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THE TERRORIST IS AMERICA
THE YEAR IS 1776

DEVIL'S ACRE

For four centuries, through one remarkable family,
the power of the world's greatest Dockyard
lies in the brothel below its walls.

Book 2 of THE DOCKYARD QUARTET

MEL CROUCHER

DEVIL'S ACRE

by
Mel Croucher

1: INK - a Prologue

April 30, 1789. Wall Street, New York.

Thursday evening, after tea and compulsory prayers, the General sat down to write his last letter. It was a suicide note. A servant stooped over his shoulder and reached down to stir a pot-belly inkwell, slow and steady, anticlockwise, with the claw of his finger. When the writing powder had dissolved and the ink was mixed, the servant calmly placed a human jawbone east-west across a pile of rag-paper. Not a word was spoken.

The servant, who was blackmailing the General, used his sleeve to clean the dust off the desk-top leather, and then set out pen blades, goose quills and blotting ash, as if laying the table for a meal. So far, the ink was innocent, circling round in its pot, but soon the General would drag it across the paper to write the last words of his extraordinary life. The words would go down in the history books, of course, so they would need to be impressive.

On balance, the General probably thought it best to murder his tormentor as soon as possible, certainly by morning, before the public ceremonies took place. He had run out of time to meet the man's demands, and he could never repay the money owed to his paymasters. But above all, he had resolved to kill his servant because of a sack full of evidence which proved to him that such a man did not deserve to live.

The filthy old canvas bag lay at his feet, beneath the battered desk. It was the sort of bag a sailor might use to carry all his worldly goods. The smells of rope and tar and damp sea charts could not mask the stink of something more cloying and corrupt inside.

The General slid one hand down the length of his right thigh, into the neck of the sailor's sack. His servant, the blackmailer, waited motionless on the blind side while the General rummaged beneath the great desk, trying to find the loaded pistol he knew was in there. He dug his hand deep down among the documents, but withdrew it with a shudder when he touched the mummified human remains that also lay inside. And all the while, his servant stood silent, close enough to smell the thing under the desk, as he watched a line of sweat trickle down the face of his Commander-in-Chief.

I know this because there were three souls in the room that night. The General, his servant and me. I felt the Chief's nerve fail him as he waved a hand to dismiss the man, who took a step backwards and made a pantomime bow before speaking in a fluting, mocking voice.

"You'll want me to retire now, won't you Sir. And you'll need me to lock you in here, so you can write your speech undisturbed, don't you Sir."

The General tried to nod, but he only managed a twitch. When he heard the iron key turn in its lock, he got up and moved slow, because growth on his leg pained him. After pulling the heavy drape across the door, he slumped back over the desk and toyed with the broken jaw paperweight, holding it up and balancing it in front of his eyes until it was in focus. He stared at the bone for a very long time, and then I heard him address it in a weary, measured way.

"Welcome home, Painter Jack. I'll be dead as you soon. I guess you can't help smiling at that, can you. Even though you have no lips."

The General took out his own teeth, because they hurt like hell. They had always hurt like hell. He had not smiled in public for ten years. He had not smiled in private for the ten days since the arrival of the sailor's sack and its cursed contents of evidence against him. Naturally, his blackmailer had removed the documents bearing his signature on the false accounts. So there was now only token evidence left inside the sack, setting out the secret history of events since the beginning of the war, and the debts he had gotten suckered into. There was nothing to smile about. Nothing to smile about at all.

The servant had become the master, and the master had become the servant. The creeping, insidious way he had been lured then trapped into letting go the ropes of power, and handing them over to a bunch of crooked market traders. But he could become master again, if only for a few hours, by putting a bullet into his blackmailer. The merchant moguls wanted their patsy for the president of this new nation, but their patsy was not done yet. Yes, he was going to kill their lackey alright, and he was going to do it soon.

A dull, gray dangle of spit slid off his denture onto the desk leather, where it puddled. The General's false teeth seemed to me like intricate instruments of torture, with metal gum-clamps fashioned from springs and bones, plugged by the ivory of three animals: a wild hippopotamus, a domestic cow and there, dull and dead, one of his own extracted incisors. He snapped the device open and shut a few times, then made it kiss the human jawbone paperweight, with a gentle show of respect.

Now he felt his own mandible through unshaven jowls, wishing aloud that he had half the teeth of the paperweight, with its smears of tar around the molars. Most of the jawbone's teeth were chipped and busted, or missing in action, beaten loose by a British hangman outside a royal dockyard gate. But they were more powerful than his false teeth, even in death.

"So, Painter Jack," he addressed the jawbone quietly again, "will you judge old George before he goes to meet his maker? And so, George," he waggled his own denture, "allow me to introduce you to this relic of Painter Jack, who's already met his maker. And now, if you will excuse me, I must examine my conscience and write my farewell."

That was when I knew he had decided to go the whole way. I heard his words clearly from my hiding place, and they confirmed his intention. After killing his blackmailing servant, he had made up his mind to take the Roman way out. He was going to kill himself too.

The General peered into a flyblown shaving mirror alongside the desk, turning his head to the side and swiveling his eyes until he could see the military queue of hair plaited behind. He had never worn a wig, and preferred to powder his hair for the formal portraits. From what I observed, his portraits had always been kinder than the reality.

He reached for a pen, dipped it in the ink and began to write, but his writing hand was cramped and hesitant. He blinked a few times and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. Then I watched him stab the nib hard into the paper, spraying an arc of blue-black ink droplets.

"Shit, shit, shite!"

A significant ball of hardened snot sat on the ink pot lip, deposited there quite deliberately by his servant.

The General stood up and carefully eased the buckled leather belt through the loops of his breeches. He undid the bone buttons that kept guard over his withered

shanks, and took down his pants to examine the growth on his leg. It was the size and shape of a lamb's brain, a sore with a bare head, and it tortured him.

"Shite!"

He was fifty-seven, a fine old age which nobody else in his family had managed to reach. And he was broke. He had even borrowed the cash for the damned journey to New York from his home on the Potomac. I watched him wince. Maybe one of his violent headaches had started. He ripped the ink-spattered draft of his confession into uneven squares, then he rubbed his gums, prodded his carbuncle and scratched his belly. Finally he sat, naked from the waist down, and took another sheet of paper from beneath the jawbone, and began again.

Federal Hall, Wall Street, the City of New York
Thursday April 30, 1789
Fellow-Citizens of the Senate and of the House of Representatives:

In all my life, nothing has filled me with greater anxiety than the summons by my Country to come out of retirement from the asylum of my declining years. In this conflict of emotions, I have not been swayed by illness or by any reluctance for the job offered me, as I confess to you why my next public duty will also be my last.

I dwell on this prospect with every emotion the love for my country can inspire, and all I want is to keep the sacred fire of liberty burning, entrusted to the hands of you, the American people.

I have only one thing to add. It concerns me, so I will be as honest and brief as possible. When I was first honored with a call to serve my country, my duty required that I should renounce financial rewards. I confess that I have departed from this resolution. But only because I have been the subject of a conspiracy, that forces me to resign this, my newly elected Office.

I hereby name the men who have engineered my entrapment. They are the French conspirator, Le Comte de Rochambeau, in league with the Salem merchant, Elias King Derby. I also name the several identities of the blackguard who has precipitated my downfall, and who will be dead by my own hand before I take my own life. Sometimes he calls himself James Hill, and at other times James Aitken or James Boswell.

I leave you now, unworthy of the great responsibilities of office, because I have succumbed to those whose concern has never been the pursuit of liberty and justice, but the pursuit of money.

I leave behind a sack of evidence containing documentation and relics. Make use of it as you see fit.

I hereby abdicate all honor bestowed on me as President of our beloved United States of America.

This is my confession before I kill the man who has engineered my shame, and then kill myself. May God forgive me.

George Washington

I was the perfect spy. I witnessed everything. I was there when the first gunshot marked the start of our rebellion, fifteen years before. I had sailed on the fragile ship that took our war to England. It was me who terrified the enemy, from the cream of their society to the scum of their earth. And it was me who destroyed their mighty dockyard. I knew everything about the remains of the hanged man that rotted inside that sailor’s sack, and I knew why it had brought the General to this sorry end.

My name is John Aitken, and this is the honest account of my true story.

2: LOBSTERS

19 April, 1775. Lexington, Massachusetts.

I was a practiced birdwatcher, so I knew how to conceal myself. I was cautious too, and I kept in deep cover while I waited all night for lobsters to appear. Then at first light I spotted hundreds of them. They had migrated many miles, and they were crabby and tired. The lobsters scuttled in an awkward single file, and they were a dispirited bunch. I would have laughed out loud at their funny procession, but that would have revealed my lair.

As the first of them passed by my hiding place, I could see how they struggled along under the carapaces on their backs. Their peculiar head covers moved from side to side, unnatural and twitchy, watching for danger. The protective leathery thickness around their leg joints gave them their typical lobster walk. I recognized them for what they were by their distinctive coloring, which was richer than our indigenous breed. Also, because each one of them carried a Brown Bess smooth-bore flintlock musket slung across the left shoulder of his bright red uniform.

I felt excited, crouched low behind a rough stone wall in the damp scrub. I knew my patience would be rewarded, and I knew I could earn my fee for the newspaper piece on the events I had come to witness. I needed a thousand words to entertain my readers and keep my editor satisfied, and at the very least I would begin my squib for the *Salem Gazette* with an account of the weather, not so much to set the scene, more to pad out my report.

After a flurry of rain, the night had become clear and crisp. But then a sharp drop in temperature caused a thick mist to fall, before the footsore British troops had reached the village of Lexington.

I waited there for something to happen and record it. I had a pencil and some paper. I was a professional. With any luck I would describe the high-handed manner of the officers, and quote their words when they carried out the orders of General Thomas Gage. I could smell a news story, but after following it for two days I still didn't know what it was.

I had interviewed General Gage in Boston, and he struck me as an amiable sort of English gentleman. He had offered me sweet tea, which he poured himself from a fluted silver pot. I thought it was only silver plate, nonetheless, the tea was excellent, and I had told him so.

It was clear he was not at all happy to be in command of the garrison, but I knew he was duty-bound to act when a report came through that a bunch of Massachusetts patriots were collecting munitions. It was plain to me that the British General was reluctant to enforce the Coercive Acts, and everyone knew his American wife wanted him to hold back. But orders is orders, as the English say, and a story is a story whatever it may be. And I was being paid by the word.

A woodcock exploded from cover as the lobsters halted their march, much too close to my hide for comfort. I inched my way back from the shelter of the wall and crawled along a shallow ditch into the nearest thicket. My elbows and knees pressed into the soft earth under the trees, whose sodden branches dripped cold water down the back of my neck. A bell began to toll in the village, ringing a half-hearted alarm. The officers bawled out their orders, but with little enthusiasm. There was a puny

drum roll, followed by the clatter of weapons unshackled from their straps. Then there was near silence.

I pulled my notepad from my pocket and unsheathed the pencil from its spine. I licked the point and it broke off as soon as I put it to paper. I felt ridiculous as well as excited. That's why my hand was unsteady. There was barely enough light to see, let alone write, and the paper was damp anyway.

The birds had stopped singing, so I knew something was very wrong. Birds only stop singing before an abnormal event, like a hurricane. Or a battle.

The only noise I could hear was a faint tapping just in front of me, like the click of a death-watch beetle. But it wasn't an insect. It came from something unnatural on the ground, not six feet away, pointing at my face and held perfectly still. I crawled towards it like a damn fool until I was staring straight into the end of a metal tube. It was unmistakably the barrel of a gun.

The sight of the weapon made my balls shrink and tighten. As I lowered my face into the mud with a groan of despair, I wondered if I would hear the bang before my brains mixed with the landscape. I waited there half-frozen with dread for that shot to come. But it did not come, and I forced myself to make a slow count of ten, before opening one hopeless eye to confront my enemy.

I could see where the weapon stuck out from a pile of sackcloth, and there was the tiniest flicker of movement beneath. A sort of pulse, accompanied by the clicking noise like a fingernail tapping on glass. Now my teeth were clenched harder than my scrotum, and I feared my jaw might break before I could surrender. My hands trembled as I raised them above my head, and I lay there prone, like a rag poppet thrown out of a babe's crib. I held my cowering surrender until I could bear it no longer.

"I'm John Aitken," I moaned. "Come on friend, don't kill me. For Christ's sake, I'm only a journalist. I'm just an observer. I'm not armed. For the love of God, don't shoot."

From back over the other side of the wall, one of the troopers shouted he had spotted a line of irregulars through the mist, and he was immediately ordered to shut his mouth and wait for orders.

"Don't shoot," I hissed at the buried gunman. I covered my head and pushed it into the yielding earth. "Let me live."

The gun barrel didn't move, and the invisible hand continued to tap and click as if counting out the seconds, as regular as clockwork.

A clock? The pulse of blood inside my skull beat in time to the thing under the sack. And still there was no gunshot. I counted ten more clicks before I rolled out of the line of fire as slowly as I could. Then I reached sideways, shaken but excited again, to remove the top layer of rough cloth and reveal the gun.

I had to choke back my sob of relief when I saw the thing. An intricate metal device, whose heartbeat was animated by nothing more sentient than a metal spring escapement, alongside three cogwheels, one on top of the other.

A horse whinnied nearby, and the village alarm bell tolled again. An English voice yelled something like, "Lay down your arms, you rebel bastards, or you're all dead!" and the troopers raised a terrible cheer. Then everything fell quiet again. It was like some puny theatrical show where a bunch of amateur players had forgotten their lines.

I gathered my strength and rose to a squat, hopping behind the curious little machine to examine it. The bottom wheel was the size of my outstretched hand, and it rotated in the slow, clicking rhythm, its oiled facets glistening in the early morning

light. Above it, the middle cogwheel was more finely crafted, and moved one notch to each turn of the wheel below. And above both was a small bright disc with a single notch, holding a pin against a black metal claw. I had begun my search looking for lobsters and I had ended up face to face with a single lobster claw hooked around the trigger of a gun.

Once again the officer barked through the mist, "Fuck off, you rebel bastards, and there'll be no killing today. I order you to disperse, in the name of the King!"

This time, his words were greeted by jeers from maybe a dozen of our militiamen, away off toward the village green.

The gun device was wholly unfamiliar to me. It was not a musket or a blunderbuss, but more like the latest breech-loading weapon, except the stock had been shortened and the barrel sawn off. The whole contraption was held by a wooden clamp and pinned to the earth by a metal spike. I thought it was rather elegant.

I was a desk worker, with little experience of guns, but I reckoned the dampness of the dawn would make gunpowder useless, so the device was impotent. As I peered closer I could see neither flash-pan nor striker open to the elements. At least I was sure there was no gunman to fire it, and all I had to do was keep hidden, not draw attention to myself, and survive to write my story.

My sigh of relief was sucked back into my lungs as the awful realization struck me, and I watched in horror as the little machine executed its purpose. The bottom cog completed another revolution and snapped with a loud click, and the little brass pin shot upward, releasing its claw. I did not have time to yell, before my eyes were seared by the flash and my ears were deafened by the explosion that I would later announce to the world as the first shot of our War of Independence.

Then I waited, blind and deaf, for the British to come hurtling over in their stupid lobster uniforms and take me. My deepest regret was I might never earn a lousy penny from this, my eye-witness account of a momentous event. As I blacked out, I fancied I heard the cackle of idiot laughter, and I think it was mine.

3: SCALP

19 April, 1775. Lexington.

I had seen dead people before, and I had done my share of grieving. I had laid out my mother when she gave up the struggle. I had carried the coffin of my sibling, absurdly small and light, and lowered it in a hole, then flung clay over it. And, may God forgive me, I had spoon-fed my father enough laudanum to put him out of his last year of misery. All this before I wandered from the ruined house where I was born up near the Canada line, to make my new life down in Salem.

I was still a boy when I left my empty home, but it was not until twenty years later, in that field outside Lexington, that I first saw a soul separated from a body by war. He was more boy than man. Fifteen or sixteen years had failed to coarsen his skin, but it was his hair I remember most of all. His hair was soft and long, like the ear of a golden spaniel. At first I could not understand why it fretted so fine in the breeze. It should have been sodden with dew. I thought it was beautiful, and I watched it moving for a long while before I worked out that it glowed in a warm sunbeam. So it must have been at least mid-morning when I came back to consciousness. And I wondered what sort of a man had scalped this beautiful boy and hung his lovely hair out to dry on a broken, green twig, six feet above his glistening skull.

I was still alive, no doubt about that. Thanks to my frozen state and my hiding place in the ditch, I had survived while this boy had died. I couldn't tell if he was a villager or a lobster. He had been stripped of his clothing. A fine line of golden hairs ran from the nape of his neck all the way down his spine. The index finger of his right hand had been cut off. I reckoned it had worn a ring. I thought of the mechanical finger on the gun machine as I puked.

I hoped the boy's ma and pa were dead like mine, so they would be spared the business of dealing with their son's humiliation. The ordeal of burying their own child would outweigh every happiness generated by his life. I knew that for a fact. I mumbled a prayer that he might not be a villager, lying here next to me, waiting to be found and carried to the houses on the other side of the wall, for his kin to identify. They shouldn't see his severed scalp and his amputated finger, or his ears, which had been sheared off, leaving silver gristle and brown blood.

I wiped my lips clean, and knew that while I had huddled in shock, deaf and blind through the morning, dreadful things had happened around me. But I could remember nothing, from the moment the gun machine detonated until I found myself lying near the dead boy. Not one thing.

It didn't matter. I would still write my story and earn my money. And even if I hadn't seen a thing I knew where my paymaster was likely to be, and I would still deliver an eye-witness account of the atrocity to him.

I hoped my so-called friend the playwright would be there too. He had accused me of plagiarism once too often, and now I'd show everyone what caliber of writer I was. I paused for a moment before I left that sordid little battlefield, and took the scalp from its twig. After all, I needed it as evidence of my story. And it sure was pretty.

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By the time I caught up with the Committee of Safety, the honorable members had adjourned to the spit and sawdust of the tavern in Menotomy, and the Committee of Safety was roaring drunk.

The crooked doorway was half-blocked by a cauldron of scummy ale, shared by the militiaman Sam Prescott, a hunting dog and a horse. Sam Prescott was flat out and cackling like an imbecile. That didn't surprise me. He was an imbecile. He embraced my legs, and pulled at me to join him down in the dirt.

"Hey Scribbler, it's started, ain't it? You got to write about me in the papers, 'cause if this is a' uprisin' we're all in, then I'm a goddam hero, I am. And so's my goddam dog, here. And so's my goddam horse."

I pulled away from his clutches, but he hung on to my legs and babbled on, "We hustled our way through the roadblocks, we did. And now I'm gonna boil me some lobster, Mister Scribbler, you see if I don't."

Sam Prescott continued the conversation with himself from inside the lip of the iron bowl. The dog lifted itself from between his master's legs and leaned against the doorpost. The dog was also drunk. It half-raised its head backwards and curled a lip in a blissful grin, exposing yellow teeth and freckled gums as I stepped over it, and wagged a cauterized stump of tail in slow contentment. The horse, although it was unsteady on its legs, was the most dignified creature of the three, by a very narrow margin.

At the edge of the bedlam inside, Prescott's colleagues Mister Watson and Paul Revere were arguing. I asked if they had seen The Boss, but they ignored me. Somewhere at the back of the room a hymn was being sung, accompanied by breaking glass and splintering wood, and then drowned out by whoops and obscenities. I saw my former friend, McCarthy the playwright, dancing in the mob, but he didn't respond to my call either, and turned away as if he had not seen me. Well I'd show him. The story of how I had heroically tried to save the life of a brave, young, golden-haired freedom fighter would bring me new friends.

A whirlwind scarecrow figure flew through the door, all flailing black clothes and white skin.

"Where's James Hill? The hour of reckoning is here!"

It was Deacon Loring, looking like he'd been scared out of his grave as usual, and a cheer of recognition went up.

"James Hill! Where art thou?" the Deacon raved. "My storage barn is burned to the ground! Show thyself, thou fire-starter! Expose thyself, I command thee!"

The crowd parted and a blue-eyed stranger stepped out of the heaving bedlam. In one hand he held an old book, and in the other he hefted a blackened firebrand, which he raised like a club. Deacon Loring backed off and trod on Prescott's dog, earning a kick in retribution. Whether from Prescott or his horse I could not see, but the Deacon kept on roaring. "James Hill! My barn is burned to the ground, thou pyromaniac!"

He then wrestled this James Hill fellow, accompanied by the horrible, tuneless scraping of Wall-Eye Walter the Scottish fiddler. Now I saw old Joshua Bond stagger up and join in, hollering, "And my shop is burned out, and I'm ruined. He! He! He!"

Mother Mullikin loomed out of the crowd and dumped a curtsey before the dancing men. She grabbed the charred firebrand from the blue-eyed stranger and spun round and round, harum-scarum, in her own private ballet, spilling ale and laughter before she too joined in the chorus of loss. "My darling house is still on fire, and I'll be having my cash now, if you don't mind."

As she wailed and dabbed at her mock tears with an invisible kerchief, I understood the theatricals going on around me. They were not lamenting the damage and looting that had been visited on their properties. They were celebrating it.

A voice roared out for the assembly to raise a toast to General Gage's wife and all who could ride her, and the madness erupted with renewed heat and noise. Chairman Warren climbed up on a stout table, stamping his high-heeled boots for attention, and when all heads were turned in his direction he raised his mug.

"We'll now drink one more toast my friends and brothers. To the King!"

Then I saw The Boss, in the half dark at the back of the smoke-filled room, and I knew if the villagers were happy to have their houses burned down, it was his money that made them so. My master rose from his chair and stood tall, with an expression of triumph on his sweating face. His father stood behind him, a bony hand placed on his firstborn's mighty shoulder, proud as a stud-master showing off his prize stallion. The Boss's younger brother, a sea captain, stood alongside them, basking in borrowed admiration.

"To the King!"

The cry rang around the stained wooden walls, up the smoking brick inglenook, and out into the daylight, as Elias King Derby saluted the chaos around him. One after the other, the members of the Committee of Safety staggered in procession to pay court and shake the hand of the richest man in Massachusetts. When it came to Old Mother Mullikin, she flopped into another curtsey and kissed his signet ring in homage.

Those who claimed they had suffered looting and arson got directed toward the sooty arch of the fireplace, where a stick-dry old fellow in a threadbare wig sat hunched on a highchair, with a ledger balanced on his bony knees. That was Peter Pettigrew, who we called Saint Peter. Not because Pettigrew was a holy man, but because it was his job to keep the record of all our deeds, to reward us, or fine us, accordingly. Pettigrew had always treated me with the sort of regret a bitch reserves for the hopeless efforts of the runt of her litter failing to suck, and he sighed when he saw me. He was in charge of paying out the compensation that day.

"You do not have your own house, Mister Aitken, so I cannot pay you if you claim to have burned it down. Oh, I trust we are not going to have any repetition of your nervous ailment."

I shook my head and straightened my shoulders. My state of mind was more delicate than I would admit. Nonetheless, I had a scoop to deliver for the *Salem Gazette*, and I had brought the evidence to prove it. But when I fumbled in my pouch for the dead boy's scalp, I couldn't find it. It was gone. I had lost the evidence of the atrocity I had missed. What else could I do but claim to have witnessed it anyway? I needed to get paid.

Saint Peter ignored the chaos around us. He flicked his reptile tongue and studied me with rheumy, hooded eyes, then beckoned me closer and croaked at me to report to The Boss, who was now holding court in the Snug, a tiny space at the end of the bar, behind a screen of opaque glass in a wooden lattice. At least the Snug would shield me from the lunacy of the public room. They said my father was a lunatic, because he preserved dead animals and dressed them in clothes. Me? I was as sane as the next man.

As I squeezed into the Snug, I could smell the power of the men gathered together in there. It was more powerful than the savory scent of dogs on a cornered quarry, and it was more distinctive than the reek of stags in rut. Their stench was the sour smell of success, and I cowered before it.

The Committee of Safety had set itself up as a tin-pot authority weeks before the troubles broke out. They knew what was coming, and they knew when it came to a fight over taxes General Gage would have to write an official report for the British side. And they knew too that the old goat would believe anything he was told by his own officers.

So I already expected they would need eye-witness reports from our side of the story, to publish them in the press and send copies over to England. And just to make sure they could claim to be on the side of righteousness, they had organized some volunteers to burn down their own houses. It seemed my job would be to provide the account of who had fired the first shot, and who had raised arson. I desperately tried to think of the right words as I waited for the chance to talk to The Boss.

King Derby could bank on gathering all the other eye-witness documents he wanted, because Lexington was a poor town where folk relied on barter instead of coin. That made our neighbors co-operate fast, so if sworn accounts of the battle and its aftermath were needed, they could be written and collected in a few days.

I wanted to get out of there and breathe, and I tried to sound strong and sincere as I gave my embroidered account. I chose my words as best I could, and I expected The Boss to praise me, but instead he erupted, and said I was to forget any nonsense about a gun-machine and on no account include it in my report. Then Old Man Derby interrupted his son to order me directly to gather the eye-witness accounts of the British provocations, if I expected to get paid for any of this. The Boss deferred to no man except his father, and now he gave a single nod of agreement to the order.

The blue-eyed man swaggered into the Snug, and pushed his way through the men of power towards me.

“Is this him?” His voice was surprisingly high, not like a woman or a boy, but out of place from a man who seemed to command such strength. “Is this John Aitken, the weaver of words? Is this him?”

He approached me with an outstretched hand.

“Aye. You were right when you said he’s every inch our man. He’s almost as handsome as me. Ha!”

Something made me shudder as I shook hands with him, and I put it down to my shock on finding the dead boy and then losing his scalp.

“The name is Hill, James Hill,” he introduced himself, touching his brow to mine, which I didn’t like at all, “Have you ever been to England before?”

Before? This was the furthest I had ever been from my birthplace, and I had little prospect of getting much further.

“I don’t understand, Mister Hill.”

The crush of the Committee forced me to stay pressed close to him, allowing him to whisper in my ear.

“You mean they haven’t told you yet, Mister Aitken?”

“Oh yes,” I flinched, but I could not retreat from his mouth by my ear. He smelled of kerosene. “I’m to gather the stories of what the Brits have done to our people.”

The Boss came up behind us and put a hand on each of our shoulders.

“Ah, Aitken, we were about to tell you what else we need you to do. That is to say, after you’ve gathered in our witness statements.”

I removed myself from the side of the blue-eyed man. The ventilation was not good in there, making me breathe fast and shallow.

“You are our most accomplished interpreter of words for public consumption.”

The Boss was about to hand me the dung end of the fork, I could feel it coming, and I braced myself.

“We have decided to allow you to handle the ...”

“Publicity,” his father prompted.

“Yes, we have decided you are the man to handle the publicity for our cause, Mister Aitken. That is to say, you are to present the righteousness of our grievances against these unjust taxes, in words that will sway the common people of England to support us.”

But I had no words to sway anybody at that moment. I was speechless.

“You will sail for England on my fastest vessel, Sir. As soon as I have had her provisioned, you will accompany Mister Hill here. And you will be suitably rewarded, of course.”

Old Man Derby gave me the order. His tone was cold and dismissive. He was not expecting me to reply, merely to obey.

I was indeed their most accomplished weaver of words, but only because they had no other choice. I was the only man on the payroll whose job was to write, and they knew I had to take any pittance they threw my way.

My head swam, but the words would not come. I coughed nervously. I had nothing much to lose, and any other man would have grabbed the chance to go to England, but the sea scared me. It was so wide and very wet. I coughed again, desperately trying to make sense of it all. Of course I was hardly heading for a great writing career in a backwater like Salem, I knew that. I had no family. I had no lover. And it seemed my only friend in the place had deliberately turned his peeved back on me when I entered.

“But, I have never been to sea, Sir.” My words sounded pathetic.

The Boss laughed coldly and said, “Mister Hill will show you the ropes."

Right on cue, the blue-eyed man clasped my fist and elbow in a terrible ritual grip. The smell of flammable spirit on him tipped the balance in my head and now I definitely needed to get out of there.

A very short, very fat young woman and a very theatrical Frenchie helped me out doors. As they pulled me over the threshold, I observed Sam Prescott's dog, still blissfully drunk, nuzzling and licking a bloodstained, copper-coloured trophy.

The hair on the dead boy’s scalp no longer gleamed.

4: SPIN

From that day on, up until the last, I filed and protected every document, because that was the job I was paid to do. I kept them safe, each report, every letter, all the pamphlets and newspaper squibs, the engravings and the diagrams, and as many stolen dispatches and jottings as I could lay my hands on. And when I was given evidence of General Washington's misappropriation of funds, I filed and protected that too. They all ended up in a canvas bag of bones, a bag that was to appear in my history for the first time on my forthcoming voyage to England. Of course, the bones were still part of a living man back in 1775.

There would be a time when I could not look after the sailor's sack myself, and when I would need to entrust those documents to the care of others. First to the woman who cared for me when I became mad, and then to the woman I loved. How ironic that neither woman was American, and how satisfying that both were subjects of our enemy, the King.

For the record, here are the three documents concerning the day our war began, and in which I played my most significant part.

THE OFFICIAL BRITISH BULLETIN
As written by General Thomas Gage on 22nd April 1775, and later published in the *London Gazette*.

> *As soon as I received intelligence about military supplies collected at Concord to oppose His Majesty's Government, I sent the Light-Infantry, under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Smith and Major Pitcairn, with orders to destroy the illegal stores.*
>
> *Lieutenant-Colonel Smith found the locals stirred up by the ringing of bells, so he dispatched six Companies to Lexington where they found an armed gang of country bumpkins. When the King's Troops marched up to them, to inquire politely why they had gathered, they fired their guns against my troops, and wounded Major Pitcairn's horse.*
>
> *Because of this unprovoked attack, my troops were forced to return fire and several of the rebels were unfortunately killed. Then my men marched on to Concord, to carry out their original mission. They burnt gun carriages and flung a large quantity of gunpowder and musket-balls into the river, to keep the King's peace. Regrettably, while our men did this, a great number of rebels assembled, and attacked my Light-Infantry, killing and wounding them for no reason whatsoever. Several Troopers were killed and wounded by cowardly rebels firing from behind walls.*
>
> *But my brigade, under the command of Lord Percy's heavy cannon division, joined up with them at Lexington and dispersed the rebels. Sad to say, as soon as my Troops resumed their march, the rebels sniped at them from inside houses, and several more of my men were killed and wounded. And such was the cruelty and barbarity of the rebels, they scalped and cut off the ears of our heroic wounded men who fell into their hands.*

I cannot praise all my officers enough, and my men behaved with amazing intrepidity.

God save the King.

***

AMERICAN BULLETIN
Written by Mister John Aitken for the *Salem Gazette*, 25th April 1775, and sometime later reproduced by pamphlet in the streets of London.

Last Wednesday, the 19th of April, the Troops of His Britannic Majesty opened hostilities on the innocent people of this Province, and unleashed bestiality as brutal as the cruelest Savages of the wilderness.

On Thursday evening a detachment of nine hundred men of King George's Army, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Smith, landed at Phipp's farm, a little way up Charles River, and advanced on the village of Concord. Naturally, the villagers were alarmed, and fearing for their safety they gathered together before dawn, to watch out for the advance of the Troops.

At Lexington, six miles from Concord, a company of our Militia was near the Meeting-House. The Troops caught sight of them at sunrise, and the British Commanding Officer challenged them, shouting: "Disperse, you rebels, surrender your arms." The King's Troops cheered, and immediately one of the King's officers fired a gun, which was instantaneously followed by a barrage of gunfire from the British. Then eight of our men were butchered for no reason, and nine more were wounded.

A few minutes later the enemy renewed their march for Concord, where they destroyed private property. They killed two more of our men, who were forced to return fire to protect themselves, making the enemy retreat to Lexington, where they met Lord Percy's reinforcements. The enemy, now eighteen hundred strong, were allowed to pick up their dead, and take care of their wounded.

In Lexington they torched Deacon Joseph Loring's barn, Mrs. Edwina Mullikin's shop, and Mr. Joshua Bond's house, and burned them to the ground. They looted every house they passed and smashed everything in their path. They stole valuable property and destroyed everything in sight. Only our vigorous pursuit prevented total carnage. But their savagery against our fallen brothers was incredible. They shot down the unarmed, aged, and infirm, they laughed at the cries of the wounded, killing them without mercy, and they abused their bodies in horrific ways. They scalped us and cut off our ears for trophies, laughing and posing as they did so.

But in spite of all these provocations by the enemy, not one instance of cruelty was committed by our victorious Militia.

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SEALED ORDERS
From J. Warren, Chairman, the Committee of Safety, Salem, Massachusetts, to Captain John Derby

27th April 1775

Sir. You will keep this order top secret from every person on earth.

The Committee resolves that you sail with all speed for Dublin, and from there as fast as possible to London. This course is ordered so you can avoid our enemies in the English Channel who would stop this communication of the truth about the British atrocity. On reaching London, you will deliver your papers directly into the hand of our Agent, Benjamin Franklin, to be immediately broadcast through every town in England. You will be assisted by Mr. James Hill and Mr. John Aitken who have been given an advance payment.

You, Captain Derby, will be paid for your time and expenses accordingly, when you return.

5: METAMORPHOSES

29 April, 1775. Seaborne, aboard the schooner *Quero.*

The tide flowed slow and steady from the mouth of Marblehead Harbour out to the open sea. Ahead, the wooden bulk of the King's frigate *Lively* rode at anchor, standing sentinel, her black hull and pale rigging just about discernible against an indigo sky. I could hardly believe we were close enough to hear the English voices float over the water. There was a fretful crosswind, but even so the sound was carried clearly by some trick of the air. From what I could hear of their voices, I knew King George's sailors were sober and watchful.

Our vessel was the racing schooner *Quero*. They told me she was sixty-two tons burden, but compared to the King's ship our slender *Quero* was a dwarf. The sails on her three spindly masts were trimmed hard back so as not to disturb the eyes or ears of the King's men, as we skulked out from the safety of our port like a skinny cur. Maybe we were too insignificant to tickle their fancy, maybe they simply didn't spot us. Whatever the reason, we slipped safely out to sea under the threat of thirty-two British cannons, until we were far enough out for John Derby, our Captain, to order the release of full canvas and ride the South-Westerly wind on the course directed in his stupid, sealed orders.

I'm not ashamed to admit I was frightened of the sea. I knew nothing of full canvas and South-Westerlies. But I knew how to record what I saw and heard, and I was determined not to forfeit the money the merchant kings had promised me.

There had been complete secrecy when the *Quero's* little crew signed on. None of them had been told of our destination let alone our mission, although more than one false rumor had been put about that we were headed for La Coruna, then on down to Lisbon.

I knew the enemy had a five-day start over us in the race to bring the news of the first shot of our revolution to London, and I reckoned our chances of success were damn near hopeless.

The Captain kept his opinion to himself, but his brow was dark and his mood was darker still. I had watched him in deep discussion with the firebrand wielder, James Hill, and I supposed it was Hill who would act as the Captain's second-in-command. A land creature like me would not be honored with such a responsibility, and anyway I had never given an order in my life.

The rest of the crew had no idea of our true importance. They were just hired hands. But our Mister Hill knew what he was about, and he carried an air of ease and assuredness that played well alongside the Captain's aloof authority. It was Hill who introduced me to my fellow adventurers.

There were seven crewmen in the pay of the Captain's brother, Elias King Derby of Salem. They were good men of various ages, and I tried my best to be friendly. For their part, they did their best to ignore my sea sickness. They even kept their laughter half-stifled when I tried to be nonchalant and spat over the side, as my gob blew straight back into my face.

We carried two passengers with us. One was the theatrical Frenchie, whose function I had not yet fathomed. The other was the very short, very fat woman who smelled of wet rabbits, smoked a clay pipe and was called Nell Boxall. I suspected

she was a whore, and I had always steered clear of her sort. But she was friendly, and I liked her smell.

It was James Hill who informed me that I had something in common with our Captain, other than the fact we were embarked on a mission to invite the good people of England to join us in revolution against the King's taxes.

I was stood on deck near the little binnacle from where the Captain commanded our vessel, and I was gripping the rail because my guts had not yet settled into the motion of the sea, when Hill came up top and placed himself alongside me. He was cheerful and friendly and waving a book.

"So there you are, Mister Aitken," he beamed and nodded into the wind.

"And over there is our good Captain. And I'm here to tell you I've discovered both of you are exactly the same age. Isn't that a remarkable coincidence!"

"I am thirty-three years and three months," I shouted above the roar of the sea, and wondered how he knew my age.

"You must wonder how I know your age," he yelled back at me, his tenor voice not effeminate but not quite manly. "It's my job to know as much as possible about everyone on board the *Quero*, and decide how to use my knowledge."

I shrugged, and asked him what use knowledge of our ages could possibly be. He laughed as he replied.

"It's of no use at all, until such time as it proves useful. It's enough for me to know that there's a brotherhood between you and Captain Derby there, that you share the same age as our Lord Jesus Christ when they nailed him up to die!"

James Hill clapped me on the shoulder and shook me playfully, as he would a favored child. "I tell you this, Mister Aitken, no English Pontius Pilate is ever going to hang me up to die. That I swear to you. I've got protection more powerful than any earthly king." And he held up his book, high above the guard rail, facing its cover to heaven.

"Amen!" I cried, but it was more with a nervous effort to please than with any conviction.

He clamped my shoulder harder, saying, "You have a lot to learn, pal, and you won't learn how to win a victory over our enemy in the pages of any Holy Bible. This here's the book you want." He shoved his little volume at me, and grinned again. "It's going to be a long journey, shipmate. Read this well. Maybe I'll be able to test your reading before we reach our destination."

I thanked him, but I wasn't sure what to say next. I asked if he was also the same age as our Saviour. Hill grinned all the more and said, "That's for you to wonder, and me to know."

And with that, he went back below, leaving me with his book. The swell of the waves was growing too heavy for me, so I squatted down by the binnacle with my back against the wind and sea spray. I was one of three men leading this perilous venture, and we tallied a hundred years between us, all middle-aged and well past the strength and recklessness of our youth.

I hoped the Captain would prove to be the hero we needed, and that James Hill was the tactician he seemed to be. For my part, I had no qualities except the ability to write penny prose for a second-rate newspaper. I pulled my muffler up to protect my neck and cheeks from the cold, and examined the faded blue cover of Mister Hill's book, rubbing its cracked spine. When I opened the little volume, the frontispiece identified itself:

The Metamorphoses, by Ovid.
Translated from the Latin by John Dryden.

Printed and Engraved by Matthias Barley,
39, Strand, London.
Book One: Chaos

The name Matthias Barley thrilled me. He was a legend among all of us who espoused journalism and the art of printing.

***

On our third day at sea, with Cape Sable behind us and the coast of Nova Scotia running from our wake to the West, I began to understand what a brilliant tactical decision the Captain's father had made in the choice of our vessel. It was also proof that the Old Man was completely heartless.

His racing schooner *Quero* was built for top speed around coastal waters, but she was never designed to dash across those wide, high Atlantic seas. I figured out the Old Man was gambling that his yacht could fly on the prevailing winds to overtake General Gage's great man-of-war, and then outpace her. But he was also gambling against us not getting smashed to pieces as we headed up coast, nor sunk by storms when we crossed the open ocean toward our secret destination. If the cunning old bastard lost his gamble, and we lost the race, or indeed lost our lives, then Old Man Derby would have only sacrificed one of his smaller vessels, and would have only killed his younger son. His most valuable craft would still be intact, and the firstborn heir to his empire, Elias Haskett Derby, would still be safe and sound inside brick, stucco and slate in Salem.

Either way, his spare son was bound for glory.

Captain John Derby, second son of Salem's reigning merchant, exchanged as few words as possible with me, and wasted none at all on his crew and passengers. They knew by now we were not heading for Spain or Portugal, but North along the Canada coast. Nonetheless, the Captain commanded an awesome respect from all aboard. I thought it was based on nothing other than his appearance and deportment. He looked every inch a captain, and I was grateful for that. He was tall, his frame was spare, and he was as fit as any man I had seen of our common age of thirty-three years and three months. He had a thick head of hair, and showed none of the thickening of body or spirit that the years had started to lay on me.

I was aware of a distinct shiny patch where the hair on my crown used to be, and over the last year or so my temples had risen higher. I was going bald. The Captain was not.

I had sketched his face a number of times, amused that his features could be represented as a geometric diagram made entirely of perfect ratios, with the single flaw of a concave gutter in the center of his chin. What New Yorkers called a dimple.

I liked to sketch during mealtimes, which were hearty, regular and often, with plenty of fresh fowl or codfish, and good quantities of salted meat and biscuit. After I sketched the faces of the crew during our meals, I would give them their portraits as a keepsake, and without exception they were very well pleased.

During the second week of our voyage, with hardly a breath of wind in our sails, I was writing up my daily journal when I witnessed both Nell Boxall and the Frenchie watching our Captain as he took the air. Captain Derby was deep in thought, as usual. Nell Boxall was sighing and looking at him all moist and round eyed, and Monsieur had a look of admiration for him too. When I caught the eye of James Hill, who was watching me watching them, we grinned at one another like conspirators.

Our destination may have been unknown to the crew, but I knew we had someone who looked the very model of a leader, tasked with getting us there.

Hill rolled his eyes and laid his hands on his heart, then he blew the Captain a theatre kiss from behind the curved, wide back of Nell Boxall. He winked at me and came over.

"Your color has improved," he said. "It looks to me as if you've got your sea-legs."

I aped a few steps of a sailor's jig, and admitted that the rolling of the schooner no longer terrified me completely. Hill played a pretend tune on an invisible hornpipe, then asked me how my reading of the *Ovid* was progressing. He grew animated when I told him I was intrigued by all the annotations and underlinings in his book, and how he seemed greatly preoccupied with matters of sabotage and the tactics of deceit.

"Aye, spot on, pal. I want you to pay special attention to those passages where I've added my own thoughts," he said. "When we understand the minds of the ancient victors, then we know the true nature of warfare. And only then, my friend, will we see how to beat our enemies."

Hill saluted me in pantomime, but I don't think he was mocking me.

"You'll find every damned romance and tragedy and comedy and twist of plot in the *Metamorphoses*, all ripe for you to steal for your own writings, Mister Aitken. Nothing changes. Nothing ever changes except the names of the winners and the losers. I don't doubt you will filch a few of these stories and graft them onto your account of our adventures."

I was both flattered and affronted by his words, and wanted to tell him he knew very little about my fumbling attempts at writing. But I did not challenge him. Instead, I opened his book where I had inserted some pages of my reports to mark the passage on the destruction of Troy. I coughed. I always coughed when I was nervous.

"So are we going to leave a damn great wooden horse outside the gates of London?" I asked him.

Hill barked a laugh, and replied, "We'll release a stampede of them, Mister Aitken, from Seven Dials to Newgate and all along The Strand!"

I had no idea where any of these places might be, and I told him as much, so Hill went and drew me a peculiar map of London with bizarre captions for each location, such as, "Rent-me-a-Mob Headquarters", and "The River of Gin", and "Polly Puts the Kettle on Here", and "Here Sukey takes it off again."

Without warning he snatched the pages of my journal from the *Ovid*, and turned away. "Don't even try and deny we're all in here, pal," he growled. "And don't deny that you will take our fine words and deeds for your fictions, and claim them as your own."

Hill whipped around and faced me directly. He slowly inclined his brow towards me, until I felt the pressure of his skull against mine. It was a gesture of simultaneous threat and brotherhood, as I have seen prize-fighters make before they must perform for a baying crowd. I hated him touching me.

Hill spoke softly now, close to my ear, and I could smell the macassar oil on his hair. It was more pleasant than the turpentine he reeked of at our first meeting.

"You will learn more from me than I can ever learn from you, my friend. And I promise you, what you learn from me will shape your entire life, and mark you out a small place in the history books. But now, if you'll excuse me, I must go and persuade our heroic Captain to save his shoe leather pacing around the decks. Then I will get him to break his oath of secrecy and disobey his orders. Because, my friend," Hill

smiled at me with cold eyes, "if he does not follow my instructions instead of the fucking idiocy written in his sealed orders, we are dead men."

And so it was that Hill went and walked the Captain to the prow of our vessel, and began the process to change the course of our ship's bearing and the course of our war.

It is hard for me to say how long they debated there, certainly more than an hour. They talked in whispers, punctuated with gestures and growls. Several times, one of them made as if to leave the argument, only to be restrained by the other, or with a sharp call to come back and finish the matter. Once the Captain went to strike Hill, but the blow hung in mid-air as Hill, unflinching, held Captain Derby's eye. I believe that was the moment when the will of James Hill won through, and the safe haven of Dublin was deprived of the good ship *Quero*'s mooring fees.

It could not have been easy for the Captain to disobey his father's orders, much less the written instructions of the Committee of Safety. But Hill later told me that his case was won by simple mathematics. It was clear to me that James Hill was far more intelligent than the Captain.

They knew General Gage's report was headed for London aboard the Express Packet *Sukey*. When she set sail a full five days before us she was filled with cargo, which would not be risked for the sake of speed. Hill estimated it would take the *Sukey* thirty-two days to tack up the coast to Newfoundland, cross the expanse of the Atlantic and sail the length of the English Channel then on up to London. However, the voyage could be done in only thirty days if stronger winds prevailed. He reasoned that the British report would be delivered to His Majesty's government as fast as possible once the *Sukey* docked, but they would need to consult before taking any action, perhaps buying us another day's delay.

If we obeyed our orders and landed in Ireland, to avoid getting shot up by armed patrol vessels or customs boats, we would probably make landfall in twenty-six days. Our vessel was admittedly fragile, but she was sleek and fast as any at sea, and the elements had been kind to us so far. Hill forced the Captain to admit he had no plan of how we were to get from Dublin to London, and he proved beyond doubt it would take at least nine more days on the road after the relative safety of Dublin, to deliver our precious documents to the American Agent Doctor Franklin in the heart of the enemy's capital city. We could not hope to beat the race against the *Sukey*. It was mathematically impossible.

The argument between the Captain and Hill continued below decks in the cramped privacy of the main cabin, as the wind outside began to rise. They interrupted their quarrel to call for a bottle of port wine and some salted beef and biscuit, and I took the chance to take it down to them myself.

"Come in, come in, Mister Aitken," Hill said. "Captain Derby would like your opinion on the state of mind of the crew."

They sat opposite one another across a small table covered with charts and calculations. The Captain was flushed and his mood was even darker than I had seen it before, but Hill seemed amiable and collected. He took three beakers from the bulkhead locker, and poured each of us a drink. I remained standing, holding the slab of meat and wrap of biscuit, because there was nowhere for me to sit. I doubted very much if the Captain would like my opinion on anything.

"The crew are in fine spirits, as far as I can tell," I said, concentrating on keeping my wine balanced as the ship changed tack and jibbed.

The Captain demanded, "Have they any idea of our destination?"

And I replied, "No, sir. How could they? Although in my opinion, they would welcome being told the truth." I stuck my neck out and added, "And I think our mission would benefit if they felt you trusted them with the knowledge."

The Captain took the food from me without further comment, and began to eat methodically. Hill looked up at me with approval and said, "I think the Captain would like you to assemble the crew. He wishes to make an important announcement."

I felt very pleased with myself as I did his bidding. The seamen listened to the Captain's announcement in complete silence. He explained how crucial our mission was, and he was honest about the risks we faced. Then he told the crew we were changing course for the south coast of England, the centre of the enemy's naval power.

Each one of them, from the weather-beaten boatswain to the rangy lad who pumped the bilge, declared their backing for his decision. The Frenchie applauded and Nell Boxall clapped her hands and popped her bulging, wet eyes, blowing everyone kisses, while James Hill called for three cheers for our Captain, which came loud and sincere. Then at last the Captain smiled, took off his hat and bowed to us all.

I don't know if he was aware that his cheerleader had promised the crew extra pay for each day saved in the crossing. I suspect not. But I was very pleased that Hill confided the fact to me.

Nonetheless, as the wind picked up, so did the efforts of all on board. They posted continual lookouts up in the rigging, for any sight of a hostile sail, and they acted toward the Captain with even greater admiration and respect. And the *Quero* sped us even faster on our new course.

There was a howling wind that night, and although the seas broke high over our ship, the fervor of the crew did not lessen at all. By common agreement we kept full sail and ran before the storm.

I had no chance to be afraid, because all hands were needed on deck to control our brave *Quero*, and there was nobody else to keep lookout but me. The Frenchie had tied himself to the main mast where he prayed and sang like a madman at the top of his voice. Nell and the bilge boy were given the wheel, and together they made one fine helmsman. The boy stood in front of her, his potato head between her mighty breasts, wearing an expression on his face I had last seen on Sam Prescott's besotted dog.

As for me, I climbed up that rigging and once up top I never looked down. Nor did I shirk my duty. I never even questioned the stupidity of my task, which was to be swung in great arcs high above the spume, staring into oblivion. It was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to me, as I waited for another ship or a sea monster to loom up out of the night, into my sight.

I clung to the bars of the protective cage up there in the lookout and thought I had better tie my wrists to it, as if I had volunteered to become some sort of willing prisoner, to save myself from being tossed into the seas below. The mast swooped and dipped and came upright again, and I felt the exhilaration of childhood when my father would push me on a rope-swing high into the air. He had once made a little tableau of a stuffed cat pushing a stuffed kitten on a toy swing, which had repelled me almost as much as it had fascinated me.

I fancied I talked with his ghost that night, which I had not done for a long while. Our ghostly conversations were always more loving than those we had while he still lived. He was not much of a man for talking.

When the winds finally lessened, I was in a pleasant state of trance, fancying myself to be the Christ hanging up there in the dark, with ropes around my wrists, on

the topmost cruciform of the ship. On either side of me stood the crosses of the other two mastheads, making up my Calvary. I wondered if rebels against the Empire were still crucified. Or did the British hang enemy spies from the yard-arm? Or in these modern times were they shot against a wall with a flour-sack hood over their head and a square white target pinned over their heart?

The high crucifixes rose and dipped with an unbroken slow rhythm that hypnotized my mind and stretched my sinews. I tried to remember the Lord's Prayer, but could not recall what came after "lead us not into temptation". Thirty-three years and three months seemed too short before having your life drained out by being hung on a tree.

I fancied I could hear a woman's voice brush against my dreaming, a long way below my cross. Perhaps it was Mary Magdalene keening for her crucified Lord. I could hear a name being called over and over. It was a familiar name. It was my name, and I came to my senses to hear Nell shouting, "Aitken. Ait-ken! You silly sod, get yourself down here and take some soup. There's work to be done."

She sounded nice and jolly, and I felt hungry. But when I tried to move, I found my joints had become locked, and every muscle in my body ached in frozen protest. Mine was a slow and painful descent from the cross, until at last I fell down rather than sat down beside fat little Nell, and gradually warmed my body from the inside out with the scalding liquid.

"Christ, Nell," I spluttered, "this is salty soup!"

She gave me a poke in the ribs with her ladle and chuckled, "So it should be, it's mostly sodding sea water."

I was beginning to like Nell Boxall, and stayed with her while one of the torn sails was hauled down and brought to her to be patched and mended. Hill was swinging about the rigging checking the goosenecks and grommets, and instructing the men as to which ropes to attend to and which would need replacing.

"He's a master rigger, that one," Nell nodded toward where Hill was performing. "Don't let him get started on about ropes to you, or he'll make your ears bleed."

I asked her if she had known Hill for long, and she giggled like a child, replying with a gesture that was unfamiliar to me, but probably obscene.

Nell wriggled into a more comfortable squat and stabbed at the canvas with a hooked skewer of a needle. She pushed her lank, wet hair behind her ears and nudged me. "Mister Hill says you writes for the newspapers. He says you writes stories. Is that what you do, my lovely?"

I nodded and licked the last of the sea soup from my bowl.

"Ooh, I wish I could eat like you," she sighed.

"I've only got to look at a morsel of food and it puts the weight on me. It's a proper burden, I'm telling you. The funny thing is, I can drink as much beer as I likes, and I don't put on an ounce. How long you been writing for the newspapers then?"

I told her how my family house had been pulled down by my father's landlord, and given over to grazing sheep. Nell smacked her lips.

"I loves lamb pies, I does. So what sort of sheep they throw you off the land for?"

"Culley's Leicesters. They all got the sheep rot."

I told her how all my kin had died before I was old enough to grow hairs on my chin, and how I had arrived in Salem aboard one of Old Man Derby's coastal trading ships, with nothing but the clothes I stood up in and a notebook full of little stories I had made up.

"Well, you ain't changed a lot, have you dear," Nell giggled.

I told her how I had begun as a printer's devil, running errands and setting type, and the long years it had taken to work my way up the ladder to become a journalist. I lied about that. The truth was it took long years for all my superiors to die off before I could step into their shoes, and even when I became chief reporter my nervous ailments had held me back.

She cocked her head to one side, making a new chin appear. She was oozing her wet rabbit smell again, and I was aware that I smelled rather manly after my hours up top.

"Tell me one of your stories. Go on, please do. Pleathe," she wheedled in a little girl voice. “You tell me a story, and I’ll make a present for you in return. You ain’t got a kit bag, have you dear?”

It was true, I had no proper bag in which to stow my few on-board possessions, so I shook my head slowly. I tried to look solemn, and gravely examined the rope marks on one of my wrists, wincing as I moved my joints and muscles. Then I spoke very slowly. "Once upon a time ... "

Nell let out a squeal of delight at these four words, and I was very pleased to have such a power over her, so I continued. "Once upon a time, long, long ago and in a land far, far away, there was a warrior who sailed the seas."

She became more eager, and popped her sausage of a thumb into her maw, but ruined the childhood illusion by scratching her minge with enthusiasm. Then she waved her darning needle in my face and said, "Don't go making our story about war and fighting, please." She stabbed a square of canvas with a series of rapid pricks, and began to fashion me a sailor’s sack. "Tell me a proper story, about a lovely lost child and a bitchy old witch and a big feast. A big, fat feast of meat pies. As many pies as you likes."

I obliged her, and started again.

"Once upon a time there was a warrior who sailed the seas in search of a beautiful princess ..."

Nell made as if to attack me with her needle and whispered, "A beautiful fat princess from the Devil’s Acre in Spice Island?"

Nell Boxall had a very peculiar accent, but her voice was not unpleasant. She told me hers was a dialect local to her home in this Spice Island, which I presumed to be some tropical place, perhaps in the East Indies. But it turned out that her home was in a collection of disreputable alleyways and molly shops in the south of England, hard by the home of the King’s navy at Portsmouth Dockyard. She claimed her business in Gropesack Lane was a famous pleasuring house for His Majesty's officers. When she confirmed that she too was in the pay of The Boss, I asked what she had been doing in Salem and why she was on board.

Nell Boxall's answer was very direct.

"Mister Hill and me plans everything together, dear. We works together and we travels together and we takes our pleasures together."

She fished around in her clothing and pulled out a pouch. Then she popped an unlit pipe in her mouth and continued. "Captain Derby's father is taking this war to England, you can be sure of that. I has to tell him face to face what English officers I been turning over to our cause, and what ones we can suck His Majesty's orders out of. Mister Hill may be the Old Man's fucking fist, but I'm his eyes and ears!"

I pondered this, and then said, “But we’re not at war. We have grievances and we need to state our case and tell our side of what’s happened. But nobody wants a war, for pity’s sake!”

“The Boss wants a war, you daft bastard. And after it’s been won, he wants to be running the whole bloody shop, not just Salem.”

I was amused by her reply, which struck me as completely fanciful. "But why are you doing this, Nell? Do you want to see The Boss crowned King of America!”

She raised the pouch, jangled the contents above my head and squeaked, "I'm doing it for the money, you daft bastard. You silly sod."

Nell Boxall also had a lisp. I found this very amusing, and silly sod that I was, I spun her a story of love and meat pies, which she interrupted at every turn.

She made me swear I would come and visit her in Portsmouth town so she could demonstrate the noble art of gathering intelligence from the English naval officers as they drank and fornicated with her "girls". Nell declared herself to be an actress, and it was obvious to me that her starring role would always be that of brothel keeper.

When the Frenchie was untied from his mast and delivered to her, she made fine *parlez-vous* with him. I very much admired her skill at the French tongue, which shamed my own even though there had been plenty of Frenchies up by the Canada line when I was a boy. When she said that some of her English officers preferred "a nice mature piece of Frenchie-bum", and patted Monsieur's *derriere* to illustrate her words, I was not in the slightest bit surprised.

"You should see him at his work, Mister Aitken, all painted up and perfumed up and plumed as fine as any of me girls. He's lovely to see, with his false titties and fluffy little merkin."

Then Monsieur spoke the first words of English I had heard from him, and declared, "I am marvelous. I am superb. I am Jean Baptiste de Vimeur, Comte de Rochambeau. You love me, *non*?"

"*Non*," I replied, and gently removed his hand from where it rippled below my belt.

When I asked him if he also worked for the Derby family, Nell and Monsieur collapsed giggling, their arms around one another.

“You silly sod," Nel said to me. "You silly, silly sod."

“I am *le banque* of your revolution, *Monsieur*.”

He patted his head with one hand and rubbed his belly with the other.

“Is better you ask if *famille* Derby work *pour moi*!” The Frenchie was raving as ever.

Nell laid aside the sailcloth and scratched around somewhere deep inside her billowing petticoats, and I thought she was hunting fleas. Instead, she pulled out something equally alive but a lot bigger, that wriggled from an inside pocket. It was a red-eyed albino rat, which she kissed then handed to *Monsieur*.

"*Fait bonjour, mon petit*," she said to the rat or possibly to *Monsieur*, I wasn’t sure which.

I asked the Frenchie if he really was a count, and Nell assured me he was the best little count in the business. And so he was. Le Comte de Rochambeau would prove to be far more powerful than I could have ever imagined.

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Our voyage lengthened, the winds continued to favor us, and I was given more tasks to help our endeavor. I was trying to splice some cable in the way the boatswain had shown me, and I was quite pleased with myself for almost succeeding, when Hill chose to educate me on the subject of rope.

Nell had been teasing me about how similar I looked to her Mister Hill, and how we could be taken for brothers. “You’re like two cheeks off the same arse, you two. Show us your cock so I can see if you look the same down there.”

I batted Nell away, although her touch was not unwelcome, and it was then that Hill began calling me brother at every opportunity. I must have shown how much it irritated me, because it made him call me brother all the more.

My rope lesson began when he tossed a wooden pulley block toward me and invited me to pass the bulging splice of my handiwork through it. The rope jammed fast where my plaited joint was twice the thickness of the original rope ends.

"You hold in your hand the way to defeat the British, brother," Hill chirruped, looking very satisfied with the world, and sounding as if he too thought our skirmish back home would somehow lead to a full-scale conflict.

I asked him if he proposed to hang them all with the rope, which made him bark one of his high, exploding laughs.

"Ha! Short ropes are useless for tall ships, brother, and the British navy has some mighty tall ships."

The image of the warship we had dodged as we crept out of Marblehead Harbour came to me, and I tried to reckon the length of ropes needed to keep her sailing.

"Your splice may be the strongest way to join two lengths of rope," Hill said, "but it's damn near useless for a fighting ship's rigging that’s got to go through pulleys and blocks. There's only one way you can make a long rope," he warmed to his theme, "and it hasn't changed since the Egyptians perfected it back in Bible times. Have you got your notebook and charcoal with you? Here, brother, let me show you."

I handed him a couple of sheets of paper and a stick of carbon, and he lectured me about how long ropes of great strength were made in ropewalks, where yarns were stretched between revolving hooks. Hill drew me a diagram showing how the hooks twisted the yarn together, and asked me to guess the greatest distance between the mechanical limbs. Before I could guess he answered his own question.

"Three hundred yards! That's what the King's ropemakers need. And now look here," he continued to draw with great skill, "this is the only advance we have made since the ancient Egyptians invented the swivel-hook. It's called a jack, and it's a bloody marvel."

He told of how he had first set eyes on such a device, set up in the narrow alleys of an English town called Bridport, where he had been spying the latest ways of rope-making for Old Man Derby. The strands of rope and then the rope itself got spun as a rigger turned a sort of common cartwheel linked by a leather belt to smaller wheels at the top of this jack device. Then he fired another question at me. "Do you know where the biggest, most important building in the world is, my friend?"

I shrugged. “Babylon? Troy?” I tried to remember the ancient wonders listed in the book he had lent me. “The Great Pyramid in Egypt?”

Hill snorted, then again answered his own question.

“The biggest building in the modern world is in England. Aye, pal, England. The biggest building in the modern world is the Great Rope House in King George's Dockyard at Portsmouth. You wait until you see it. I’ll bet you’ve never dreamed any construction can be of such a scale. It’s more than one thousand feet long. One thousand feet! All held up by great iron beams and brick walls like a cathedral. A man can’t even take in the length of the structure from one end to the other. And you’ve no idea how alive it is, spewing out mile after mile of rope, by God. Long rope. Long rope for the tall ships of His Majesty's Royal Navy."

The light began to dawn on me, and I said, “Do you mean that without this great rope house there is no rope long enough to keep the British fleet at sea."

"Yes! Yes, brother! Now you see how it’s to be done!"

Hill grew more excited.

"If they can’t make their long ropes, they can’t navigate their English sails. No navigation, no navy. No navy, no transportation of men or weapons or supplies. They may have the will to fight us, but they won’t have the means to fight us! We cannot lose, brother. We cannot lose."

He raved on about the great English rope houses at Bristol and Chatham and Devonport docks, but above all about Portsmouth, and how it would take the British months to rebuild once we destroyed it, forcing them to fall back on the medieval practices of ropewalk alleyways in little villages all over England.

"We can knacker the Royal Navy, without a shot being fired. We're like the Trojans. They used their brains to beat the enemy. Keep reading my *Ovid*, brother, it's all in there."

I tried to show enthusiasm for James Hill’s scheme, but I was pretending, because his strategy had such an obvious flaw. He would need an army of saboteurs to destroy all the rope houses in the dockyards of England, and this army, which he did not have, would need to be equipped with enough cannon and explosive to demolish the biggest buildings the world had ever seen. I came to the conclusion that Hill was as raving mad as the Frenchie. It also struck me that he would make a fine villain for a stage drama I had in mind, and I had heard there were some mighty fine theatres in the City of London.

There was one other thing Nell Boxall told me about James Hill, which gave me an insight into their attachment. In return for the sailor's sack she had stitched for me I had been making a sketch of Nell, propped up against a bulkhead smoking her pipe, and I became intrigued by a patch of scarred skin on the upper part of her left arm, which was puckered and pale. She saw my eyes wandering to the spot.

“Tattoo,” she said.

I must have looked puzzled, and so she continued.

“It were a tattoo what I had done. A little bluebird of happiness it were, with the name of me husband below.”

“Ah, I see. And you had it removed, did you?”

“No dear. It were cut out by a certain person who didn’t like me husband much.”

And she jerked her head in the direction of the man I had just been talking to. James Hill.

6: RUM

26 May, 1775. The English Channel.

On the twenty-seventh evening of our voyage, the lookout bawled down from the rigging that he could see a flickering light way off on the port side. The Captain and Mister Hill took turns to peer through a small telescope, but as night was falling they were unable to tell if it was land or cloud marking the darkening horizon.

The Captain went below to consult his charts, and Hill came over to where I stood.

"We're getting close, brother. It could be the coast of Devon or Dorset out there, and I reckon we'll be off Hampshire sometime tomorrow."

"God help us," I muttered.

"Maybe he will. Maybe he won't," Hill responded. "Either way, you meet me and Nell in the hutch when the next watch changes, and we'll celebrate our last night of freedom on the open sea. You be there, brother."

I was happy to accept his invitation.

At the appointed hour, Hill came up into the binnacle swinging a heavy clay flagon, and Nell squealed in anticipation as he cracked the wax stopper to sniff around the neck. She smacked her lips and wedged herself down in the corner, sitting on a little barrel that was in danger of being swallowed between the considerable cheeks of her beam end. I was most content to celebrate our farewell night on board by reclining on the deck, just inside the shelter of the hatchway. Hill squeezed down beside Nell and me, and we started to pass the jug, sipping in turn what proved to be fierce Jamaica rum.

I had always preferred the whiskey of Scotland, mixed with a little spring water, but that rum was good stuff. I believe my first pull of it was the moment of deepest content for me in all our long voyage. We were happy together, swigging and talking quietly until the drink took hold.

When the drink got to me, I told them of my dreams to be a playwright, and I promised that one day I would immortalize us all on the theatrical stages of London, and New York of course. I announced that I had not a friend in the world as fine as the two of them, and that we would remain true friends forever. I kissed Nell, and touched brows with James Hill, remarking that we could indeed be taken for twin brothers.

When the drink got to Nell Boxall she took hold of Hill's head and licked the tip of his nose. He bathed her with a wide grin in return, then pushed his nose between the creases of her dugs and made a dog noise as if lapping up a puddle of rainwater, until she fell back off her barrel in a gale of laughter that could have filled the sails to blow us onwards up the English beaches. I heard the lookout cheer her on from somewhere above us.

There she sat, with her hams spread wide, her eyes rolled up and her chins wobbling, sobbing with laughter and farting uncontrollably. And Hill went, "Bow-wow-wow!" and hunkered down, making as if to sniff up her stink like the dirty dog he was. That made Nell scream out all the more, and clap her heels up and down with a slip-slap of her calves and thighs on the decking. She was the most beautiful woman I ever saw, since we had left the American shore.

I admit it, I was now as drunk as Hill and he was now as drunk as Nell, and we both caught her fit and almost died laughing with her, him with his head up her skirts and me collapsed on top of the both of them. Then we passed the jar round again. And again. And once again, until the sun leered up over the sea like a big, bloodshot eye.

"Well, me boys," said Nell Boxall, loosing off a fanfare of contralto poops to greet the coming dawn, "if me dear Jack Hill is to play a part in me dear Johnny Aitken's theatricals, then we'd best christen him with a name that's fit for the crowd to cheer."

"Or boo!" Hill added, nuzzling in her lap.

"So what shall we name you, my sweet, pet puppy dog? Shall we name you Roderick Random for the press gangs? Or Jack O'Lantern to make you scary?"

We thought awhile, and laughed some more, and then I spoke up.

"I believe we shall name you after your beloved rope. What do you say to that, brother Jack? Shall we name you Mister Hangman's Rope, or what?"

But James Hill had an interesting mind, even in drink, and it quirked from normal people.

"I'm much better named after the rope that will undo the King's navy." He grinned.

"And what rope is that?" I asked, my laughter almost spent. There was no reply.

"And what rope is that?" I said again, watching a dark line on the horizon.

"Brother," said Hill, "it's the rope they call the *painter* that'll undo the bastards. The most insignificant looking rope that ties their little provision boats to their great Man-of-War fighting ships. But when this painter rope is cut, they're cast adrift and out of control."

The dark line on the horizon resolved itself into the shore of England, and I felt Fear's cold hand stroke my insides. I confess, Fear was usually my first emotion on gaining consciousness most dawns, except I had not slept before greeting this one.

The lookout yelled, "Land ho!" and the ship's company began to stir.

"That ain't no name for a he-ro of our re-vo-lu-tion!"

Nell tapped the oiled head in her lap with each syllable she spoke.

"You should be called after a great machine of war, not a piece of fucking rope, my sweet."

She rubbed the scar tissue on her upper arm.

At that, James Hill raised his head from her lap, let out a wolf howl, and said, "Well then, the greatest machine of war is not a cannon. It's the iron jack that spins the painter rope."

I spoke next, keeping watch of the shore, and observing the distinct fires and lamps of an enemy town not three miles distant.

"Then, Sir, I intend to make your name the most ... the most renowned in all England, and to make your name the most feared in all England by the ... by the ... oppressors of His Majesty's people and their American brothers. Your name shall be Painter Jack."

Nell Boxall raised the empty rum flagon to her lips and sucked its spout with the gracelessness of a mudhole. Then she raised it in a toast.

"To Painter Jack, me darling," she grunted, and hefted it over the side of our ship. As I watched her, she fell asleep.

A faint roll of thunder rumbled in the distance, followed by another, closer this time. Before the third thunderclap arrived, it was heralded by a flicker of lightning

which gave me a momentary glimpse of tall chalk peaks sticking up out of the sea. They were ghost white, and pointed like a shark’s teeth.

"Sod me sideways, brother," Hill said to me, gazing up from the retreating rum jar as it bobbed away from us and squinting at the ghostly white pinnacles.

"I think we’re off the butt end of the Isle of Wight, and sailing toward Portsmouth harbor."

He tried to gain his feet but failed, half smothered by Nell's carcass. I hauled myself up and offered him my hand, which he took solemnly but most unsteadily.

"Thank you, my friend," he slurred his words.

"I must inform the Captain that the entire Royal Navy lies ahead of us, and he must give the order to change course and head West for Southampton with all speed, before we’re blown out of the water."

That said, he fell flat on his face, leaving me to deliver his considered opinion to Captain John Derby.

7: FLIER

28 May, 1775. Southampton, England.

We made landfall at Southampton around midday. The air had been warmed and cleaned by the thunderstorm over the Isle of Wight, and the smells of the English port were more varied than those we had left behind at Marblehead. This foreign shore was such a long way from home that although I had feared the hazards of the sea voyage, I now felt afraid to leave the safety of the *Quero*. Nell was bleary and still half asleep as she hefted her carcass to the rail, so she could wave me off.

"Don't worry, dear. You'll be alright so long as you keeps your head down and your gob shut. I'll be staying here a while until I clears me head. Then I've got business to attend to in Devil's Acre with *Monsieur*."

Of course the Captain was eager to head for London at once, and deliver his documents into the hands of our American Colonial Agent. If he achieved the strategic triumph over our colonial masters, then he could justify the fact that he had disobeyed his orders. Nell slumped over the ship's rail as the Captain barged past her.

John Derby jumped ashore. He rocked on his heels and steadied himself to survey the Southampton dockside. Laborers shoveled heaps of coal, their arms and torsos gleaming black and oily in the noonday sun. Draymen bawled and cursed as they loaded heavy wagons with wool stockings imported from the Channel Islands. A group of armed ruffians guarded a forest of wine barrels. I hung back a little, holding the ship's rail next to Nell.

Painter Jack, to give James Hill his new name, jumped down beside the Captain, explaining what we saw, and warned him to take great care now because we had arrived at the smuggling center of the kingdom. It was best to steer well clear of the lot of them, he said, especially as they had already marked his distinctive Yankee appearance.

John Derby's New York breeches cost two pounds ten shillings, which was more than these sullen dock workers earned in a month. His Philadelphia buckled shoes were high in the heel and square at the toe. Back home in Salem we called wearers of old-fashioned shoes Squares. And the Captain was a full blown Square. His shoes were individually crafted for the left and right feet, and that was a luxury not common in these parts. This stranger was not only a Yankee, he was a rich Yankee. But beneath all that tailored finery, I reckoned he was as tough as any Southampton drayman or bootlegger.

Jack helped me down as I stumbled ashore, and he flicked his eyes to heaven to show he knew how I was feeling. He was in the same drink-sodden state as me.

"Don't forget your kitbag, you silly sod," Nell called from the rail, and she threw down the canvas sack she had made for me.

Captain Derby moved away from the quayside leaving Painter Jack by my side. One jerk of the Captain's head ordered me to accompany him toward heaven knows what lay in wait, but my legs had forgotten how to function on dry land. I stood there like an idiot, peering into the canvas sack, its drawstrings still golden and the metal eyes untarnished. It was empty apart from a change of clothes, a bundle of copies of *The Salem Gazette* and the eye-witness statements I had collected, but one day it would contain the bones of the most notorious man this side of the Altantic Ocean.

Jack seemed very uneasy, and declared he would go no further into town because he owed unpaid fines to the watchmen. This was most unwelcome news, and I had not anticipated it. I had assumed he would be accompanying us to London, and be there to steer us clear of trouble.

“You never told me you would abandon us here like this!” I whispered at him.

“Trust me,” he hissed back, “the most important thing to remember is that we must never, ever, be seen together from now on. You will understand why, all in good time.”

He turned away from me towards the *Quero*, and I think there was a note of panic in my voice as I caught his sleeve, saying, “But how will I contact you?”

“I will find you, brother. When the time is right, I will find you, have no fear of that. Now, remember what I have told you about this place, and if it looks like the Captain is about to get you killed, then run!."

"But, where should I run to?" My question sounded pathetic, even to my own ears, and Painter Jack dismissed it.

"Just run, brother, run. I’ll find you.”

Captain Derby bawled back at me to stop dawdling, and Painter Jack took that as his queue to disappear.

Southampton was big. A cocksure civilian port of six thousand souls, flaunting its new-found wealth with mature trees lining the roads and the white stone shell of the town's first bank under construction. The medieval city walls had been half-demolished to make way for modern buildings, and the ancient East Gate into the town was smashed to rubble to allow for the flow of new traffic.

It was very different from what I was used to in Salem. To begin with, the main streets were paved and clean, and watchmen strutted about keeping the King's peace, towing away any carts that blocked the roadways, chaining them to a pound-tree, and extorting release fines. Captain John Derby did not intend to be hindered by any damned watchmen, and he walked fast with me stumbling after, the canvas bag bundled up under my arm.

Did the subjects of His Majesty King George III know there were armed rebels in America? If they did, we could be hung for insurgency. If not, and if we had really won the race across the Atlantic, then we were the only landside men in the realm who knew of the Lexington and Concord atrocity, and I was carrying a bag of evidence to prove it. We headed for the nearest grand building, which stood immediately opposite. It was like stepping into an illustration plate.

The Assembly Room on West Quay was a very elegant venue. There were several coffee-fueled card games underway at the neat little tables. The room boasted five glass chandeliers, and the decoration was in the oriental style that I'd seen in the illustrated journals from England and France.

At one table there was a black man, wigged and booted, and talking in the tones of a milord. He had a whore on his arm and a colorful caged bird at his feet. All three of their breasts were puffed magnificently and I don’t think I had ever seen such a marvelous sight before.

I thought Captain Derby was either overly brave or too impatient, because he yelled out to the entire gathering of the Assembly Room patrons, "Has anyone heard the news of Lexington and Concord?"

I held my breath until I registered that his words had been greeted by shrugs and blank stares. But the Captain merely grunted and then asked to see a daily newspaper.

We drew a blank there too. There was a weekly press in the civilian town of Southampton, but the nearest source of a daily paper was a two hour journey away back along the coast to the great military city of Portsmouth. James Hill, my Painter Jack, had thankfully steered us well clear of that most dangerous place, where the might of the King's navy rode at anchor, and a boatload of Yankee revolutionaries would be not at all welcome.

The plan was for the *Quero* to head back out to a safe anchor if we had not returned within the half hour, leaving Painter Jack a little way along the shore to make his way toward Portsmouth, for a rendezvous with his network of phantoms. But my task was clear enough, and that was to stick to the Captain's side, and make sure as best I could that everything which took place got written down true and fair, unless of course I needed to edit history a little for the sake of winning our battle of words.

Our enquiries about the quickest route to London were ably answered by the black milord, who sounded just like an Englishman when he spoke. He proudly announced there was a new fast service he called the London Flyer, operating along the stage-coach route to the capital, and the 75-mile journey now took only seven and a half hours. If we could get ourselves on board the one o'clock Flyer, we'd make London by nightfall.

The dockside clock in its fine wooden turret read a quarter before one. Captain Derby pulled out his Connecticut pocket watch, with its engine-turned casing and white enamel dial, and corrected the reading. Then the Captain demanded where he might find the coaching inn, turned on his elegant heel and ran the mile and a half inland. I struggled after, as best I could, past a fine new theatre, through the horse shit along the High Street, under the town's Bar Gate and into the stable yard of the Star Inn. By the time we arrived, my body ached but my brain was sober.

The wind had been knocked out of me trying to keep pace with him, but we caught that one o'clock Flyer less than an hour after landing in England. Indeed we did.

I had decided to keep my mouth shut, even though I thought I could disguise my accent without difficulty, and play the Englishman or easier still the Scot. My pa had still kept the traces of the Scot in his voice and I could do a passable imitation. But my caution was utterly wasted when the Captain asked the other passengers straight out, in his finest Salem manner, if they had heard the news from Lexington and Concord.

They had not. And so the race was on for us to announce the events to the best possible advantage of our paymasters' cause.

8: FECK

28 May, 1775. The Star Inn, Southampton.

An obsequious notice was posted by the doorway of the Star Inn coaching house.

"Your Landlord humbly accepts the honour of waiting upon the Nobility, Gentry and Clergy, and assures the public they will find good beds, a well-supplied larder, genuine wines, roomy stables, healthy horses and careful drivers. And a handsome hearse, ready on the shortest notice, to any part of England".

The interior of the London Flyer was quite like a hearse. It was dark and cramped, with smelly passengers whose brats and lapdogs were all bundled in for the price of a single fare. A man as rich as Captain Derby could afford to buy us the insider's fare, but he chose to pay for us to travel half price on top of the coach, where he said the air was good and the legroom was better. A sea captain could cope with the risk of being thrown off from ten feet up, but I was as unskilled a coach passenger as I was a seafarer, and I hated it.

Pulled by four fresh horses, that London Flyer was built for speed. Plenty of goods and luggage had been stowed in the front trunk and there was overspill stacked on top. This seemed dangerous to me. It risked making the coach top-heavy and unstable, and I reckoned any bad distribution of load could threaten us with toppling over. But as ever, I kept my mouth shut.

There was a little bruiser of a guard, and I noticed one nervous passenger, a whey-faced cleric, entrust his written last Will And Testament to the guard's care before setting out. Perhaps he thought even if God granted him escape from death by turnover there was a sporting chance of getting robbed and killed by highwaymen.

Maybe the cleric took comfort in the fact that our guard was armed with a pistol. He would have felt much more secure had he known that the American gentleman sitting between the guard and me up top could outgun any highway robber on the London road that fine afternoon. Captain John Derby packed a magnificent flintlock, with a hand-grip of black walnut, and a wicked heart-shaped front sight on the barrel. Unfortunately his name was engraved on the inside of the silver trigger guard, but John Derby was not used to being an enemy spy in a foreign land, and I hoped to God he would keep his gun hidden and not draw attention to us.

The coachman seemed to be a well-respected figure, entrusted with the lives of his passengers and his guard. He preened and strode around the coaching inn yard with pomp and circumstance, surrounded by a throng of young ostlers, stable boys, shoeblacks and hangers-on, all eager to hear the latest news. As were we!

When he climbed up top, our coachman introduced himself to us.

"I am Gabriel Swift, good sirs. Feckin Swift by name and feckin swift by nature."

And he settled on his high box-seat, flicking a whip in his hand as if to test it. He sported a greasy tricorn hat on his head, tied with a ribbon that was once red.

The guard clattered up the iron steps at the back of the coach and offered Captain Derby and me a blanket. It may have been warm that day but the woolen

cover would keep the dust and mud off the Captain's fine clothes. Besides, there was a breeze up top.

Then the guard checked his own timepiece against the inn clock with ceremony, inspected the door latches below and proclaimed a sort of ritual call.

"All secure, Mister Swift. All ready, outside and in!"

Mister Swift the coachman preened in his cape and yelled to the ostlers.

"High-yo! Let 'em go!"

The horse boys leapt back, releasing the heads of the leading pair. Horns blasted out as a warning to everyone in the yard, and the horses surged forward, throwing coachman, guard and us back in our seats. We were off, and the race was on.

The coachman drove with panache and great skill, taking full advantage of the road. And woe betide anything that got in his way. The road out of Southampton was a marvel, not like any I had ever ridden in Massachusetts, and Mister Swift gave us its history with enthusiasm.

"Welcome to me feckin road, good sirs, grown up from feckin tracks worn down by a million feckin ox wagons and ten million feckin packhorses. We are traveling at a height of nine feckin feet, and your guard today is Mister Scroate, who will look after your every feckin need."

The guard leered into my face and offered me something which looked like a pig's eye.

"Snack?" said the guard.

It could have been a sweetmeat it could have been a talisman. I declined it anyway. Mister Swift the coachman continued his welcome message.

"We are riding on the best feckin surface since the feckin Romans built their feckin causeways across this feckin land thirteen feckin hundred years ago, thanks to the genius of Master John feckin MacAdam."

In spite of his choice of words, our coachman was absolutely right. That new macadamized road was wonderful. It was built on a layer of knuckle-sized stones, dumped on the dirt and crushed with what must have been a heavy roller. The hard surface was formed into a sloping camber and covered in black stuff to drain off rainwater, and it allowed our Flyer to speed like a Roman chariot.

Captain Derby probed Mister Swift on the risk of meeting trouble on the road from the military, or worse still from brigands. I tried to write notes, but I was forced to abandon my records by the rattling of my bones and the gusting of the wind.

"Feckin packhorses carry feckin coal, feckin wool and feckin salt from the feckin salterns of Southampton feckin Water, and contraband feckin brandy from feckin Portugal up to them feckin conts in feckin London, good sirs."

The coachman then told of how he'd seen thirty wagons loaded with illegal kegs, and a hundred outriders each carrying barrels on their enormous saddles. He described an army of smugglers, with armed men front and back of each wagon, and all drunk. It was little wonder that coaching inns were most lucrative centers of illegal commerce, and no wonder that our foul-mouthed coach driver was one of the best informed men in the county. He was not going to risk his passengers or his reputation if he knew of a smugglers army on the move.

He told us there had been a big increase in legal traffic too, with manufacturers growing hungry for transported raw materials and labor. All this new traffic carried too much precious cargo to be jeopardized at the river fords that crossed the gentle hills of southern England, so bridges had been built across these ancient boundaries.

"You wait and see, good American sirs, the new feckin bridges is where the feckin feckers lurk by the feckin turnpikes. Another feckin tax for us poor feckers to stump up, feckit."

Our road to London had been turnpiked to collect tolls, and back in Massachusetts I knew tolls meant trouble. These tolls were collected at gates made of hinged iron pikes. Mister Swift said the military and mail coaches were exempt, but everyone else paid according to the size of their wagon and the number of horses pulling it. We learned that a new bridge was under construction at the village of Chandlers Ford, a few miles out of Southampton

"Feck the tolls and god bless Macadam!" our coachman roared, and declared several times that he lived by the clock and by his reputation for speed and punctuality. He calculated the new bridge would reduce the Flyer's journey to London by fifteen minutes, and increase the fair by tuppence. I wondered if my American pennies would be accepted as negotiable currency in this strange land.

“See that?”

Mister Swift flicked his whip towards a glistening block of granite at the roadside.

“That’s a milestone.”

Our coachman's guard, Mister Scroate, aimed his pistol at the marker as we hurtled past and I could see he was not the first man to take a pot shot at the King’s chevron chiseled in the stone.

"That’ll cost us a ten shilling feckin fine if we get caught,” yelled Mr. Swift.

“No disrespect to His Majesty, good sirs, but His Majesty is a feckin cont!"

The coachman educated us on the subject of violent demonstrations against fines and taxes, and it was plain they were a burden suffered by the British as deeply as us Americans.

I ventured to ask Mr. Swift if he favored justice for the American colonies. He whistled, cracked his whip, leered across and cackled.

"I don't give a sixpenny feck about any of you Yankee feckers, so long as I arrives on feckin time!"

At milestone sixty-eight, we crossed the Itchen River by the magnificent walls of Brambridge House, where our grizzled guard blew his horn to warn of our approach, and flung coins at the turnpike-keeper. My spine felt like Master Macadam's crushed stones as we thundered through the crossroads at Alresford, with the clock at the market-cross reading almost three hours past noon.

At milestone forty-seven from London, the Flyer reached the little town of Alton, where it veered off the road by a school under the carriage arch and into the courtyard of the King's Head coaching inn. I hoped a halt in our journey would give us the chance to ask after news, but I was very wrong. There wasn't even time to dismount.

Ostlers leaped to meet the coach as we swerved under the carriage arch. Even as they unbuckled the steaming horses, fresh replacements were led in. The guard blew his horn and away went our coach, rumbling down the market street and over a bridge.

We headed north-east out of town, with our driver keeping up his gloriously obscene banter and stream of information, past a decrepit flour mill on the river Wey, through downlands towards a place called Farnham town, from where the milestone declared another thirty-eight miles to go before we reached our goal of London.

It was at this point that I very much regretted the lack of a piss break, because the road through Farnham Heath fell under the jurisdiction of no local authority and it

reverted to the unmade road of the Dark Ages for the next hour, until milestone twenty-six heralded the village of Bagshot.

There we changed horses again, at the White Hart Inn on Bridge Road, newly named where a fine brick bridge had been built at the border between the counties of Hampshire and Surrey. A turnpike promised that the road was going to be good from here on, but that did not do a great deal to help my discomfort. I have no idea how the other passengers evacuated bladder or bowel during our long, kinetic journey, but the Captain's decision to ride up top had a distinct advantage over the passengers bolted inside their mobile confinement below.

The third leg of journey would take another two hours, and I was finding this English countryside neat and orderly compared with back home. As we left the scrublands of Bagshot Heath, a chiseled boundary stone promised twenty miles to our destination, and sculptured groves of oak trees could now be seen to the west. This was Windsor Park, the lair of our enemy, His Majesty King George the Third.

Mr. Swift pointed at the Royal standard on the battlements, proclaiming the King to be in residence at the start of Parliament's long summer recess, escaped from the stink of his capital city and the continual grumblings of its citizens. I had only ever seen a royal palace as an illustration in a nursery book, and I was suitably impressed by the reality of Windsor's battlements and towers.

"Do your duty, Mister Scroate!"

The grinning guard fired another pistol shot in the general direction of the King's flag.

We crossed into the County of Middlesex where the village of Staines straddled a narrow neck of the River Thames, and the last turnpike opened to let us through. Although I had heard of the Thames, and knew it to be the great river that flowed through London, I was surprised by how fast and lively it ran so close to the city.

Our coachman never slowed his speech or speed at any time through the heath land and the little hamlets of Hounslow and Turnham Green, where milestone five heralded a truly astounding sight. A shallow valley led down to the Thames, suddenly swollen to a majestic width at Hammersmith, where smoke from a hundred thousand chimneys and bonfires hung in the darkening sky, and the stench of sewage hit my nostrils. Our entry into London shocked all my other senses too.

The stone marker for mile-one took us into the London borough of Southwark, where eddies of smoke and dust whirled in the hubbub of city life. Without warning, Mister Swift reined in the horses and then unceremoniously discharged us below a thirty-five-foot high wall, crowned by iron spikes. We had arrived, unscathed, in London, to find ourselves in the shadow of a jailhouse. I felt exhilarated by the scale of everything around me, but terrified by it too.

The esteemed Mr. Swift left us with a parting nugget of information.

"Welcome to His feckin Majesty's King's Bench Prison, home to all London's bankrupts, debtors and feckin feckers."

He held out his hand for a gratuity, and his forefinger twitched. "You have been safely delivered by Mister Gabriel Swift and Mister Samuel Scroate," he continued. "We hope you enjoyed your journey, and look forward to you traveling with us again on the London Flyer."

I fished in my pockets for a few coins as Captain Derby strode off without me. The coins were all American, but the coachman trousered them anyway, with a cheerful salute.

"Thank'ee, good Yankee sir. Yer fecker."

9: METROPOLIS

27 May, 1775. London.

Captain John Derby was a lot more familiar with modern city life than me. He had spent time in New York, where twenty-four thousand souls lived. But even his mouth hung wide open at the sights of this awesome city. No wonder King George needed to raise as much in taxation as he possibly could, this city alone would need a whole continent of colonial taxes to pay for its administration. As for me, I was overwhelmed. Nothing Painter Jack had said could have prepared me for the metropolis.

He had told me three quarters of a million people lived in London. It was by far the largest city the world had ever known, and it made me feel like a savage fresh in from the wilderness.

Painter Jack had warned me that London was riddled with crime and drunkenness and disease, just like New York. But what else he had said excited me. How the city pulsed with innovation. How there were pleasures to suit every virtue and vice. How there was cheap gin for the lowest class of worker, and cockfights, and public hangings. And I longed to sit in a coffee shop with other scribblers, and join in their talk about new dramas and books. As for our mutual enemies, the idle rich, Painter Jack had said it was a regular thing for them to lose a thousand guineas in a night of gambling and lechery, right here in London. I could never hope to amass such a sum of money after a lifetime of writing, let alone squander it all at the gaming tables. And even if I did get something published here for a tidy sum, I was determined to spend it wisely.

The people looked much like us, although their clothes were a little more colorful. And most of them talked like us, though there were some accents which were even more bizarre than little Nell Boxall's dialect. Anyway, it wasn't the English people we were in conflict with, it was their taxes, and the parasites who levied them. I knew the people of London had freedom of speech and freedom of my beloved press. I knew they could even demonstrate in the streets without getting shot at by lobsters. But the one thing most of the British could not do was damn well vote! Maybe that was a running sore for us to pick at and infect.

And this great city of London was no stranger to riots. All this, Painter Jack had assured me, would serve our cause better than a rag-bag bunch of rebels more than two thousand miles away.

I ran to catch up with Captain Derby.

We had to watch out now, and I begged the Captain to be more cautious. If he started asking Londoners about news of an insurrection in America, we'd get more than indifferent shrugs. London was policed by squads of thugs they called the Bow Street Runners, and Painter Jack had warned us to avoid them at all costs.

I had Jack's crude street map of how to get to Doctor Franklin's lodgings, but first we needed to find out exactly where Gabriel Swift's Flyer had delivered us, and get our bearings. Then we needed to lay hands on a newspaper.

Newspapers! After puking my way across the Atlantic Ocean, and then to have the bones shaken out of me on a stage coach, I longed to get my hands on a London newspaper. A fresh one, full of that day's information.

In my quietest moments aboard the *Quero,* I had wondered about the chances of making my mark as a writer among these heaving masses. London was where the English language could be turned into money like no other city on Earth. There were more than a dozen London titles published each day, and they reckoned two thirds of Londoners could read, women as well as men. This was way beyond the experience of a Salem wordsmith like me. There were more opportunities for a writer in a single acre of London than in the whole of Massachusetts.

We had no problem finding a newspaper, but I had great difficulty trying to read it. It was nothing like the *Gazette*. There were no breaks in the columns, and there was no variation in the font or style. Captain Derby divided the pages between us, and we set about reading the whole damned publication in search of news from America.

As I waded through each page, my confidence grew that we had won the race to bring the news to England, until we managed to read every last item and found nothing about a bloody clash between General Gage's forces and our armed rebels.

The stories in that day's London paper were bizarre, and unlike our concerns back home. The biggest coverage was a celebrity sex scandal, gone to trial the previous day. A seductress called Margaret Rudd had bedded identical twin brothers, and lured them into a labyrinth of forgery and deceit among the elite of society. I could only imagine the thrill it would be to write such stuff and not only get paid for it but have a willing audience read it.

Captain Derby snatched away the newsprint and stuffed it into my canvas bag, then he approached the least homicidal-looking individual he could see, to ask directions to Westminster Bridge a mile or so from King's Bench Prison. After we had been invited to bugger off back to America, we crossed to the north embankment of London's mighty river.

The whole wide surface of Father Thames was covered with little boats and barges and wherries. I consulted Painter Jack's hand-drawn map. Between the wooden hulls, the putrid filth of the great city floated downriver beneath Blackfriars Arches, past the darkened dome of Saint Paul's Cathedral, alongside the bastion of the Tower of London and onward to lick the hulls of vessels much bigger than our own *Quero*, en route to stink up the estuary mudflats and marshes. Painter Jack’s map could not do justice to the immensity of it all. London was overpowering and it was magnificent.

There was a crush of people everywhere, and the streets were a bedlam of horses, wagons and carriages. Everything seemed to be in motion, and we were jostled on all sides. The early evening lamps and torchlights added to the choking smoke and fumes from chimneys. The noise was unbelievable, but not all of it was unpleasant, with peddlers hawking their wares in a funny sing-song.

Our destination was 36 Craven Street, which was somewhere between the finery of a street they called The Strand and the alleyways around Covent Garden market. Here a Missus Hewson kept a rooming house which had been home to the American Colonial Agent, Doctor Franklin, for many years. Our walk was one of only fifteen minutes, and that was as long as it took for the Captain to grow fully confident that we had won the race to deliver the rebel account before the British dispatch.

He strode ahead whistling *Buttermilk Hill*, while I struggled behind with the baggage. For once he did not seem so stern and ill tempered, and as we neared Craven Street he looked back at me and smiled. Perhaps it was then that I recognized Captain John Derby for what my mother used to call my poor father. A Buttermilk Junket.

Which is to say, he was quite sweet but rather thick. Before very long, he would become my rival in love for the woman we were about to meet for the first time, but when he turned around to smile at me, I thought I might outsmart him and take advantage of my situation. The power of his father seemed a mighty long way away from the vantage point of London Town.

10: DOORSTEP

27 May, 1775. Craven Street, London.

The Captain's long legs took the three stone steps up to the door of 36 Craven Street in one stride, and he hammered the brass knocker against its boss-plate with enthusiasm. The fanlight above the door was darkened, and no lamps showed from behind any of the thickly draped windows, even though it was now past twilight.

Painter Jack had assured us of a warm welcome from the landlady's daughter. He said she was Franklin's favorite person in the whole world. What he could not have known was that these windows were draped not against the night, but in the black cloth of mourning.

Captain Derby shuffled his squares and tapped his heels on the top step, then he rubbed the palm of his right hand against his thigh in anticipation of a dry, manly handshake with the famous Doctor Benjamin Franklin. Eventually, an oil lamp glowed feebly as the bolts were withdrawn from inside the door to reveal a magnificent, no-nonsense looking woman, who appeared quite used to strangers banging on her door at dusk. Judging by her stream of invective, she seemed to think we were a pair of body-snatchers, trying to sell resurrected corpses to her surgeon husband. She declared that he was in no position to buy any more cadavers from grave robbers, because her husband was dead himself and buried in his own grave.

This was the landlady's daughter Polly Hewson, the mother of two young boys, just widowed and pregnant again, defiant, and heaping confusion on us two strangers on her doorstep.

Captain Derby bowed low and presented his credentials, which had become very grubby since penned by the Committee of Safety. I stood behind him, trying not to lurk like a body-snatcher, or a revolutionary, or a journalist.

The statuesque Englishwoman stood imperious on the pedestal of her threshold. Then she lowered her neck until her chin was level with the Captain's brow. She sniffed, wrinkled her nose, recoiled a little and attempted to focus her brown eyes on those of the Captain. After a while she brought her oil lamp to bear on the Captain's document and made as if to read it.

From my vantage point I could see that Polly Hewson was suffering not only from ill temper, but the affliction of myopia. Her eyesight was as poor as a mole’s. But my Captain was fired up and eager to accomplish his mission to Doctor Franklin, and he failed to register anything useful about who he was dealing with.

"Now then, woman, you will kindly tell the American Colonial Agent that I’m carrying evidence of huge importance, which needs his immediate attention."

I think it was the word "woman" that did for him. Polly Hewson looked nearer forty than thirty years of age, and she was in full sail. It had been worth the rigors of my Atlantic voyage just to see her. Her prow was stupendous, her beam and her draught were magnificent, her keel was a delight, and she had two little anchors clutched at her rigging, their noses running and their eyes raised in awe and admiration, as were mine.

"Captain Digby ...", she began.

"Captain Derby!", he corrected.

"Captain," she continued. "Not only do you wake my poor, fatherless children from their sleep to wave this, this, this stupid Paper in my face.” She batted his letter

of introduction aside. “Not only do you address me in a manner so rude that I have a mind to toss the contents of my poor, fatherless children's piddle-pot over your ridiculous costume.”

One of her brats stuck out his tongue at us.

“Not only this, but I must also tell you that you smell most unpleasant. Indeed, Sir, you stink. Yes, Sir, you stink. I invite you, Captain *Dar*-by, to go to the devil, and take your paper and your henchman with you. Now leave us in peace, and wash!"

During this tirade, the Captain had retreated back down to street level, and the goddess had advanced to occupy the top step.

"But, it’s a matter of the utmost national importance that I see Doctor Franklin, Ma'am," he spluttered.

Polly Hewson waved an arm in the most graceful and airy gesture of dismissal.

"So it is *Ma'am* now, is it!"

"Madam?" the Captain ventured.

"Yes, it is Madam. And now Madam regrets to inform you, Sir, that you have had a wasted journey. Doctor Franklin departed two months ago. I believe he may be in France. Now, Sir, good night, and good riddance."

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