Soldiers, be damned,” said Abe. “They bain’t bothered about me. They’ve Boney to fight over the channel. They can come and quaff my cider any night they want. It’s that revenue man I’m lookin’ out for - that Rudden, ‘cus ‘im. I’ve been told e’s cummin’ right now.”

No sooner were these words out of his mouth than there was a loud knocking at the door. "Open in the king's name", shouted a voice, and at that word, Mrs Abe sat down smartly on the cask of brandy and spread her skirts around it. "Here, chicks," she called to the little girls, who ran to clamber round her.

Abe collapsed the ladder in such a way that it became a piece of wooden fencing which he placed around the stove. He opened the door with a sweep crying, "Why, it's Captain Rudden. Here's the captain come see us, love. Come in, sir. How do ye do, on this fine mornin'."

The riding officer marched into the parlour with a scowl on his face. "I've two men with me and we have a warrant to search these premises, Abraham Mutter. We understand there was a haul on the Maer last night, and I have reason to believe that you were involved."

"You're welcome to look round if you must," said Abe. "I'll not question your authority, but you'll find nothing 'ere in a poor fisherman's abode. If it's brandy and backy you're lookin' for, you'd do better at the Globe Inn on the Strand and if it's muslins and silks, I'd suggest you go to Sir John Colleton's Manor House, or Lord Rolle's great place. You can see my good lady has nothing but 'er own 'ome-made skirt and blouse."

Rudden called in two other revenue men and, with no further word to Abe, they set about searching the bar area, opening cupboards and doors to adjoining rooms, tumbling beds and going into all the out-houses in the yard behind. Eventually, they came back empty handed.

"If you tell me straight where you've stowed the run, Abe Mutter, it will go better for you with the magistrate," said Rudden.

"What run?" asked Abe. "You're jumpin' to conclusions again, Captain Rudden, without any evidence."

"Right, that fixes it. I'm going to search your fishing smack, and if I find anything there, it'll be the worse for you."

"You're not goin' aboard my craft, unless my lad and I are with you," cried Abe, and with that the three revenue men left the cottage, with Abe and Will running alongside them.

I was left alone in the parlour with Mrs Abe and the children. Will's mother looked at me and grinned, "Best get that last keg stowed quick", she said. "Here, hold the babe gently, Jack," she added, plucking it from her breast. She reached out to the fire screen, reconstructing it into a ladder with a few shakes and some pulling. She picked up the keg, balanced it on one shoulder and told her eldest child to hold the ladder firmly. Clambering up, Mrs Abe hid the keg with others in a secret locker in the thatch. The two girls watched in silence, and the baby started to cry, so I rocked it to and fro. Quietened, the babe gazed at me with a startled expression. As soon as it was

back in its mother's arms, I wished them all well and set off running back to the Globe, thinking up a tale to explain an hour's absence from my duties.

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### Chapter 3 The soldiers on the Gun Field

Abe was right. The soldiers had not come to chase smugglers. They were here because the war with France, which had rumbled on for several years as a series of fights at sea, had suddenly taken a turn for the worse. Napoleon Bonaparte was now in charge of the French government and laying plans to invade England. The whole of the south coast was being prepared.

From early times, there had been a look-out post on the cliffs at Exmouth to help defend the estuary. It was developed further during the English Civil War and, at the start of our present hostilities with France, a watch had been set up there by a team of newly recruited volunteers, marshalled by Gustavus Ducorel from the great house with the garden on Chapel Hill. He drilled the fencibles, as they were called, at Woodbury Common, but now a gun battery was placed on the cliff, a new cannon put in position, and a team of soldiers took turns to man it, commanded by the captain who was staying at the Globe. The gun was fired once or twice with blank shots to test its workings and the noise shook the town. Another gun post was established on the warren sands to guard the other side of the Exe estuary.

Captain Gower was a gentleman who was outdoors most of the time and kept to his own room in the evenings - when he ordered me to bring up a drink of toddy and where I usually found him smoking his pipe and reading a book. Sometimes he asked a few questions about the neighbourhood. A quiet confidence sprang up between us. Then one morning, I saw the wild-eyed man again. He arrived on the coach from Exeter, staying for a meal in the bar. I felt a shudder when I served him, and he looked up at me and spoke in his high soft voice. "I would like to stay here tonight, boy. Do you have a room free?"

I said I would speak to my father, who told me to take him up to one after the meal. This I did with a sinking heart, and after a cursory view, the man told me he would take it. "Do you have horses for hire, here?" he asked.

"No," I said, "but you could get one easily at the stables on the new parade," pointing the way. I watched him go, carrying a black bag, and saw him return late that evening. Feeling uneasy, when I brought Captain Gower his toddy that night, I told him about the man, and my strange encounter with him in the sea fog by the Wither Brook.

The captain listened to me quietly. "That's odd," he said, "and you're an observant lad and were right to tell me. There may be nothing in it, but I'll go down to the parlour tonight. If he's there, I may have a word with the man."

That's what he did, but I noted that he had changed out of his uniform and when he walked into the parlour, he looked more like a local squire than a soldier. I watched them chatting quietly over a couple of drinks and puffing their long pipes. They fell into some talk which looked friendly enough.

The stranger left on the Exeter coach the next morning, but when I took the evening drink to the captain that night, he smiled at me and called me a bright lad. "I'm glad you told me about that man," he said. "He said his name was Silas Clinch and that he's a lawyer, but I don't believe a word of it. I gave him a pack of lies about myself,



so I can't complain," he added. "Let me know if you see him again, or any other strange customers, come to that. We can't be too careful when there's a war on."

Captain Gower gave me a knowing look and a wink, and I felt I had made a friend of quite an important man.

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A few days later, the cannon was fired for real! I was in the stable when I heard it.

The building shook, and the horses whinneyed in dismay! I ran out to see what was happening, but my father was not alarmed. "T'will be another practice", he said. I was not so sure and ran out to see for myself. I hurried past the old dower house, where a draper's store had been newly opened, and up the lane by the new Assembly Rooms, where the gentry met to play cards, and on to the Beacon Fields. A crowd was collecting here, because they could look on the Gun Field below. Several people were pointing out to sea, where the sails of three ships were visible and appeared to be approaching. Will Mutter was there. "They's been identified as French," he told me.

"They're lookin' out for our defences," said an old fisherman. "Oi've seen 'em afore. Spyin' they be. They goes prowlin' along our coastline and reportin' back to Boney, I guess."

Suddenly, the ground beneath our feet vibrated with another warning shot. I felt a rush of excitement. This was real war, I thought. Captain Gower was commanding the gunners in the field below. We watched as the men turned the still-smoking barrel, sponged it down with a mop on a long pole, and then rammed a cannon ball in place before they re-sighted their prey. We covered our ears for the third huge bang and then sent up a great cheer as the echoes faded away.

"They're turning tail," shouted someone.

"Let's show them what we're made of" shouted a bright-eyed youngish woman, who was wearing a red shawl. We all knew her as Nan Hopper, a brave woman who had served with her husband on Nelson's ship when they had fought the French at Cape St. Vincent and later off Egypt. "See here," she joked. "I've brought six red shawls at Louie's market stall. Put 'em on girls and we'll parade up and down the Beacon Walk. The Frenchies will see our colours and think we're all soldiers protecting the cliff."

Several girls came forward laughing, led by Louise Hopper, Nan's young daughter, who ran the market stall. Will and I joined them and we marched up and down the cliff top in military style.

"They're sailing off," shouted Nan, and we all cheered again, laughed and joked that we had won the battle.

That evening, there was a rousing gathering at the Globe to celebrate the "victory".

I told Captain Gower and he came to join us and ordered a round of drinks. There were several local men who had sailed with Nelson on his Mediterranean campaign and Nan and her sailor brother were celebrated guests of the party. Ed Hopper, Nan's husband, was far away on another voyage. As I served the drinks, I took the opportunity to ask the young woman how she'd found the courage to take part in the sea battle. She looked pensive at that and said, "There was no choice once I was there. We'd no time to think. We was so busy fetching the powder. Something comes over you at a time like that and you're given the strength despite the horror of it all."

"There's a word for it," interjected Captain Gower. "Fortitude."

Some of the men broke into a sea song, and shanties were exchanged around the room.

Over at a big table in the window sat another young woman, but one of a different stamp. She was a proud-looking, painted lady. I had never seen her in the Globe before and my father was annoyed to have her in our rooms. I learned that her name was Mary Anne Clarke and she had come to live in Manchester House, which stood on the quay. She was surrounded by a group of noisy young squires, part of the local fencibles who drilled on the common. They joined in the singing, and the woman called across to us that the war would not be won by sailors alone. "The army needs bold men too. If anyone fancies a commission, let them come and speak to me. I have the ear of the commander-in-chief."

Captain Gower flushed angrily at that and soon afterwards he left the room. He told me later that she had referred to the Duke of York, brother to the Prince Regent. "She was talking nonsense," he said.

But a few days later, serious army recruitment did take place in Exmouth – at the Ship Inn on the High Street. Capitalising on our recent excitement, a recruiting sergeant appeared and gave out shillings to fit young men who were prepared to sign their name on his paper, and join his regiment.

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## Chapter 4 I become a spy

I saw Silas Clinch again a few days later. He arrived on the morning coach from Exeter as previously, but this time he did not linger at the Globe, or hire horses. He set off walking up the hill that leads to the Beacon path. Will Mutter saw him too, for he was in our yard delivering scallops and dabs from the morning's catch. "You see that man", I whispered, and told him something of my suspicions. His eyes lit up. "I'll follow him on my cart and tell you where he goes," he promised.

A while later, I heard Will's secret whistle from the yard and hurried to the kitchen door. There he was back on the cart, but alarm was written on his face. "That man's up to no good," he said. "I followed him up the lane, past the Beacon fields. At the top, there was Black Martin waiting for him with two horses and they rode off along the cliff road towards Orcombe and Straight Point. I know Black Martin. He runs a farm by Ladram Cove, but he works for the falcon gang, and they're a devilish lot. My Dad won't go near them – not since they killed Barnaby Grange, who knew too much about their ways."

Will and I stared at one another. "I'll tell the captain," I said.

"No," he rejoined "Let's do this ourselves. We don't want no soldiers interfering. Tell you what, Jack. you're off work tomorrow. Can you bring Baron and we'll ride over to Ladram together and spy out the farm and see if we can find out what's going on."

This sounded dangerous, but the idea appealed to me. The captain had told me to keep my eyes skinned and here was an opportunity. I saw myself returning the next night and telling him more news, and it would be an adventure, going out along the coast with Will, discovering an area I had never been to before. I agreed immediately.

The day was bright and fine. I rode over to the cider house, intending to give the secret whistle, but Will was out on the road waiting. He climbed up behind me and we set out along the field lane towards Salter's Haven. We rode up the hill and dropped down through woodland to the fishermen's cottages by the pebble beach and then beyond to the limekiln by the headland. Here the River Otter seemed to cut us off. I had never managed to cross it, but Will seemed familiar with the reed beds and the winding stream and urged Baron to forge the swift flow at various points until we were safe on the other side.

Now we faced a high red cliff and we were forced to dismount, but Will knew a steep path between the rocks, so we took Baron by the halter and led him up it to the top, where we mounted again and looked back on the way behind us. The cottages straggled up the hill by the clear sweep of the blue washed bay, and Exmouth was hidden from view behind Orcombe Point.

We turned east and saw rolling fields on the left, and a cliff path running along above red rocks to the right, which curved around coves and inlets, where the sea intruded. The path ahead was enticing, and we urged Baron on into a canter. The morning welcomed us and the ride was exhilarating.

After a while the pace slowed down. We paused to rest at Brandy Head, and Will pointed out rocks where casks were sometimes hidden on rope-lines beneath the water level. "There's hidin' places out to sea, in the lea of some o' the rocks, rafts of wine and spirits strung together under the surface, so no one can see them. Dad used to come here, when he was young, he told me so. But we've not been near since the falcon gang took it all on, over two years back. This is their territory now, and they run the distribution for miles right along the coast hereabouts," he added bitterly.

A bit later, Will told me more, in a sad, ruminating sort of way. "Born in these parts was Dad, he came from Beer, but we can't go to see my cousins now – all because of this wild falcon gang. We even have to keep our heads down in Exmouth some nights when the word is spread. 'Indoors tonight - the falcolns are flying' we get tipped."

This was all new to me. I knew of the "tubmen", who were hard working fisherfolk most of the time, but willing to lend a hand with the quiet distribution of smuggled goods in return for a tub of spirits, but Will told me of darker deeds. "The falcon gang use batmen," he said. "They carry big swingle sticks, and blacken their faces, so no one knows who they are. If anyone finds out and blabs, they'll be found in a ditch next morning, an' they'll never tell tales again."

We came to a grove of trees and Will decided that this was the best place to tether the horse. "Best go on foot from here. That hedge marks the ground of Monk's Farm, Black Martin's place," he warned. "There'll be hiding places under this turf, I'll be bound, but you'd need a sniffer dog to find 'em."

We walked forward stealthily, looking around carefully. Nobody was in sight. To our right, below the cliffs, was a lazy summer tide. Towers of red rock stood out in the water, with sea birds wheeling above them. "That's Ladram Cove," whispered Will. "It's where the falcon gang hide their ship. It's in a cave, but you wouldn't know because the entrance is covered by one of them red stacks."

"And where's the farmhouse?" I asked. Pigs and goats roamed the field, but no one was around. "Over there in the woods." Will pointed inland towards a copse. This whole area used to belong to an abbey before some rich landowner got the manor, but the farm has been used by the smugglers for years. A new leader took the gang over some time ago, I dunno who he is, but everyone around here is afraid of the falcon gang and no one goes near this place."

I felt my heart pounding as we crept stealthily forward. I saw some rabbits hopping across the field and we followed in their tracks. Soon we were under the cover of tall ivy-clad trees. "Don't walk in the long grass," whispered Will. "There could be man traps laid there." Through the trees we could see a kitchen garden, and beyond it lay an old stone building with a thatched roof. We crouched down behind bramble bushes and watched and waited for any sign of life.

We were getting bored and restive, when I saw a door open at the farmhouse. Clinch and a tall slim man with a wide black hat came out together. They were both smoking clay pipes as they took a turn walking around the kitchen garden, both deep in conversation. We could not catch a word of what was being said, but they appeared to

be trying to convince one another of some knotty point. Eventually, they returned inside. Will and I exchanged glances.

“There’s something shady going on,” I whispered to Will. “I’m going to find out more and report it to the captain.”

Will did not look pleased at this, but I felt sure that this was the right thing to do. “We won’t find any more out lying here.” I said. “They’re in the room where the door is, and the window’s open. I’m going to get nearer and I think I see a way.”

“Stay where you are,” said Will. “You might get caught.”

I was too impatient to listen to him and did not wait longer. Heart pounding, I slipped forward, crouching below the brambles, and edged my way along the side of the kitchen garden. There was a large apple tree near the house, thick in foliage, and a bough swept low by the window. Hiding myself behind the trunk, I climbed up on some lower branches, inched myself on to the bough, and started to wriggle near to the window. I could see the two men now, sitting at a table with papers on it. They were so deep in conversation that I thought they weren’t likely to look out of the window. I edged nearer, and began to catch a few words. The tall man was speaking in a foreign accent and waving his hands about. I thought that he was a Frenchman.

I edged nearer, and suddenly there was a loud crack. My body lurched and I tumbled

Before I could scramble to my feet, I was surrounded by four men, who were demanding to know who I was and what I was doing there. Stunned and confused, I didn’t respond. Rough hands seized me, and I was bundled into the farmhouse. Other men appeared and the questioning continued. I decided the best thing was to say nothing. Possibly they might think me dull and stupid and let me go. I had no real defence, and did not want to give them any information.

Clinch peered at me with his piercing eyes. “I think I know that boy, “ he said. “It looks like the lad from the Globe in Exmouth.”

A murmur went round the room. The Frenchman seemed to be the most alarmed of all, but fortunately none of the others knew me, so I continued with my dumb act, hanging my head like a simpleton, and the trick seemed to work. A large man with dark hair, whom I took to be Black Martin, seized hold of me saying “I’ll keep him safe until we know what Peregrine wants us to do with him,” and I was carted out of the room, up some stairs and pushed into a small closet, with no light or window. I heard a key turn in the door and the footsteps retreat.

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For the next few hours my mind was in turmoil. I did not know what would happen. Will’s words about the devilish behaviour of the gang terrified me, but I felt I had done right to hold my tongue. My only hope was that Will might ride back and raise the alarm. I later learned that this was exactly what he did.

Apparently, Will poured the whole story out to his father, who scolded him for being so foolhardy. Abe Mutter was in trouble with the law himself so did not feel able to report anything to the magistrates, but I later learned that he did the best he could, and put himself at risk by immediately riding over to see Jeremiah Quelsh, the leader of the falcon gang.

Quelsh was a man with two faces. To the world outside he was a retired sea captain, who had made his fortune in the slave trade and was now retired as a country gentleman. He owned a small estate and sat on the bench of magistrates but, to a few in the know, he commanded a big smuggling extortion racket along the south-west coast, and answered to no one but himself.

Abe Mutter was one who knew something of this double life and for that reason he was a marked man, but he had the courage to bang on the door of the manor house, demand to see the master and then face him with the fact that he could produce papers and would give evidence against him if I were killed or harmed. This act probably saved my life. I learned later that my father had ranged the countryside searching for me, and when he had come home dispirited, had found a note pinned to the stable door.

“Your boy is alive and well,” it read in a rough hand.”I have done all I can for him,” and it was signed “a friend”. Baron had been returned to his stall, but he was trembling and in a lather. Search everywhere and ask as they did, my parents learned nothing more.

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## Chapter 5 A Prisoner at Sea

I have no idea how long they left me there. I felt stifled and soon developed a great thirst. Some hours after I had fallen into a nightmarish dose, I was roused by the noise of the key turning. I had a brief glimpse of Black Martin but before I could gather my senses he had turned me round and tied my hands together behind my back. I protested, but immediately a big bag was thrust over my head and tied round my neck with a piece of rope, which almost choked me. I was pushed forward to the stairs, which I stumbled down trembling, with a man in front and a man behind me.

“Where are you taking me?” I called.

“You’ll see find out,” I was told.

I was lifted bodily by rough hands and was carried into an underground place, where the air was dank and clammy and there were many steps. Eventually, I felt that we had emerged into a wider space, like a large cave. I could smell the sea and heard the sound of other voices a distance away.

I was carried in the direction of the voices, and passed into other hands. The man who took hold of me put my feet to the ground and made me walk on what felt like swaying wooden planking. I heard creaking and the sound of water lapping and it came to me that I was probably now on a boat. Will had told me the smugglers had an underground cave large enough for a ship. Was this the place? My heart sank. I might be taken a long way from home. I tried to struggle free and cried out “No, No,” but the man laughed, said “Yes, Yes,” pushed me into a cramped cupboard and closed the door behind me.

A dreadful feeling of despair and helplessness overwhelmed me. I crouched there in a stupor, wondering where on earth they were taking me. I could hear distant voices and the noises of a ship being loaded with goods. Then everything swayed, and the floor rocked beneath me. I realised that the boat had been pushed off, and we must be moving with the tide towards the cave entrance. We were going to sea!

Later the floor began to sway alarmingly, as we were caught by the waves. I heard the noise of sails being hoisted. All this time I felt stifled, sick and desperately lonely. I trembled and turned to prayers.

It seemed an age before I heard the door open, and felt the rope being untied from round my neck. To my intense relief someone lifted the hood from off my face, and I saw a bearded giant of a man. “Come boy,” he said. “Peregrine wants to speak with you.”

“Who’s Peregrine?” I asked.

“The captain,” he replied. “He’s master of everything here – you included.”

My hands were still bound behind me, but I was frog-marched through a hatch on to the open deck, where there was a welcome breath of sea wind. At a glance I saw that I was on a two-masted sea-going ship. It was dark and no lights were visible except a

single lantern swaying above my head. I saw the figure of a man steering the wooden wheel, and beyond him there was a raised cabin. The giant thrust me forward through the door.

Sitting at a table in front of me was a weather-beaten man with the hardest face I had ever seen. He had bushy eyebrows and half-closed eyes. which glared at me below heavy lids.

“Well, Jack Westcombe, what do you have to say for yourself?” he demanded. “Why were you hiding in a tree snooping through the window of my farmhouse?”

For a moment, I was too stunned to say a word. Who was this man? How did he know my name? How much more did he already know about me?

“Come, you’re not dumb, boy, not when you serve drinks at the Globe Inn, anyway,” he roared. “Answer me, or I’ll flog you with a rope’s end.”

I suddenly found myself giving the first excuse that I could think of. “I didn’t mean to spy sir. I...I was scrumping apples when the bough broke.”

“Why were you on my land?”

For a moment I hesitated. I mustn’t give anything away, but the man seemed to know a deal about me, so I dared not stray far from the truth. I remembered the rabbits.

“There were some rabbits in the field, sir. I ran after them into the wood.”

“And the other boy with you. Did he come on to my land?”

Clearly, someone must have seen the two of us. “Yes, but he didn’t come far into the wood. He stayed behind. I was the only one scrumping.”

“It was Abe Mutter’s brat, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, sir.” There was no point in denying something he already knew.

“And were you after something else, besides poaching my rabbits and scrumping?”

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry. We were just out for the day”.

“And you borrowed or stole a horse.”

“I didn’t steal nothing, sir. It was our horse, from the inn.”

“You came a long way on it – all the way from Exmouth. Why? Have you been on my land ever before?”

“No, sir, never.”



“Well you’ll pay the price for trespassing and for poaching too. I could have you put down for that – gaoled - shipped to Australia. But I’m handling this my own way. You’re used to serving at the bar – well from now on, boy, you will serve me here on this ship. You’ll be cabin boy and you’ll be under the hand of big Tregarth, the cook who stands behind you now. You will take orders from him, from me and the mate, Solomon Day, and no other. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

He stared at Tregarth and ordered, “Take him away and set him to work in the galley, and keep him bound and hooded whenever we arrive in port.”

I was bundled away, across the deck to the small galley, where I nearly passed out on the floor. “Please can I have some water?” I asked Tregarth, “I’m parched.” He gave me a tankard and I drank my fill. He offered me some baked fish to eat, but I felt I could not face eating anything in my present condition on the swaying ship. We looked at one another and I think he must have felt some sympathy for me, because he said in a gentler voice.

“It ain’t as bad as all that lad. You’ll survive and you’ll soon get into the way o’ things. Peregrine’s a bold captain wi’ a foul temper, but he’s as fine as seaman as you’ll find anywhere in Devon. You’ll learn a power about life aboard ship alongside of ‘im. You’ll soon get the swing of a galley if you’ve been brought up at The Globe Inn. You might have fared much worse locked up in gaol for trespassin’ and poachin’ as you said you were. Best get started straight away to take yer mind off things. There’s a mound of mullet and sea bass in that tub, behind you. Get handy with this knife, and bone ‘em. When they’re cooked you can serve ‘em up to that French fellow we have aboard, who looks the hungry type.”

It was true I was used to kitchen work, so I began to think more clearly as I set about boning the fish. I must learn as much as I could about this ship and its crew.

When the meal was ready I was despatched to serve the Frenchman, who was in a small cabin by himself looking rather bored. He gave me a sarcastic smile when I came in. “So, Peregrine makes use of little spies.” he said. I ignored the remark, and went back to the galley, wondering exactly why a Frenchman was travelling like a passenger aboard an English smuggling ship while a war was raging between our two countries. And what was the link with Silas Clinch? Although I was appalled by my new circumstances, perhaps I was in a position to find out.

The Frenchman demanded a bottle of wine when I went in to clear his table. I passed this request to the cook, who produced a bottle of claret and a tankard. “This is what Monsure Dupont seemed to like when he came over last time,” he observed.

When I went back into the cabin with the wine, the table was strewn with papers, and I could see closely written handwriting. As I leaned over to pour out the drink, I managed to discern a heading written boldly at the top of the page – a single word, “Bronte”. I came away memorising those two words – Dupont and Bronte.

Hopes of learning more were soon dashed because, as dawn was breaking and we came within sight of the French coastline, I found myself suddenly seized from behind, bound, hooded again and thrust back into my cupboard.

I was kept in my prison all the time we were in French waters, but could hear voices and the noise of cargo being unloaded. Then after some hours, I knew by the sounds and movements that we were at sea again and eventually, to my relief, I was released and sent back to work in the galley. I was able now to take stock of the situation, and began to notice the layout of the ship, and assess the character of the crew.

The captain kept very much to himself, either in his cabin, or taking his turn at the wheel. He fraternised with no one. The man who gave most of the orders was Solomon Day, the mate, a tall saturnine seaman. Tregarth was the most approachable of the crew, despite his fierce appearance, and I tried to sound him out when I had the chance, but got little information beyond the fact that we were returning back to our base, which he called "the passage house." This was the name they all used. No one so much as breathed the real location - Monk's Farm.

There was no sign of Dupont. Clearly his mission had been completed and he had remained in France. I wondered where Silas Clinch had disappeared to. He was not aboard the ship. Presumably, he had come to meet the Frenchman at Monk's Farm and hand some papers over. I dreaded to think what they might contain, but the fact that we were at war with France made me suspect evil doings.

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## Chapter 6 I plan my escape

I do not wish to dwell on the next few days. As we approached land, I was hooded and bound again and carried up through the cave, like a piece of contraband, to the farmhouse. This time I was locked in a windowless attic room with a pallet bed and held prisoner there for three days. I was fed and provided with water by Black Martin, but I saw no one else, and did not know whether it was day or night. My life seemed to have become an endless misery.

They came for me suddenly, bound and carried me out again in a strong blindfold, so I never saw the passages or the underground cave. The bonds came off when we were at sea again. It was dark night when I was put to work in the galley. Peregrine scowled at me as I served him broth in his cabin, but he said not a word.

It was clear that we were sailing to France again for another cargo. How much longer could this servitude last? I got a glimmer of an answer later that night, when I was hidden from view by a low sail on a portion of the deck and overheard Solomon Day observe under his breath, "We won't have to keep that young whelp on board much longer. Peregrine says he's made arrangements to take care of Abe Mutter."

I lay low, in a sweat of terror, and stayed hidden until the deck was clear and I could slip back safely to the galley. What did this mean? I felt sure that I was the young whelp, but what was to become of me? And what had Abe Mutter to do with it? But then I remembered that Will had been recognised. Was there a connection? I must look after myself. When the cook wasn't watching, I deftly slipped a kitchen knife into the pocket of my breeches. As we approached the French coast I was hooded again but I was able to console myself by gripping the handle of that knife.

Again, they imprisoned me in the stifling cubby-hole. I'm sure that their intention was to release me when we went back to sea, so that I could do the chores in the galley, but the weather intervened.

I heard loud waves crashing against the bows and the whole ship shuddered as it dipped and rose. Clearly we were heading into stormy waters. I don't know whether the crew were so occupied that they forgot me, or whether they thought my presence at such a time would be more of a hindrance than a help, but I lay there bound and hooded for the whole of that day. I was desperately sick and shivery but, as I had an empty stomach, I had nothing to bring up.

I felt despair. Would I ever escape? The storm had become so rough that I thought the ship might founder. What would happen if the lugger were driven on to the rocks? I had heard it lamented that there was no rescue service in the channel for stricken ships. And if another ship came to our aid, would they find me? I began to think that death at sea might be better than servitude on this vessel. There were some hours when I scarcely cared: there were others when I found myself praying for passionately for deliverance. Then I heard my schoolmaster's voice saying, "Help yourself, boy."

That didn't seem fair. Anger swept through me, but then I remembered that behind Revd. Robert Winton's strict sayings there was always common sense and kindly intention. It dawned on me that there was something I could do, even in this extremity. I started to work at trying to release my bonds and my courage began to be restored. My wrists were bound together, but now they were tied in front of me rather than behind. I found I could inch my arms up to my belt, and managed with one hand to release the clasp. I nudged the tip of the buckle pin upright and pushed my wrists against it. For about an hour I worked the buckle against the ropes until I began to feel them fraying. Then I tugged and pushed to try to loosen them, cursing the fact that the hood prevented me from using my teeth. Eventually, my right wrist was freed. Now I could reach for the knife and release the other one too, although I cut myself and lost some blood in the process.

The next task was to untie the hood. The knot round my neck was tightly drawn and, being blinded, I was terrified to use the kitchen knife near my throat, so I had to pick at the strands with my fingernails, which tore and splintered. Somehow I did it though. At last I was able to free my head and throw the foul thing away. I was now able to look round my cubbyhole, though there was nothing to see there, except a coil of rope. I turned my attention to the door and, to my delight, saw that it was fastened by a latch rather than locked.

So far so good – but what could I do now? I was frightened to open the latch and go through the door. I knew I would get the flogging of my life, and be tied more securely than ever the next time I was put away. All I could do was crouch down in that tiny den and hope that no one would come to get me until I had devised an escape. This was virtually impossible. I went on my knees and prayed for deliverance.

Then I realised that the rocking of the ship was subsiding. The noise of the storm had abated, and we were clearly back in calm waters. Why didn't they come for me? My hopes began to rise. Perhaps it was because we were near the English coast again. I must listen for the sounds that would tell me if this was true. For a long time I heard nothing of significance, but then I heard the sound of oars. A small boat seemed to be coming alongside. Then I was sure. There was a call and the noise of an oar just by me. A voice indicated that a rope had been caught and the sounds of casks being trundled along the deck overhead was followed by them being loaded into the small boat. The men were all busy. Now was my chance.

I slipped the latch and stepped out, with my limbs aching after being cramped for so long. There was no one to see me. I was in a little alleyway lined with cupboards. At one end there was a door to an inner cabin, at the other there was a ladder leading up to the deck. Which way to go? If I went to the cabin, I would go further into the bowels of the ship. But the crew were on deck, and the voices were near and came from above my head. I dared not stand there pondering. Someone might see me. I slipped back into the cupboard to try to develop a plan.

I was numb with fear, and my movements were clumsy after the confinement. I worked my limbs quietly to get them back in trim – lifting first one leg and then the other, swinging my arms and twisting my hands - all done quietly in that tiny space. It was dark outside, so it must be night again. Of course it was - smugglers always unloaded at night. I must creep on deck without being seen – when could that be?

When they were offloading the heavy cargo, not dropping a couple of kegs in a boat. I must wait longer. I continued my exercises, trying meanwhile to remember the layout of the ship. My leg caught against the coil of rope and the thought occurred, "I'll take that with me when I go. I might need it."

Why didn't they want me to help with the cargo? Maybe, they feared I might try to escape. Perhaps that might mean we were near my home. I felt sure that we were not back in the big cave. We could be in one of the coves where brandy kegs were left, tied on a rope and concealed by rocks. I waited again and heard the oars of the little boat departing, and felt our ship lurch and move back into the swell. Where were we going now? Still, I waited.

Perhaps an hour later, the ship stopped rocking and I heard the noise of feet and barrels being lifted beyond the far side of my cupboard. The hold must be there. This might be the time when the big haul was being offloaded. A number of men were clearly in the hold and casks were being lifted up. Then I heard the sound of a boat on the port side of the ship. Perhaps things were being carried to a quiet beach beyond. I must be on the starboard side – now was my chance! I picked up the coil of rope and slipped quietly out again.

The corridor was empty. I crept forward and slowly climbed the ladder. The deck was quiet now. There was one man at the other end of the ship lowering something over the side. The others were either in the hold or in the boats about to go ashore. I crouched down under the bulwarks and tied my rope to a marline spike on the ship's side, carefully doing a very strong knot, which could take my weight. I looked across at the man on the far deck. He had his back to me. In a trice, I swung swiftly over and climbed down the rope on the seaward side of the ship. I must not make a splash. The cold water lapped my feet. I climbed lower, and it crept up my body and then I swung clear, plunging into the salty sea. I swam quickly away from the ship at first, but then took a big curve, heading for a distant shoreline, breathing the words with every stroke, "Please God, give me strength!"

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## Chapter 7 The Exe Crossing

Eventually, totally exhausted, I staggered ashore onto a lonely beach. After a few steps, I collapsed on the sand and fell into a deep swoon.

I awakened slowly. Gradually, I became aware of the sound of surf pounding nearby and gulls squawking above me. "Where was I?" I had no idea. I raised my head and then dropped it again, for it ached as if to burst. In that moment, I saw that dawn was breaking on an empty beach, where there were sand dunes and clusters of marram grass. I felt I was safe here and fell back into a deep and haunted sleep.

Some time later, I roused again and was able to sit up. I looked out across the water and, to my joy, recognised a familiar sight - the windmill on Exmouth Point. I must have struggled ashore last night on to the warren, that sandy spit on the opposite bank of the River Exe, long used by smugglers. Further downstream, I could even see Glenorchy Meeting House by Pratt's landing. My heart leapt, and I knelt in the sand and gave thanks for this deliverance.

But Exmouth was across a wide expanse of water. Clearly, I must walk to the ferry point and plead with the boatman, for there were no pennies in my pockets.

I stood up, swayed a little, and then regained my balance. My belly was empty and there was the sharp tang of seawater in my mouth, which gave me a great thirst. But I began to feel buoyed up with pride, for I had managed to make my escape.

The nearest town was Dawlish, but that lay to the west and I had no business there. The Exe ferry lay about two miles away at Starcross and to reach it I had to walk over some rough ground, for I had landed on a sandy spit which reached out halfway across the wide estuary. To get home I had to walk a big circuit, but now there was hope in my heart again. I had lost my shoes in the sea, but walking barefoot was no real problem to a country lad and I set out with a will.

It took the best part of the morning to reach the quay. By then I was parched and exhausted, but as luck would have it I did not have to plead with the ferryman, for there, sitting on the bench, was the woman who'd sailed with Nelson. Nan Hopping greeted me with joy.

"Jack," she cried, "You're safe and sound. Wherever have you been? Your parents have roused the whole town, and we've all been searching the coast for you."

"I was kidnapped, but I escaped," I said briefly, and then broke down in tears, for it was so wonderful to find a friend again. In a few words, I told my story, explaining that I had no money for the ferry.

"Never mind that," said Nan. "Poor lad, you must be starving. Come with me to The Passage House, and you'll have food and drink."

At the mention of a passage house, I went pale again, but Nan assured me that there was nothing to fear. "It's the name used at all the crossings," she said, and soon I had

as much bread and cheese as I could eat and was offered ale, but wisely chose plain water instead, for I was feeling sickly.

“I’m sorry I made such a fool of myself just now,” I stammered.

“No matter,” said Nan, putting her hand on my arm. “You’ve been through hell. I know. I’ve been there. Don’t think it was all glory on those ships, with Nelson. It was a terrible time. Though I brag of it now, the truth is I was petrified and bullied. But I survived the blood and the gore – and I gained the courage to help the surgeon with the men who’d been wounded. That was terrible too, working alongside a sawbones, but I came out the stronger. Now I’m my own woman and answer to no one when my husband’s away sailing the world and I’m left minding my girls. Now he’s back home again, he’s joined the local fishers and I’m queen of the fish girls in the market. Some day, Jack, you’ll be your own man and you’ll look back on those dark days and see it as the growing time.”

When the ferry arrived, I was told it was not going to Pratt’s landing. The tide was not right. It was going to Topsham instead. Nancy knew this and said that her cart was waiting there, filled with wool from the Exeter mills. “Louie knits fishermen’s jerseys. We have our own cottage industry now,” she said with pride. “Ed and I earned it through hard labour in the kings’ service. We’ve prize money to prove it.”

As we approached Topsham, I saw the shipbuilders at work, making great vessels, which would sail across the high seas, and I felt a surge of excitement about the adventures which may lie in the future. Nan paid the ferryman, who was moored beside another old inn also called “The Passage House”. It seemed to be a good name for a crossing place and for my return home again too. As I stepped on to the quay, I knew something had changed in me. A new phase of life lay ahead.

Nan’s fish cart was waiting her return, laden with yarn from the mills. She picked up the reins, gave a click of her tongue, and the horse moved forward through the busy town, and on over the Clyst bridge leading to the to the Exmouth road.

Nan drove the cart over the hills, across the Gully ford , by Lymptone turning and down Long Causeway, through the town and into the yard at the Globe Inn. My mother saw us through the kitchen window and came out crying with joy. My father was fetched and, as I began to pour out my tale, who should come into the yard but Captain Gower. He stood there listening, but began to look very grave as my story progressed.

Suddenly, he held up his hand. “This yard is no place to tell such things,” he said. “We must go inside to a quiet room,” and he indicated that he wanted Nan to come with us too.

When we were seated, he looked at my father. “What Jack has just told us could put him in great peril,” he said. “If it’s true that these smugglers are in league with French spies and if they find out that Jack’s here, they’ll stop at nothing to close his mouth. Two things follow. Firstly, I must pass this information immediately to my commanding officer. Secondly, Jack must go into hiding. Nobody must know he has

come back.” He turned to Nan. “Did you speak to anyone on the road? Did anyone recognise him in the town?”

She indicated not and that she’d driven swiftly. “Then don’t say a word to a soul,” he said. Turning to my father he asked, “Where can you hide him?”

My parents looked at one another in dismay. How could I be kept in hiding in such a public place?

“Have you friends in the countryside?”

“There’s my old family home on Dartmoor,” offered my mother. “My brother keeps the farm now and it’s a lonely place.”

“Excellent,” said the captain.

It was agreed immediately that my father would take me there under cover of darkness, that night, the servants should be told to keep quiet and that no one else should know I had been found.

“How long must I stay there?” I asked.

“Until all the devils are under lock and key,” said the captain “and now, one thing more. I must speak to the boy alone and get a signed statement from him.”

After Nancy and my parents had withdrawn, he quizzed me in detail about everything. He noted in particular the “Bronte” name that I recalled on the top of the paper that Monsieur Dupont was reading.

“Does that mean anything to you?” he asked me.

“No, sir,” I said.

“Just as well,” said he. “Lord Nelson is the Earl of Bronte, but keep that to yourself. He may be in peril.”

I left just before midnight. It was a great disappointment so soon after returning home, but I understood the necessity. My father drove me to the farm, which we reached at daybreak. I’d not been there before, although I had met my aunt and uncle when they had visited the Globe two years earlier.

I was welcomed, given a hearty breakfast and a new name, Isaac, for safety’s sake they told me. The harvesting was just beginning, and here I learned new tasks and responsibilities.

I will pass quickly over those weeks of high summer when my life seemed to be a dream of sunshine, sweat and aching limbs. I had friends around me, good food and a warm bed under the eaves.



For several weeks I heard nothing about the subsequent developments, although I had letters from my parents about their own affairs. It was two months before I was able to go home again but, when I arrived, there was a letter waiting for me, which had been delivered a few days earlier by the Exeter mail coach, addressed "To Master Jack Westcombe, The Globe Inn, Exmouth, Devon." There was an intriguing seal on it bearing the imprint "Gower". I read as follows -

"My dear young friend,

Now that several weeks have passed and the culprits have been appropriately gaoled and some of them are awaiting worse fates, I am free to acquaint you with the full facts and to say how truly grateful I am for the invaluable assistance you afforded us in this country's hour of need.

Immediately after our conversation at The Globe, you went into hiding and I rode post haste to tell my Commanding Officer all your information concerning Mr Clinch, Peregrine and the French Agent. As soon as I mentioned the word "Bronte" my C.O. whistled. (The name was obviously highly significant to him.) He told me that he and I must go to see the Lord Lieutenant of Devon without delay.

We met him late that night. He was appalled at the facts you had given us. He spoke of treason at the highest level, and despatched his officers, with a dragoon accompaniment, to round up the Ladrum smuggling gang before dawn. To my surprise, the Lord Lieutenant ordered my Chief Officer and me to accompany him the next day on an urgent visit to London, where we had swift meetings at the War Office and the Admiralty. We saw Nelson's Deputy without delay. Apparently Bronte was the code name for the Admiral's proposed pre-emptive attack on the invasion fleet gathering in Boulogne. It was clear that Clinch must be one of the inner circle handling the defence of our southern seaboard. The papers you saw must have detailed our coastal defences, and presumably made reference to the proposed Bronte assault.

Clinch's identity was very soon established. This, as I suspected, was not his real name. He was in fact a disaffected young nobleman, who had lived in France at the time of the revolution and supported the extremities there. He was a clerk to the first sea lord, but he was also in the pay of French leaders and had expectations of high rank, if Napoleon succeeded in this country. Officers were despatched to arrest him and they found he had a copy of Nelson's instructions for the defence of the English coast from Beachy Head to Orford Ness. (This was the area where the attacks were most expected.). We believe that it was an extract from these papers that he handed over to Dupont, who carried them back to France on the ship belonging to Quelsh (alias Peregrine.)

When Clinch was seized, they found the final version of the Bronte papers on him containing the draft battle orders for Nelson's planned assault on the harbour at Boulogne, where the French fleet was gathering. No doubt this document was intended to reach the French within days by the same route. It named the ships involved, their commanders and the time and direction of the assault - treason most high! Clinch has now been executed.

Meanwhile, I am promoted and sent back to Devon with orders to try to find Quelsh, who is a former English slaver and, we have discovered, has had dealings with French merchants for many years. He has, so far, eluded capture and is now a hunted fugitive. No doubt he also thought he would be rewarded should Bonaparte occupy this country. Perhaps he saw himself as Lord Lieutenant – who knows? – the devil! So here I am, promoted to Lt. Colonel and conducting the search for him from my headquarters here in Exeter. I owe some of this to you, my lad. Thank you for your fortitude, at the time of England’s peril. If ever you fancy wearing a redcoat uniform, it will be my pleasure to give you a good testimonial.

My respects to your good parents, I remain,

Your servant, John Gower (Lt. Colonel)”

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## Chapter 8 The Great Fall

I got a great welcome when I came home from my uncle's farm. My old schoolmaster, the Revd. Robert Winton, held a special service of thanksgiving at Glenorchy Meeting House for my deliverance. It was well attended, not only by the regular worshippers, which of course included the two Miss Parminters who twittered around me like excited birds, but also by a great many of our friends and neighbours, such as Mr Staple, the baker and Mr. Sprague, the carpenter.

Colonel Gower made an unexpected appearance, riding over from Exeter for the occasion. Nan Hopping came to join us and Will Mutter hung about the church door. Although he would not venture inside, he came back to the Globe for the great celebration which followed. It seemed as if the whole town joined in the festivities. My father declared that his son had been lost and found again and that, now I had come into my own, I would be given more responsibilities for the running of the hostelry.

This proved to be the case. The Globe was prospering: more wealthy people were visiting the area rather than touring abroad whilst there was fighting in the Mediterranean. In addition to our coaching house in the Strand, we took over the Manor Hotel on the Beacon, where the views out to sea are extensive. We found that the more wealthy clients preferred to pay the higher price and stay on the cliff-top, where there are gardens to sit in alongside our bowling green.

Two years passed but no more was heard of Jeremiah Quelsh; it was generally believed that he had escaped abroad.

In the late summer of 1803, we received a letter from my uncle asking if I would like to go to the farm again and help with the harvesting. It seemed he was beginning to feel his age and would value more help. I told my parents that I would like to go, if I could be spared for a couple of weeks. They agreed, and I rode over on Baron, going through Exeter and the road which leads through Newton Abbot. I had never been so far by myself before.

For two weeks, I laboured in the fields with the farm workers, bringing in the crops of barley and wheat. This time there was no need to disguise myself as Isaac, but some of the hands who remembered it still called me by that name.

When all was gathered in, we had a big harvest supper in the great barn, with fiddlers playing and lively dancing. The ale was plentiful and many old songs were shared round the wooden tables. After this night of revelry, I slept well and only rose late the next day, when the sun shone brightly through the curtains of my attic room. I had a free day, so I went riding on the moor.

Dartmoor enchanted me with its rolling heather, ancient rocks and high tors. I had been told that there was a spectacular waterfall nearby, so I chose to ride back through a combe where I could see it. I gasped at the height, and went over to look at it more closely. As I approached the falls, the roar of the water seemed to draw me on. I tied Baron's reins to a thorn tree and walked towards the great pool at the foot of the cascade. There was a cave near the water's edge, and I could see a man standing by its

mouth. He looked like a vagrant, with long dark hair and ragged clothes. Suddenly, we recognised each other. I was staring into the crazed eyes of Jeremiah Quelsh.

He glared at me with hatred, and then ran to bar my retreat. We stood a few yards in front of each other. The cave was to my right and the waterfall to my left. He was a powerful man and there was murder in his eyes as he pulled a knife out of his belt.

“Westcombe, you little brat,” he shouted. “I let you live the last time you spied on me. I won’t make that mistake twice.”

He rushed at me with the knife raised. I turned to run but was trapped by the cliff-face. With nowhere else to go, I started to climb up, like a monkey. Quelsh was stronger and I could not overpower him but I knew I was nimbler and, in moments, I had scrambled to a ledge beyond his reach.

He threw a stone at my face. I ducked, but it hit my shoulder and nearly made me fall.

He put the knife between his teeth, and began to climb up after me. I scrambled higher. The spray of the water was splashing my face. The stones were loose and slippery. Fear began to engulf me.

“Go down, Peregrine,” I shouted. “The stones are crumbling. They won’t take your weight.”

“I’ll teach you to defy me, you puppy,” he shouted, above the roar of the waters, and then the rock he clutched inches below me cracked in his hand as he tried to haul himself higher. His foothold crumbled. He lost his balance and, suddenly with a great cry, he fell backwards into the torrent.

The last thing I saw was his hand, engulfed in a whirl of foam. It circled in the whirlpool at the bottom of the falls and then disappeared from view.

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It seemed like an age before I had the strength or courage to climb down again. Somehow I managed it. Shuddering, I passed the mouth of the cave where he had been lodging. I staggered weakly back to untie Baron, who greeted me like a friend, and rode to my uncle’s farm in a sombre mood. I could have felt joyful that my arch-enemy was no more. Instead there was an emptiness, for I had seen a man die, and though I had acted in self-defence, I knew I had a part in it.

I arrived back home late the following evening, and next day I penned a letter to Colonel Gower giving him a brief account of it all. He replied a few days later saying that he was my debtor, for I had done his work for him, and saved the business of a long court trial. It was then that I knew that my great adventure was ended and, with it, my boyhood. The responsibilities of adult life were now falling on my shoulders.

I write these words several years on. I am now landlord of The Globe Hotel. Over those years, I have had the honour of entertaining many guests, retired nobles who come here to admire our sea views and the sunsets over the Exe estuary, painters who

try to catch this landscape on their canvasses, botanists who study our wildflowers and birds, gentlemen and their ladies who come to use the new bath house or go sea bathing to improve their health. Amongst these visitors was Lady Nelson, the widow of our great hero, who died in his country's service. The French wars are all over now, and Bonaparte is an exiled captive whose name is still used as a bogey to frighten naughty children.

Lady Nelson decided to stay in the town and has now bought one of the new houses built on the Beacon fields, a few doors from the Manor Hotel, and close to the assembly rooms, where the gentry play cards and there is musical entertainment. Her son lives with her.

I still worship at Glenorchy Meeting House, where we now have a new young pastor called Richard Clapson. The Misses Parminter explained that, as they grew older, they found that the water crossing to Glenorchy was becoming irksome on winter mornings, so they have had a new church built near A La Ronde, which they call Point-in-View.

Nancy's husband died at sea, but she is now married to John Perriam, who does good service as a pilot, steering ships safely into our new harbour. Abe Mutter is no more, but Will has followed in his footsteps and the rogue now keeps the cider shop. He and I have gone our separate ways, but when we meet in the market hall, we exchange a nod and a friendly smile. Our smugglers are somewhat kept in check now by a new revenue cutter called "Nimble", so our lives are somewhat better ordered.

Occasionally, though, on wild nights, I can lie in my warm bed and feel that I still hear the creaking of that smuggling vessel in the stormy channel crossing and, on days when the sea mist rolls over the town, I find myself looking over my shoulder in case I should see a pair of fanatical eyes peering out of the gloom.

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