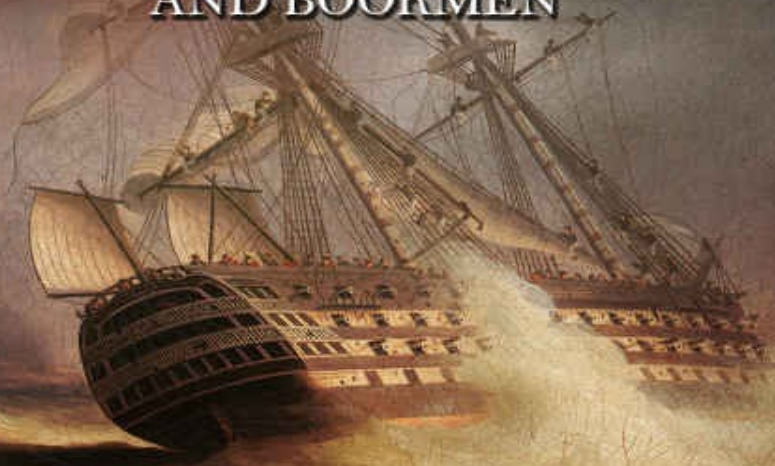




RONALD BASSETT
**REBECCA'S
BRAT**

'GRAPHIC TALE OF SLAVE AND CONVICT SHIPS' BOOKS
AND BOOKMEN



REBECCA'S BRAT

RONALD BASSETT

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1

WHEN ADAM took horse on the Sawston road he left behind him a Cambridge feverish with speculation. His visits to the county seat were becoming rarer, or he might have known that the public mania for financial investment, which so amazed him, was no sudden thing. For months the convulsions that still rocked London had rippled northwards, enveloping the provinces in an intoxicating miasma, but Sawston was a backwater with scant communication with the world of commerce and industry, and Adam was not forewarned.

At the Pembroke Arms he had read London's newspapers. They were filled with the announcements of schemes for making salt water fresh, squeezing oil from sunflower seeds, extracting silver from lead, trading in human hair, transmuting quicksilver into a malleable metal, for importing Spanish jackasses to improve the English breed, for fattening hogs, for working a perpetual motion wheel. There was, it seemed, no project too absurd to attract financial supporters — nor even for 'an undertaking which in due course shall be revealed'. Adam, his business done, turned homewards, anxious for the domestic sobriety of his own farmhouse.

Coal, iron, cloth, ships. Aye, the country had a sudden madness for making money. The South Sea Company, the *Gazette* had said, had raised its capital to nearly twelve million pounds. *Twelve million pounds?* Adam's monetary calculations were confined to scores, occasionally hundreds. A million was beyond his comprehension. He shrugged, then kicked his mount into a trot. He had to think about harvesting four hundred acres of barley, and the corn prices in Ware and Royston allowed ample speculation.

He reined, where he always did, on a rise in the road, to survey the farmlands stretching southwards and westwards towards the Granta River. Three generations of Margerys had farmed this land, and Grandfather Ralph — a Suffolk man — had always said that the Margerys had been yeomen since the days of Hugh le Bigod. There had been a Margery at Acre, at Poitiers, and at Flodden. Grandfather Ralph had fought for Oliver Cromwell, while he — Adam — had served for three years under the Duke of Marlborough, at the Schellenberg, Blenheim and Elixem. But that had been near fifteen years ago, before his marriage.

The barley showed well; it would be a good harvest, which meant that prices would probably be low. He eased his mount on. What had he been thinking? Aye — his marriage.

It might be better to think about barley prices, or Grandfather Ralph, or even the Cambridge fools mortgaging their properties to invest in some nebulous El Dorado.

Not — i'faith — that he regretted his marriage. It was impossible to imagine being married to anyone but Mary — beautiful, dark-haired Mary Hewar, who had added to the Margery acres the house, park and woodlands of the Hewar family, of which she was the only survivor. No, he loved Mary as much now as when he had led her proudly from the little church of St Mary-the-Virgin in 1706. And that was the rub.

He glanced at the dusking sky, red-flushed on the western horizon. It would be a good day tomorrow — an opportunity, perhaps, to send Thomas into Sawston with the plough team for shoeing. They were a docile pair, and the boy could handle them well enough.

Aye. Thomas. The boy was twelve — born the year following his marriage — and had near made Adam a widower. He winced, recalling Mary's sweating, pain-twisted face, her shuddering whimper, and the blood which

soaked the sheets beneath her heaving, tortured body. She had almost died — as her sister, Rebecca, had died three years before — but God had spared her. Adam did not need the finger-wagging doctor to warn him that Mary's pregnancy must never be repeated.

It was likely, he considered, that Mary's ordeal, and its implications, had coloured his attitude towards the boy. Aye, he would have liked more sons to carry his name on, but there was another reason for his illogical resentment. He had not been husband to Mary since Thomas' birth.

At the Granta ford he paused again to frown at the sedge-choked banks on either side. There was a week's work here for a man and a scythe, and he could ill-spare the labour from the fields. Six dozen bottles of fine Canary had arrived that morning from Sir John de Courcy in Halstead, and Adam would return a side of young beef and some cheeses — as he did every year.

It was almost dark when he reached the farm, and there were lights showing. Mary would be waiting, and Betty Cowper, to hear the Cambridge gossip, and there'd be home-fed turkey for supper. Betty Cowper, thirty-five years old now, or thereabouts — she was uncertain — had come to the Margery farm as a parish foundling when Adam was a youth. She'd been a thin-faced scrap of a child then, but she had developed into a plump, comely wench, to whet the appetite of many a Sawston lad. Aye, she might have married well and been mistress of her own house, and he had never known why she had chosen to remain spinster, servant to the Margerys since before Grandfather Ralph's burying in 1702.

The white-scrubbed table in the kitchen was already laid for his supper, and it was Betty who greeted him with her roguish blue eyes, her corn-coloured curls dancing beneath her crisp mob cap. 'Master Adam — it's high time ye were back from ye' tavern dallying. And I'll have those boots off before ye ruin my floor!'

Mary's cool lips brushed his cheek and he seated himself, a little stiff from the eight-mile ride. Well, he was approaching middle age, wasn't he? Time was, as one of Corporal John's dragoons, he'd be in the saddle from three in the morning until noon and not show sign of it — but the women were eyeing him expectantly. He cleared his throat, grinning.

'Aye, I've bought all the things ye listed. They'll be coming by carrier tomorrow — 'cept for the Genoa velvet, which'll have to be ordered in London.'

'And my lavender water?' Mary asked.

He nodded, grimacing. 'At five and twopence a pint. I could buy brandy cheaper.'

'No doubt,' Betty commented. 'And I'll hazard we'd lift a few noses if we perfumed ourselves wi' brandy.'

'Prices are the highest I've seen,' Adam related, 'but there's no shortage of witlings anxious to be parted from their money. The South Sea Company's offering dividends o' fifty per cent, and ye can invest in anything from Leghorn straw to French cocks' feathers. Aye, and there's talk of another Jacobite plot, worse than the Fifteen — but it's probably nothing. The King still has a lively appetite for the Duchess of Kendal and the Countess of Darlington, and there's another — the Duchess of Shrewsbury.' He paused for breath. 'Ah, yes — there were four people killed by a fallen house sign in Bride Lane, and Jack Ketch himself was hanged in Bunhill Fields for murdering the wife of a watchman, then afterwards hung in chains.' He surveyed his listeners triumphantly.

Mary was not over-curious about financial irrelevancies, hangings, or the King's mistresses. 'And the fashions?' she insisted.

'African limes and pistachio nuts. Ladies favour the new London bazaars — the Pantheon in Oxford Street and the Lowther Arcade. Bear-baiting's

dying, and so are patches and masks. Wigs are smaller, but most ladies wear their own hair, wi' curls — confidants near the ears and heartbreakers on the neck — ' He chuckled as the hands of both women rose involuntarily to their hair.

Mary wrinkled her nose.

'And bodices, Adam? How low are bodices?' A mischievous voice spoke from the buttery door, and Adam turned to meet the quizzical eyes of Sara.

Sara. Rebecca's brat.

Seventeen years earlier Rebecca Hewar, magnificently beautiful daughter of the haughty Hewar family, and older sister to Mary, had given herself to a Sawston ostler, Rupert Dolling. The sequel to this indiscretion had been the birth of Sara and Rebecca's childbed death. Rupe Dolling fled to Marlborough's army, died at Blenheim with a French pistol ball in his chest, and the infant Sara, rejected by the disgusted Hewars, became the ward of Mary — and subsequently of Adam.

'Distractingly low,' Adam answered amusedly, 'wi' the breasts pushed so high they're in constant hazard of exploding from their lacings.' He raised his eyebrows. 'But a young lady of sixteen would be expected to present a somewhat more modest appearance.'

Sara laughed, pouting. Sixteen she might be, but there was no disputing that she was a mature young woman. She had Rupe Dolling's eyes, Adam decided, sloe-black and confident. Her sable hair fell to her shoulders and, if her bodice was not as immodest as the fashion Adam had described, it could not belittle the lithe and swelling orbs beneath it, the slim waist which scorned a dressmaker's artifice, the skin of unblemished whiteness. Aye, she had Rebecca's body — a proud, truculent and exquisite body which could drive a man to frenzy. And if she had inherited her mother's morals she probably would.

‘And so she should,’ Betty retorted. She blushed easily at any indelicate reference to a woman’s physical attributes, or even petticoats and garters. Come to think of it, Adam mused, he was endowed with three very handsome women — Mary, Betty and Sara — but each so different in sentiment. Betty, wary that the conversation was going to drift into further embarrassing channels, was clearing the table of the remains of Adam’s supper, and Adam, to tease her, said, ‘Aye, but ye’ll agree that women only wear clothes to provoke men into curiosity — and to enjoy the pleasure of allowing a man to undress them.’

Sara laughed again, then spun on her toes so that her skirts whirled. ‘La, Adam — I’ll agree, for one. But if a woman is well favoured, may not she allow an admirer just the briefest glimpse — to keep him impatient?’ But Betty Cowper had retreated to the scullery.

Twenty minutes later Adam sat on the edge of his bed as Mary undressed slowly. She unpinned her lace bertha, folded it neatly, then plucked thoughtfully at her lacings.

‘Sara is becoming pert for her age, Adam — and you encourage her.’

He shrugged. ‘She needs no encouraging. She’s wanton blood in her veins, and breeding will out, encouragement or no.’

Mary frowned, not liking the oblique reference to her sister, Sara’s mother. She peeled off her bodice, then wriggled her slim hips to allow her petticoat to fall about her ankles. She’s still beautiful, he thought, bitterly. Few women of thirty-seven could boast her firm, perfect breasts, her taut belly, her slender legs. And I can’t have her. I can only look at her, burning with hunger and pretending indifference.

Naked, she reached for her shift. ‘No — ’ he said. ‘Mary — can’t you? — ’ He swallowed, his throat tightening.

She paused, saying nothing, then dropped the shift to the floor and turned to

face him, her eyes tender. 'Adam? — '

'Can't you — can't you stay like that?'

She smiled, mildly rebuking. 'After twelve years?' She came towards him, reaching up her arms. 'If you want to, my love.' Her breath was warm on his lips. 'Do you suppose that I have never yearned for you to reach out for me in the darkness, to feel your hands rough against me, and your body against mine?' Her hands cupped his face. 'My poor Adam — '

He shook his head miserably. 'No, it can't be — '

She withdrew a pace from him. 'It can be, Adam.' With the smooth grace of a girl she lowered herself to the bed and stretched backwards, languidly, so that the rounded contours of her flattened, the ivory perfection of her body punctuated only by the copper coins of her breasts, the pit of her navel and the shadowed triangle at the cleft of her thighs. Then she surveyed him, still standing in mid-floor. 'Now, Adam,' she whispered. 'Let it be now.'

He drew a deep breath, walked to the bed, and pulled the sheet across her. 'No. I swore it once, twelve years ago, and I'll not risk that torture — for both of us — again.' He smiled wryly, pale. 'The Hewars were always beautiful women, but ye' Creator was so concerned wi' the triumph of ye' bodies that he marred the faculty for child-bearing.' He lowered his head to kiss her brow.

They were both silent for a very long time. Then the candle at the bedside spluttered, and Mary shivered. Adam rose, stooping to lift the shift from the floor. 'Ye'll be chilled,' he said.

'Adam — ' She sat up. 'In the Bible — '

He laughed softly, ruefully. 'Aye, I know it, by rote. "Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair" — '

'No.' She laughed also, then sobered. 'Adam, it's an unnatural thing for a man to be denied.'

‘There are men who choose to be denied. Priests — ’

Mary eased the shift over her shoulders, shaking her hair free. ‘You didn’t choose.’ She groped for his hand as he slid beside her. ‘Adam, for twelve years I’ve watched you torment yourself, and every year you’ve chafed more, grown more restless, more impatient. Once you had a soldier’s manners — rough and spirited, full of oaths and quips and Lilliburlero — but now you’ve forgotten them, and you’re not the Adam I married.’

Before he could interpose she hurried on. ‘No, it’s not your blame — nor Thomas’. It’s mine, for I’ve denied you a husband’s title.’ She paused, then said evenly, ‘You must take another woman.’

Adam, stunned, raised himself on his elbows. Another woman? Is that what she said? His belly writhed. Aye, there had been other women, many years ago, before his marriage. There’d been Nell Something, a scrubby sutler’s wench, and Katrin the Flemish ale-maid, and a Smithfield slut during his apprenticeship days, whose name he couldn’t recall — if he had ever known it. Aye, and there had been that humiliating experience with Rebecca Hewar, that Mary knew of —

He turned towards her. ‘Did you say *another woman*?’

In the darkness he could hear her steady breathing. She lay quite still. From beyond the window, a diffused square of grey above them, came the faint scream of a predatory owl, then silence.

She stirred. ‘It was Abram whose wife Sarai, because she was barren, gave to him her handmaid, Hagar.’

‘Abram?’ His thoughts chaotic, Adam fumbled again for the candle. ‘Sblood! The Bible’s filled wi’ bigamy, incest and cuckoldry!’ The candlestick fell to the floor, and he abandoned it. ‘Jacob had two wives and two handmaids, didn’t he? And didn’t Lot bed both his daughters?’

‘There were reasons,’ Mary said.

‘Aye, and lechery was one of ’em,’ Adam snorted. He peered at her. ‘But how d’ye pretend that concerns me?’

‘Because,’ Mary resumed patiently, ‘it would be best if you took another woman.’ She paused. ‘Sometimes.’

Adam was not sure that he quite understood. When a man has been married to a woman for thirteen years and shared her bed for every night of those years, watched the gradual tempo of her deepening maturity and grown to recognize and interpret her every mood, he believes he knows everything about her. And when that woman suggests he take another, he suddenly realizes that he does not.

‘You won’t pretend that other women are beyond your experience, Adam,’ Mary claimed, but kindly. ‘And I mean besides Rebecca. When you came to me — before Thomas — I knew there must have been others. It was plain.’

‘Aye — well — ’ Adam was flustered, and angry with himself for being so. ‘Aye, perhaps — but not since we wed — ’

‘I know, my love.’ She pressed against his shoulder. ‘That would have been plain also.’

He wanted to be righteously indignant. ‘But now you suggest that I find some scabby Cambridge brothel — ’

‘No, Adam, no. You haven’t listened. Sarai gave to Abram her handmaid Hagar.’

‘Handmaid Hagar? I’ve scant patience for riddles in the middle o’ the night. What handmaid have ye got except — ’ He halted.

There was a moment of silence, then Mary said, ‘Yes, Adam.’

Adam tumbled from the bed, scrabbled on the floor for the errant candlestick, then groped for flint and steel. The candle flared.

‘Betty? Betty Cowper?’ The comedy of his situation, night-shirted and barefoot, escaped him. Was Mary really saying that he should intrigue under

his own roof? That he should make a doxie of simple, modest Betty Cowper? The proposal was not only incredible, it was incompatible with his relationship with Betty, who had been servant, housekeeper — almost a member of his family — for nearly as long as he could remember. Betty Cowper? It was almost incestuous.

Mary surveyed him from the depths of her pillow, provokingly cool, and Adam choked. ‘‘Od’s blood, woman! — ’

‘Odd nothing, Adam — and not so loudly. You’ll waken the house.’ Her hair lay over her shoulders in a silken black cascade. ‘Adam — do you recall the night you returned from Flanders, and proposed marriage to me?’

Adam frowned. ‘Aye.’

‘That night Betty cried herself to sleep. I know, because there was only a thin wall between her bed and mine.’

Adam said nothing.

‘Betty has always cherished a love for you, Adam. She still does. That’s why she has never married — when she might have taken her choice from a dozen Sawston men, and likely by now have a maid of her own. No, she preferred to remain here, maid to the Margerys, so that, if nothing else, she would share the same house with you.’

‘I don’t see — ’ Adam protested.

‘Men never do,’ Mary assured him. ‘And you’ve been too concerned with barley prices, beef grazing and sows in farrow to heed something under your very nose. But I’ve noticed, Adam, for years. She has lived for you, worshipped you — and if you beckoned, she’d come willingly.’ She hesitated. ‘I’d rather it be Betty than the shame of you coming from a bawdy-house.’

Adam had quelled his riotous speculations. ‘I have no intentions,’ he gritted, ‘of coming from a bawdy-house, now or ever. As for Betty, the

suggestion ye've made is beyond my comprehension, and ye do her a wicked injustice.' He drew in his breath. 'I never thought I'd hear ye say such a thing, Mary. I still can't believe it. D'ye suppose I wed ye for better nor worse, to make a whore of a loyal and unsuspecting servant?'

'Unsuspecting?' Mary had snuggled deeper into the bed, her eyes closed. 'If you'd taken a little more notice, you might consider differently.' He voice was sleepy. 'But you will take notice, Adam, tomorrow — and the day after. And in time, my love, if you're wise, you will go to her. If you don't — ' She yawned. 'Come to bed, Adam.'

He shook his head. 'God knows I've wanted ye, Mary — a thousand times worse wi' ye being every night beside me. But rather than sniffing after chamberwenches like some old lecher — '

Mary opened her eyes. 'Then there's another way, Adam. There are things a woman can do to be safe from conceiving. These town ladies who change their bed partners quicker than their petticoats — how do you suppose they're not forever bearing children? If they can do it, why can't I?'

'I know — and I've seen the results,' Adam growled. 'Tampons that'll wring blood from ye, purges vicious enough to pulp leather, and in the end a cancer to make ye pray for the grave. No' — he shook his head again, — 'this way's better. If ye can tolerate it, so can I. And that's that.'

To Adam's surprise, Mary giggled. He bridled, then, suddenly aware of his ludicrous appearance — nightgowned and bare-foot, his unribboned hair hanging untidily, he grinned sheepishly. 'Damn ye, Mary. There were times when a man could take a strap to his wife's breek — '

THEY HAD risen early next morning to await the arrival of the carrier from Cambridge, in whom each member of the household had an interest — Mary her lavender water, shoe buckles and a quilted petticoat, Betty candles, thread, soap and a new milking pail, Sara a length of tiffany and some lute-strings, and Thomas his first pair of shop-bought rhinegraves to be reserved initially for Sunday church. There were less interesting things — salt, a hogshead of sugar, starch, cotton for sheets, some copper pans and a pair of fire irons, nails and — a whim of Adam's — a trio of crystal decanters, London-made, to match those of Sir John de Courcy. On the latter's next visit Adam would not be obliged to pour brandy from a clumsy bottle.

Thomas was vexed in being dispatched to Sawston with the plough team, but went with increased alacrity when assured that he would probably be returned before the carrier's arrival. Fair-haired, lean, and tall for his age, he showed every sign of achieving the physical stature of his great-grandfather, Ralph Margery, who at eighty-two was sitting a horse as straight as any man. There, however, the similarity ended, Adam considered. Grandfather Ralph scarred from Cromwell's war, had been a man of iron, of rough kindliness but irrepressible determination — and Thomas promised to be none of these.

Aye, to Adam — who himself had taken a ball in the leg in Flanders — the boy was a disappointment. He was an unwilling riser, an indifferent worker, and when other boys were fishing, bird-snaring, or skating on the frozen Granta, Thomas preferred the lazy security of the hayloft or the warmth of the chimney nook. It was likely that Betty spoiled him —

Betty. Aye.

It had been only at breakfast that he had recalled his astonishing conversation with Mary on the previous night. He had shot an involuntary, uneasy glance at his wife, but she had remained completely impassive. Betty served breakfast exactly as she had done a thousand times before, and sat with them, flush-cheeked from the warmth of the stove. Adam had kept his eyes on his plate, muttered curt responses to Sara's chatter, and departed the table as soon as he might.

The carrier, traditional newspaper among the isolated, rural communities, had more gossip to impart — some new, some months old — to the Margery family. Interest in a Jacobite revival was still strong, and although James Edward, the Pretender, showed no inclination towards repeating his unsuccessful bid of 1715, there was a steady trickle into France of opportunity-seeking but impoverished Scottish gentlemen, and in London a young printer, John Matthews, had been hanged, drawn and quartered for issuing treasonable literature. But German George, despite his insatiable appetite for well-fleshed duchesses and a complete ignorance of the English language was, it seemed, firmly established in Whitehall. It was said that wheat prices were likely to be as low as thirty-six shillings a quarter, with chickens bringing only twopence apiece, and the Cambridge theatre promised a spirited rendering of *English Moll* with nine players. The carrier, however, had little news to interest Adam, who left the man to his unloading and a quart of home-brewed ale.

He avoided re-entering the house because, incomprehensibly, he wished to avoid encountering Betty Cowper. No, it wasn't incomprehensible. Since last night his assessment of Betty had changed completely, and he was embarrassed and annoyed. 'Od fester it — why did Mary have to make such an incredible suggestion? Betty Cowper would never again be the kindly, constrained maidservant who had always seemed as much a part of the

Margery house as the white-scrubbed kitchen table that Grandfather Ralph had brought from Suffolk. Now, inevitably, she would be something strangely different, and Mary, his own wife, had made her so.

Adam took down the long-poled scythe himself and stroked a hone over its curving blade. He'd spend the day by the Granta, he decided, alone, with bread and bacon in a kerchief. It had been a long time since he had worked a whole day with a scythe, and likely he was getting a little soft. His saddle stiffness after an eight-mile ride yesterday suggested it. Aye, and a scorched neck and blistered hands might drive the other from his mind.

He picked his way circuitously to the kitchen, waited until he could hear the clatter of Betty's broom above stairs, then gathered up his victuals with the guilt of a small boy stealing pastries, and made his escape.

It was a cloudless day, and sultry. He worked without pause until noon, sweating, his eyes dazzled by the sun-glare from the river's surface. Then, removing his shoes and hose, he sat with his feet in the cool water, watching the slashed tendrils of weed drift downstream. His hands were sore, scratched and nettle-stung but, he noted with satisfaction, he had cleared more sedge than a hired man might have in twice the time. Only yards away there was a flicker of silver and a soft splash as a fish rose for a fly. He might bring a rod here one evening, before the summer was out. He hadn't fished for years, and Thomas seemed to have no inclination.

He twisted suddenly at the sound of footsteps pushing through the long grass behind him.

'Master Adam?' It was Betty Cowper's relieved voice, and he cursed silently. 'I thought I might find ye here. Ye mentioned the weed-cutting yesterday.' Her voice became reproachful. 'But ye should have told us — '

'What do ye want?' His own voice was unnecessarily harsh.

Betty lowered a pannier to the ground. 'I've brought ye vittles — some

game pie, cheese — ’

Adam frowned. ‘I’ve already brought some.’

‘Aye, and ye’ve left them in the sun, so’s they’ll be dry as powder. Besides, I’ve brought some ale — and ye forgot that. Ale’ll be better than Granta water — ’

‘Couldn’t Thomas have brought it?’

It was Betty’s turn to frown. ‘Aye, he could, but he’s a dawdler, and Mistress Mary thought I’d find ye sooner.’ Her eyes were on him. ‘I should have remembered to bring some goose grease for ye’ hands. I can’t think why ye should suddenly decide to task yeself wi’ a scythe when there’s men enough — ’

There was an odd tightening in his belly. It was incredible that a man could share the same roof with a woman for twenty years and never really see her. Betty was raising her skirt primly as she lowered herself to the grass, unconscious of his quick, half-shamed glance at her neat ankles. He pretended to fumble awkwardly at the pannier as, seemingly indifferent, his eyes rose to her waist, the ample, symmetrical mounds beneath the high-laced bodice, the cool whiteness of her neck. Detesting himself, he had a fleeting, agonizing vision of her nakedness, with her breasts untrammelled and her golden curls loose on her shoulders —

The clumsiness of his fingers was no longer feigned, and as she reached forward to help him her hand touched his. He jerked away as if stung, and then, to hide his discomposure, groped for his scythe and hone. Faith — he was behaving like a baffled callant with his first wench —

‘Ye’ll not eat pie wi’ a scythe in ye’ hand,’ Betty observed. Damn her, Adam thought. I’ll not be on the wrong end of any conspiracy.

‘So Mistress Mary sent ye?’ He weighed the hone thoughtfully in his hand. ‘She doesn’t usually expect ye to take food to field-hands.’

She gazed at him, perplexed. ‘Ye’re not a field-hand, Master Adam — and ye don’t usually go off wi’out a word to anyone. Anyway’ — she shrugged, — ‘I’d not refuse a walk in the sunshine, field-hands or no.’ She faced him accusingly. ‘Even if ye are crab-tempered — for no reason I know of — ye have to eat.’

He considered his next words carefully. ‘And did Mistress Mary say anything to ye about Abram and Hagar?’

‘Abram? — ’ The incomprehension in her face could be nothing but genuine. That, at least, was something. Mary, then, had not confided in Betty, whether or not her allegation of the previous night was valid. Did women confide such things?

‘It was naught,’ he muttered. He was suddenly aware that he was trembling, and that the sweat on his face had coldened. The bewilderment in Betty’s eyes had been replaced by intense concern.

‘Master Adam — ye’re agued! The sun’s stronger than ye suppose — and ye’ve no hat.’ She was scrambling to her feet. ‘Ye’ll come home this moment — a few trashy weeds can wait, and there’s others can do it.’ She shook her head. ‘Ye’ll remember that ye’re not a hulky young redcoat any more. Ye’re getting older — ’

‘Older?’ Adam snorted — stung, but not ungrateful for the digression. ‘A drench with cold water’s all I need.’ He sank his teeth into a wedge of game pie. How many times had he ridden a full nine hours in a Bavarian midsummer, or stamped a Rotterdam parading ground until his feet were raw? His head, however, was beginning to ache, and the game pie was tasteless in his mouth. Betty’s hand was gently cool on his arm, the fresh scent of her in his nostrils. Lavender water, he recalled, at five and twopence a pint. Brandy was cheaper.

She shook her head again. ‘I didn’t mean — ’ she stammered, then flushed,

her assurance fled.

‘No, likely ye’re right,’ he conceded. The warmth in her eyes could surely not be merely that of a maid towards a master. Damn Mary. He stooped to retrieve his scythe. ‘I’ll ’company ye home.’

He allowed her to precede him across Five-acre Meadow, both walking in silence and he watching the curls beneath her cap dancing on her shoulders. When she unpinned her hair, he decided, it must deluge golden to her waist, like that of Rebecca Hewar. He swallowed, thinking of the thousands of nights that she had gone alone to her room under the eaves, only a few feet from him. How many times had he heard her soft footsteps in the stairs after he had retired, seen the passing glimmer of her candle beneath his door, and turned, unthinkingly into his pillow?

He was breathing quickly, wanting miserably to wrench his thoughts away from her, but fascinated by a concept that was at the same time both repugnant and delicious. Was it possible that this handsome creature could be his, if he so desired? How easy it would be to stretch out his hand to stay her —

Neither he nor Betty had spoken for several minutes, and she had not glanced at him. His heart hammering, he lengthened his stride to overtake her, curious to glimpse her face but not knowing why. She turned her head at last, met his eyes, started, then reddened.

‘Betty — ’

She halted, her lips parted and her chest rising. Her eyes were desperate.

‘Master Adam? — ’ For a breathless moment they stared at each other, motionless, before Betty, with a sob, whirled and flung herself towards the farmhouse, apron-strings flying. Adam gazed after her thoughtfully, rubbing a hand across his brow, then followed more slowly.

When he reached the house Betty had vanished. Inside, it was soothingly

cool, and it was several seconds before his eyes could accustom themselves to the shadows. From the buttery he could hear the steady clack of a butter churn, and guessed that Sara was there. Otherwise the house was silent.

He walked through to the yard to thrust his head under the pump, gasping as the cold water streamed over his chest, saturating his shirt and breeches, stinging his eyes. Refreshed and sobered, he pressed the wetness from his hair and retied it. He had undergone a moment of madness, but it was past. He had done nothing compromising and, if he continued normally, Betty Cowper would quickly believe she had misinterpreted, that it had been she who behaved oddly.

He'd send another man to the river tomorrow. No — fester it — the barley had to come in while the weather held. The house, when he re-entered it, was still quiet and, mildly irritated, he broached one of John de Courcy's bottles and drank, absently staring through the window towards the Cambridge road. He had uncorked a second bottle before Mary appeared silently, obviously from above stairs. Adam frowned.

'Adam — your shirt's soaked! Have you no care for yourself?' She surveyed him scoldingly. 'I might expect it of Thomas — but of a man your age — '

'Godammit!' Adam exploded. 'Why the Devil is everyone telling me about my age? I'm thirty-nine plaguey years old — that's all! Faith — ye'd think I had a foot in the grave! Thirty-nine! D'ye know that my grandfather was still working this farm at twice my years?'

Mary laughed, her head to one side. 'Well, at least you've remembered an oath or two, Adam.' She paused. 'And has someone else said you're getting old?'

Adam pushed his nose into his cup.

'Betty?' she asked softly.

Adam placed his cup firmly on the table. ‘Aye, and it was you that sent her, wasn’t it? To tempt me?’ He drew a deep breath. ‘I don’t *understand* ye, Mary — ’

She shook her head. ‘No, my love — not to tempt you. Just to remind you. Just once. I’ll not do it again.’ She reached forward to kiss his cheek. ‘When you want to, you’ll not need any help.’

‘I’ll not do it,’ he said, grimly. ‘I’ll not.’

He spent the afternoon sulkily in the stables, delaying his return to the house until Thomas came to tell him that his supper was waiting. Again it was a meal dominated by Mary’s and Sara’s conversation. Thomas was as uncommunicative as always. Betty’s few words were brief but unhurried, her eyes perhaps a little wary but, if she departed the table sooner than usual, none but Adam appeared to observe it. Adam was aware that his own rejoinders were laboured, and he was relieved when Betty had gone to the scullery. Then he announced — as if he had just thought of it — that he would ride tomorrow to Sir John de Courcy at Halstead, on the Colchester road. Tomorrow was the first day of Bartholomew Fair, and the knight would welcome Adam’s side of beef to supplement his tenants’ festivities.

It was scarcely convincing, but he needed the stronger flavour of men’s company for a day or two. Aye, it might be cowardice, and Mary’s amused eyes said so across the table. ‘I’ve not seen him since Lady Day,’ he shrugged, then added lamely, ‘He has a London agent, and I can order ye’ Genoa velvet — ’ Mary nodded.

He waited long after the household had retired before climbing the stairs himself, candle in hand. A few paces beyond his own door was that of Betty Cowper’s, insignificant and white-painted with its iron latch, and he found himself wondering if its bolt had been pushed home. He had not, he realized, entered that room for years. There was a bed, he recalled, two chairs, a press,

and a small sideboard with a mirror. The window was small, overlooking the rutted path to the Cambridge road, and, in summer, in constant hazard of being obscured by wistaria. Damn everything. He'd be in Halstead tomorrow and glad of it.

Mary lay with her eyes closed, breathing evenly — but he doubted if she slept.

He was up soon after first light, creeping from his bed hoping to be on the road before the house was astir and to snatch a meal at Abingdon or Linton. He dressed below stairs, then saddled his own cob and burdened a second with the beef and cheeses for de Courcy. He had a thirty-mile ride ahead of him, but the day promised fair and he had no cause for haste. If he or his animals tired there were several good inns where lodging could be had.

He had led the horses into the yard and placed a foot in a stirrup when he heard the clatter of dishes from the kitchen. He cursed and climbed hurriedly into the saddle, but he was too late. Betty Cowper stood at the door, eyeing the night-damp cobbles, her hands fastened before her.

'Ye'll not travel without taking breakfast, Master Adam.' It was neither statement nor question. 'There's eggs cooked, and beef — and I'll prepare ye something for the road.'

He dismounted slowly. 'Aye.'

She served him in the kitchen, filling his plate, then hovered inexplicably between table and scullery as he ate in silence. It was Adam's endurance that foundered.

'Mistress Mary is still abed?'

'Aye.' She seemed relieved. 'I heard ye rise — and guessed ye wouldn't bother with food.'

'At daybreak?' He frowned. He had made insufficient noise to disturb Mary, sleeping at his side. Betty must be an uncommonly light sleeper — or

she had been already awake, listening for his first movement. He pushed back his chair. 'It's time I was ahorse. I've a long ride.'

She was watching him intently, her fingers twisting in her apron-strings, as if wanting desperately to say something but daring not. 'Ye'll be returned tomorrow, Master Adam?'

Adam shook his head. 'I don't think so. The next day, probably late — likely after ye're abed.' He reached for his hat. 'If ye leave a lamp in the kitchen, and die door unlatched, I'll be quieter than a thief — '

He watched the flush spread upwards from her neck to fill her cheeks, and her lips fall apart. She swallowed, then, 'Aye,' she whispered. Her eyes sought his feet. 'It's not been latched since I've been here — and now, when I'd decided I'd had fool's dreams for years — ' She looked up quickly, her face glowing, then turned quickly and was gone.

Adam stared after her, choked. 'Od's blood, what had she thought he'd suggested? Had he never asked her to leave the door unlatched before? He sucked in his breath, calculating. Was this Mary's work? It was already bewildering that his wife should invite an association with another woman, but for Mary to play procuress was completely incredible.

But she'd been right, damn her — and she'd done this to prove it. Betty Cowper was willing, and had just made it plain enough. 'Qd fester, it, wasn't he allowed any opinion in the matter? Was he to be tossed like a shuttlecock between the women of his own house — at their choosing? He made for the stairs, intent on rousing Mary and demanding that the whole ridiculous conspiracy be halted immediately — then changed his mind. No, damn it. He'd not cheapen himself. He'd deal with the situation on his return from Halstead — and Betty Cowper would have to go.

Adam reached Halstead Hall by dusk, moody and saddle-stiff, having chosen not to stage his journey. Sir John, however, well advanced on his

second bottle of port, called for a third supported by some cooked trout, a Westphalian ham and a cold pigeon pie. ‘Fester me, Adam,’ he chided, ‘ye’re as sulky as a gib cat. I’ve told ye before — a Flanders man that buries himself i’ the country wi’ a pack o’ women is as good as buried i’ the churchyard. It’s not natural, damme — ye’re feathered enough to get yeself a London establishment and to hell wi’ playing the chawbacon — ’

Sir John de Courcy, Justice of the Peace, once of Kingsale in Ireland and of Queen Anne’s 2nd Regiment of Foot Guards, had lost a leg before Badajos under Galway, but could still ride to hounds with considerable fury, drink more port than most and curse more pithily than any. Now ruddy-faced and running to stoutness, it was difficult to recall that, as a slim young ensign in Marlborough’s army, he had been a rake and a duellist, a ruthless swordsman and an unerring marksman. ‘Aye, Adam, a town house and likely a two-in-hand, a good cellar, and three or four plump maids that’d take kindly to warming ye’ bedsheets o’ nights — ’ He laughed, and Adam shrugged. The whole plaguey world, it seemed, was intent on pushing him into bed with a wench.

The following day was Bartholomew Fair, on which Sir John played host to his tenants and the gentry of the Colnes, Maplestead, Gosfield and Hedingham. Adam’s side of young beef was spitted over an open fire, with all invited to burn fingers and mouth in taking a cut. There was a bacon flitch on a greasy pole, dancing to a fiddle, weight-throwing, a grinning match, kissing a pig, and wrestling. The afternoon was consumed by a goose-riding, wherein a live goose, its head and neck thickly greased, was hung by its legs so that horsemen could attempt to pluck off its head whilst riding at full gallop. Four geese lost their heads and a young hothead from Coggeshall broke his arm — but declined to forgo the opportunity of drinking himself insensible at Sir John’s expense before retiring. The evening was given to a

fight with fists between a local stalwart and a London man for a twenty-guinea purse — a vicious, three-hour battle which the battered countryman reluctantly conceded when his gouged, blood-filled eyes could no longer see his more wily opponent.

‘Too festerin’ clever by half, these damned London jack-puddings,’ Sir John growled, poorer by twenty guineas. ‘And there’s no subtlety about it — just two floundering oafs pounding each other’s thick skulls. Not like swords, now — feint, thrust, parry and riposte, and only one mistake.’ He sniffed ‘But the rabble want to see blood, not finesse — and half the popinjays who wear swords today’d throw a swoon if they were compelled to use ’em.’

Later, returned to the Hall, the two men drew on their pipes, discussing the times and events as the evening’s dusk drew in. ‘These frog-eating, Pope-ridden Frenchmen,’ Sir John opined, ‘will give us another war yet, mark my words. We’ve clashed with ’em in India and Acadia, and sooner or later we’ll have to give ’em another thrashing, Adam — or we’ll find ourselves throttled.’ He raised his wooden leg, stockinged and shoed, ruefully. ‘Aye, I’d not say no to another run at ’em, but I’d not keep pace wi’ the grenadiers on a timber foot.’

Adam laughed. ‘I’ve not noticed it preventing ye from steeple-chasing — nor, for that matter, from pinching the hinds of a few wenches when ye’ve a mind to it. And ye can still hit a spot on a playing-card at thirty paces. That’s a sight better than most.’ He held his glass up to the light. ‘If ye weren’t a magistrate I’d hazard this brandy came off a French cutter during some dark night on the Essex coast — wi’out benefit of the Treasury.’

‘The Treasury’s fair game — ’less ye’re caught,’ Sir John mused. ‘Then it’s Chelmsford Assizes and likely transportation. Wenches, now — ’ he chuckled. ‘There’s no law against coaxing a young baggage, and any chamberwench knows she has to earn her keep wi’ more than a dusting-brush

and a warming-pan. That wench o' yours, Adam — Betty Cowper?' He winked. 'Ye'll not tell me an old dragoon's not broken her to saddle, eh?'

Adam reached for the brandy decanter. Godammit — he'd ridden thirty miles, achieved a raw hind and aching arms, just to allow himself a respite from the proximity of Betty Cowper. And now this.

'Aye,' he said, non-committedly, then cleared his throat. 'Wheat's going to be barely worth the harvesting this year,' he suggested — anything to change the subject. 'If I knew of an investment less lunatic than Spanish jackasses or Jamaican silver I'd hazard a few guineas, but I'd need to know more than the tales of a few rum-sodden Harwich sea captains.'

Sir John put down his glass and then laid his pipe carefully beside it. 'Slave-trading,' he said. 'That's the thing. D'ye know that one round voyage — say, Bristol to the Senegal, then to the Carolinas — can earn fifty thousand pounds? Aye' — he nodded as Adam's eyebrows rose, — 'fifty thousand. Mind ye, ye have to speculate. Cottons, trinkets, gin, and likely a few muskets and shot — and ye' plaguey cargo's got to be kept alive.' He belched. 'It's no good running into Charles Town wi' a shipload o' reeking corpses. The Lord Proprietors'll give ye a bellyful o' roundshot — and they're the law, what there is of it. No' — he tapped the side of his nose, — 'put 'em ashore on their own feet, and if ye're wise ye'll laden wi' sugar, tobacco an' furs, then back to Bristol or London — and, if ye escape scurvy, pirates, shipwreck or mutiny, ye'll have made enough to buy Cambridge and the Cam.'

'Slaves?' The possibility had not occurred to Adam. Indeed, until this moment he had entertained no serious intention of investing in any scheme other than his own acres but, if a trading venture was sound enough and the profit high, he'd be a fool to dismiss it without thought.

'It's no easy matter to buy shares — they're usually spoken for as soon as a

venture's planned — but I know of the *Paladin*, fitting out at Deptford and expected to be ready for the trade in the New Year. If ye're interested, Adam, I'll gladly involve ye. Mark ye — ' he hesitated, then resumed, 'if it's a long-term investment ye're after, ye couldn't do better than take a few thousand acres in the Settlements — the Carolinas, say, or the Marylands. 'Sgood soil, I hear, and labour can be had f' the feeding of it. There's likely occasional trouble from the French or the Indians, but naught that an old redcoat can't cope wi'.' He shrugged. 'If it weren't for my pesky leg I'd consider it meself.'

Adam was mildly surprised. 'For a country magistrate, John, ye seem to know a deal about the Settlements — and slaving?'

De Courcy smiled thoughtfully. 'Well, aye.' He toyed with his glass for a few moments, then said, 'I wouldn't tell anyone, Adam, but I've been concerned wi' the trade for four or five years. The *Paladin*'s mine — the first vessel I've wholly owned — and most of my capital's in her, so if she founders, so do I, i'faith.'

Intrigued, Adam sat up. 'Damme, I'd never have thought it.' He pulled a wry mouth. 'Not that I've ever associated ye with anything beyond ye' fox-hunting and ye' taste for good brandies. Since ye've never farmed or run cattle I might have wondered where ye' income came from.'

Sir John nodded. 'It's not a savoury trade, but if I don't invest there's plenty of others willing, and it's a quick profit. The Settlements'll take slaves faster than they can be shipped — and in some places there's more blacks than whites. The colonists are pushing inland — and that's where the clash wi' the French is inevitable. All the same, it's labour that's needed. There's felon beings transported, o' course, but the Treasury has to pay for their passage, and anyway there's not nearly enough of 'em to meet the demand. The blacks are cheap enough, and ye can have as many as ye can pack below decks —

though, as I say, ye have to keep the kerns alive.’

Adam was in a reflective mood when both men sought their beds. De Courcy taken to slaving? It was the last business with which Adam might have associated his host. There were. Adam knew, a number of voices raised against the trade but he, in his ignorance of it, harboured no opinion. That it could be lucrative he did not doubt. There was a constant, if disjointed, trickle of news from the American territories — English, French and Spanish — vast, untouched forests, endless plains and ore-filled mountains roamed by a scattered Indian people seemingly indifferent to the natural wealth of their surroundings. Aye, but Adam, like many others of yeoman stock, was wedded to his own soil, accustomed to delegating nothing to others. It was difficult to envisage an investment distant by two months’ sailing. Still, England was looking more and more to the Americas, and to India — and a man must move with the times. He must consider de Courcy’s proposal.

3

THE DAWN heralded a day overcast and dull, made even less pleasing for Adam by a persistent headache and an uncomfortable stomach, the result of an unfamiliar quantity of de Courcy's brandy during the previous evening. He was unable to countenance Sir John's generous breakfast sideboard and, despite the knight's entreaty to remain a further day, decided to ride to Sawston at mid-morning. 'Don't forget the *Paladin*,' Sir John reminded him. 'If ye want a share, I'll be glad to oblige ye. I'll be frank, Adam. My outlay's heavy, and I'd not be unwilling to share the risk wi' someone I can trust. The vessel's well found, wi' an experienced master — but ye can see for yourself if ye're so minded.'

By noon Adam's head had cleared and he satisfied a neglected appetite at Yeldham, then pressed on, later than he might have wished, through Haverhill and across the county bounds at Linton, grateful to see the flatlands of Cambridgeshire before him. It was dark before he reached Abingdon, but he was on familiar ground now, fancying he could smell Margery acres if he couldn't see them.

His horses' feet clattered on Sawston's cobbles, past the shape of the church black against the sky, onto the rutted Cambridge road. He found himself thinking, oddly, of the occasion thirteen years earlier, when he had tramped this road in a blustering snowstorm — a cold and ragged redcoat returned from Flanders. The old hound Bellman — dead now for many years — had greeted him, and he'd seen Sara, Rebecca's brat, for the first time. There'd been Mary, and his father — John Margery — and his mother weeping, womanlike, at his return. And buxom, blushing Betty Cowper —

Damn everything. He kicked his jaded beast on, searching for the gate and the path that led through the stubbled wheatfields to the house.

From the window of the kitchen there was the glow of a lamp, with the remainder of the house in silent darkness. The door, he guessed, would be unchained against his return, with likely some cold victuals on the table. He led the horses, eager for the stable and a bucket of oats, into the yard, the noise of their chopping feet echoing sharply as he unsaddled them and wiped them down. The night air was suddenly chill against his skin.

As he had predicted, there was food on the kitchen table but, oddly, he felt no particular desire to eat. He uncorked a bottle of claret, eased off his boots, then stood in his stockinged feet with his back to the stove. De Courcy always said that claret was for boys — no better than this filthy tea that promised to ruin the palates and constitutions of all who indulged in it. Mark you, tea would never seriously challenge wine or brandy — or ale and gin among the poor.

Adam drained his cup. An estate in the Carolinas? It was an intriguing thought. He'd been born in Cambridgeshire and knew every inch of his well-tilled acres, but he'd be damned if thirty-nine years was too old to change. He could grow barley and could likely grow tobacco and sugar vastly better than the pimps and blackguards that the Crown shipped monthly to the Americas. Aye, but the matter needed sleeping on.

He took up a candle and, closing the kitchen door quietly behind him, walked across the darkened dayroom to the stairs. The flame in his hand glittered momentarily on the two old blades over the fireplace — Grandfather Ralph's sword, Toledo forged, that he'd carried at Naseby, and his own dragoon sabre. It had cloven the skull of a Bavarian grenadier on the Schellenberg and terminated the military aspirations of three *gens d'armes* at Blenheim. In Framlingham Castle, his grandfather had told him, was the

dusty banner that a Margery had carried in the Duke of Norfolk's vanguard at Flodden — but it was likely, Adam mused, that there'd be no more Margery swords or banners in his lifetime. Thomas would never see a rippling hedge of enemy bayonets, or tramp into a scything hail of canister with the ashes of battle fear in his mouth.

He halted at the stair-head, suddenly remembering, his hand gripped tightly about the candlestick. There was no sound save that of his own breathing; the house, it seemed, was sleeping. The door of his own bedchamber, where Mary lay, was closed, facing him blankly, but ten yards farther another glimmer of light challenged the one he held aloft. The door of Betty's room was unlatched and ajar.

Adam sucked in his breath slowly. It must be near midnight. Aye, he'd been late home before, but he'd never seen that door unlatched. Even if disinterested, he would have noticed.

He shot one glance at his own silent door, then walked forward slowly, his stockinged feet soundless on the boards and his face hot. The sliver of light from the door fell across his legs, and he halted again. Then he reached forward. The door swung softly under his fingertips and, at that moment, the light from within faded.

The room was smaller than he thought — or perhaps it was a trick of the shadows thrown by his own candle. He pushed the door shut behind him, as quietly as he might, his mind numb. Betty whispered from the bed.

‘Do ye? — ’ The whisper was trembling. ‘Do ye need a light?’

In the second before he pinched out the flame he saw the golden sheen of her unbound hair on the pillow, her eyes on him appealing. Then he was in darkness, groping forward until his hand brushed her face. ‘Betty — ’ he said hoarsely, but the moment was not for talking.

Exulting in the warm softness of her, he thought of Katrin of Maestricht.

Katrin had been like this, matching his unleashed hunger with an impetuous fervour that enveloped and overwhelmed him, goading him frenziedly to the utmost limits of his lust until, drained and exhausted, he lay with his lips on her breasts and his eyes closed. Aye, Katrin had been like this, demanding all that a man's strength could provide and then, her wanting satisfied, all submissive gentleness, her fingers stroking his hair.

It was a long time before he spoke. 'Ye were virgin.'

'Aye, Master Adam.' She pressed her cheek to his brow. 'There were none other I wanted. It were always you.'

With an effort Adam raised himself on an elbow, his free hand rising to gently cup her face. He was filled with a beautiful weariness, and he could wish for nothing but to remain in her willing embrace, savouring her surrendered body like a brandy after an exquisite meal. But he had done a shabby thing. He had spoiled an innocent who likely mistook her deference towards a master for adoration and, deluded or not, could offer little resistance to his advances.

And Mary. He had betrayed Mary. Aye, it was she who had suggested it — but likely with a confidence that he never would. Was she awake now — staring into the darkness and choked with the bitterness of this insult to their marriage? Betty was no cheap wench with a ready eye for a master's favour, but he had used her, torn the last veil from her modesty, and had left her nothing.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I'm sorry it happened.' He was grateful for the darkness. Tomorrow, in the daylight, he must face them both — Betty and Mary — and they each other, and the prospect sickened him. He wished, b'God, that he could turn back the page of time, to be mounting the stairs an hour ago, to see her open door and to ignore it.

Betty's arms about him tightened. 'Ye've naught to be sorry for, Master

Adam. It was a beautiful thing — like I never thought — and now it's done I feel' — she searched for a word, — 'fulfilled.' Pressed against him, she drew a deep breath. 'I'm glad it were you. Anyone else would've been wrong — ' He could almost sense her wistful smile. 'I saved myself a long time — '

Contemptuous of himself, he lay unmoving as her lips sought for him once more, allowed his hands to be led again to her body. No, he didn't love Betty Cowper, nor never could. His feelings were animal-like, physical, and might have been quenched by any sweating drab in a bug-ridden brothel. Aye, that was it. He should have gone to a brothel. That's what brothels were for.

He may have dozed, for he was suddenly aware that the first fingers of daylight were pushing into the room, destroying the darkness that was his last sanctuary. Betty, her face against his shoulder and her wheaten curls tousled, slept soundly. Under his hands her white skin was moist, rising and falling gently, and he could smell the sweet warmth of her. As he eased himself from her arms she moaned softly, roused, then opened her eyes.

It took several seconds for comprehension to dawn in her face. Flushing, she fumbled unsuccessfully to cover her breasts from his gaze. 'Ye're leaving, Master Adam?' She glanced at the window. 'Aye, ye'd best — before there's others about.'

Guiltily, Adam swung his legs from the bed. 'Betty — ' he said determinedly. 'What's done is done. There's no going back on it — and apologizing won't make it different. If there's trouble with ye' mistress, I'll stand by ye, God help me — '

'Trouble?' She had managed to pull a sheet about her, and from beneath it eyed him curiously. 'Wi' Mistress Mary?' She shook her head. 'If it weren't for the others knowing — Sara and young Thomas — she'd have had ye find me in ye' own bed before now. It were me that were bashful. I didn't believe her, until the other day — when ye walked me from the river. Then I knew —

an' I knew it wouldn't be long.' She paused. 'Last night I waited for ye, Master Adam. I heard ye' horses — and all the time I was trembling. It seemed like years, and then I heard ye' feet on the stairs — and ye stopped. Didn't ye hear my heart pounding like madness?' In the soft dawn light her face was radiant. 'Then I heard ye' footsteps again, and ye' hand on the door — and I put out the light so ye'd not see me hot wi' wanting — '

Confused and shamed, Adam knelt by her with some vague intention of making a conciliatory gesture, but before he could speak she had taken his hand and pressed it to her lips.

'Godammit! — ' He pulled his hand away. 'Betty — ye don't understand. I don't love ye, not like — like Mary — d'ye see?' He shrugged. 'It was lust for ye' body, Betty, naught else. I've naught else to give ye. I'm sorry.'

'You know the difference between lust and love, Master Adam,' she whispered slowly. 'I don't. How could I? I know less of men than many a wench o' fourteen years. But I don't care.' She brushed the damp curls from her forehead. 'I'll not question ye' motive, Master Adam, so long as ye'll not leave me wanting.'

There was a cock crowing, and he started to his feet. 'I must — ' he muttered lamely, then left her without a backward glance and despising himself. The door of his own chamber stared at him, mutely accusing, and he descended to the cold kitchen, where his untouched meal of last night still lay, his dusty boots in the hearth, and a half-drained claret bottle.

SARA HAD always wished that she might have been either a Margery or a complete Hewar. She was neither. Her mother had been Rebecca Hewar — sister to Aunt Mary — and her father a vaguely defined person named Rupert Dolling, but neither was an acceptable subject for conversation in the Margery house. Occasionally Adam, reminiscing in his cups, would talk of his campaigns on the Jaar and Danube, and among references to Maestricht, Donawaut, Bonn and Ruremond would let fall the name of Rupe Dolling, Dragoon. They were fleeting comments to be clung to, dissected and carefully interpreted. She had early learned that to question openly was to be condescendingly snubbed, and she had inherited sufficient Hewar pride to resent being snubbed.

The bi-annual visits of Sir John de Courcy — that good-humoured, middle-aged rake with more than a casual eye for a trim waist — usually gave her food for thought. He pinched her cheek, winked and sniffed speculatively but, exiled to bed, she would creep to the top of the stairs to listen to the men's tipsy conversation, devoted almost entirely to the vicissitudes of military life — waiting, waiting, until her eyes drooped with weariness, to hear among the sword thrusts and soldier's oaths a mention of Rupe Dolling, Dragoon.

She had defined several facts. Her mother, Rebecca — who had died in childbirth — was the daughter of a patrician house, kin to the Huddlestons. Her father — Rupe Dolling — had been a common dragoon in Marlborough's army and had died at Blenheim. If this implied a stigma, she was not entirely sure what it was. Adam — she could never call him Uncle

— had also been a dragoon in Marlborough's army and wasn't ashamed of saying so. Indeed, it seemed to be a matter of some pride during his congenial banter with de Courcy.

Adam, of course, was a little different. Mark you, he must be nearly forty years old — a remote age for a girl of sixteen — but she was easier in his company than in that of either Aunt Mary or Betty Cowper, and certainly more so than with young Thomas, who shared nothing in common whatsoever. And, excepting for Thomas, it was a female household.

Sara knew she was beautiful. Hewar women, Adam had once said, were always beautiful. In the privacy of her bedchamber she had viewed herself in a small mirror. She was young yet, she conceded, and she could compare herself only with Aunt Mary or Betty Cowper — and the village women. Well, she had naught to fear from the village women. They were ruddy-skinned, spindle-formed or stout, and carried themselves with the stolid indifference of the cattle they milked each morning. But ye don't need a goddess in the dark, she'd heard Adam say — or talk. Or had Rupe Dolling said that?

Aunt Mary, of course, was a Hewar and, even if she were thirty-seven years old, she still retained all the Hewars' thoroughbred beauty. She must have been a comely maid.

More comely than herself? Sara surveyed herself. She was as slim and lissom as Mary, although her young breasts not yet as high and firm — nor would ever be generously rounded as Betty Cowper's. When she could choose for herself she'd have a bodice such as Adam had described — 'wi' the breasts pushed so high they're in constant hazard of exploding from their lacing'. Then she could watch for that momentary flicker in a man's eyes — eyes that undressed her, wandered away but always returned, speculatively.

She could not believe that men didn't care about a goddess in the dark. And

why dark? There was no point in having a beautiful body unless a man could see it. All of it. She closed her eyes. What could it be like to undress before a man? One day she would be required to do it. She'd unlace her bodice, slowly, then peel it from her shoulders, push her petticoat over her knees. She'd be half turned from him so that, at last, he would see all of her at one moment, and she could watch the blood leap to his eyes with the sudden shock of her whiteness. Then she would wait, forcing him to come to her, knowing herself mistress.

She would lay passive as his hands and lips explored her, and then — She shivered. She could only guess. It was something she would know of only when it happened. She had seen animals do it, and had been mildly shocked at the brutality of it. Was it the same with people?

Older women knew, but they kept their secrets — at least in the Margery house. It was a jealously-kept knowledge that always gave older women an implied superiority over unmarried maids — a sort of privileged league of which a bride became a member, and showed it in her demeanour, the day after marriage. Aunt Mary must know. It was odd that a beautiful woman like Mary had borne only one child, for pregnancy was the natural sequel of a bedroom relationship, and it was difficult to believe that the provocation of Mary's nearness could be ignored for twelve years. There must be a reason.

And Betty Cowper. Sara frowned. No, perhaps Betty didn't know. Betty was a spinster and, unless she were also wanton — which was unthinkable — she had never known the greedy loins of a man against hers. There was something satisfying in the thought. Despite her seniority, Betty Cowper knew no more about it than Sara.

Betty was another reason why Sara wished that her own status was an established one — either a Margery or a complete Hewar. She was neither, and seemed to fit nowhere. Betty Cowper had once been a parish foundling,

but in the Margery house the fact had been lost and forgotten. Her position was now firm and tacitly recognized — on almost equal terms with Adam and Mary, more than a servant and only slightly less than kin. She was housekeeper to all, having responsibilities with which Mary never interfered. To Sara and young Thomas she was a figure of authority — part governess, part older sister. Nobody rebelled against, or argued with, Betty. There was no need to. She fitted into the Margery household as neatly as a nut in a husk. It was impossible to imagine any kind of friction with Betty Cowper. She was just — well — Betty Cowper.

But Sara, at sixteen, was a woman — and Betty treated her, even kindly, as still a child. It was the failing of adults who have watched a child from birth and can never lose the vision of a puking infant. Sara's growing resentment was insidious, slowly forming, unrecognized even by herself. She could complain of nothing. Excepting the county gentry, the Margerys were among the most prosperous in Cambridgeshire, and Adam was a man with an easy purse. He kept a good table, clothed his people well, and happily allowed himself to be twisted around the finger of any of his womenfolk. Adam was a dear. It was a pity he was nearly forty, or —

It was an interesting thought. Forty, after all, was not quite ancient. She'd heard of girls of sixteen marrying gentry of seventy — and bearing issue. Mind you, seventy was a little extreme, even in exchange for a title. The vision of a wheezing, wrinkled old man pawing at the soft body of a girl — darkness or no — was not attractive. It would have to be a good title and a heavy settlement to make it bearable — and she'd heard about handsome coachmen and footmen —

But she resented Betty. It was becoming intolerable that a sometime parish foundling — who had no claim to anything in this world — should continue to supervise the daughter of Rebecca Hewar, to determine her hair-style,

choose her ribbons, deny her perfume, and frown her to bed at half past eight o'clock. And what did Betty Cowper know about the frills and fineries, the subtle cosmetics, that made women irresistible to men? Betty was a spinster, with a bodice that revealed not an inch of cleaved white flesh and suppressed even the pout of nipples beneath it. Her hair always modestly imprisoned under a linen cap, had never known the attention of curling tongs, and Sara, at least, had never seen her legs above her ankles. What right had Betty to decide the dress and behaviour of another?

Mind you, there was little enough in Sawston to justify a maid doing anything to embroider her appearance. The Queen's Head, which boasted a cobbled yard, entertained an occasional band of travellers from London to Cambridge — or the reverse. The single-roomed Waggoner, brewing its own ale, boasted neither yard nor travellers. A dozen cottages, a stable, a smithy, Sawston Hall and the church of St Mary-the-Virgin made up the remainder of the village. There were several outlying farmsteads, and Abingdon, Whittlesford, and Trumpington were within walking distance but, as with Sawston, there were none but tenant farmers and labourers, ploughmen and cow-herders, working thirteen hours a day and most of them illiterate. Little enough for a maid who was the daughter of a Hewar.

Cambridge was different. There were fine houses in Cambridge — some with lamps at the door — a theatre and a tea garden. The streets were thronged with people — students and young lawyers, apprentices and merchants and, of course, ladies in satin dresses, colberteen lace and gloves. There were coaches, chairs and link-boys, just like London. But Sara seldom enjoyed the opportunity of visiting Cambridge, and had never seen London.

She withdrew her thoughts to Sawston, then to the Margery farm. There was nobody — nobody at all — that she might regard as a prospective consort. Nobody. And she was already sixteen. It was inhuman.

In her immediate vicinity there was young Thomas, and Adam. Two years ago, when she was fourteen and Thomas ten, she had lowered his breeches in the quiet of Five-acre and satisfied her curiosity towards the difference in male and female nether anatomy. Thomas, at first shocked, then intrigued, had attempted reciprocal investigations, but she had slapped him and left him bare-buttocked, in tears of humiliation. Thomas, hairless, was too young. No frightened, drooling boy was going to finger her. When it happened, it would be in confident, masculine arms — and not in a corner of a field. There was a deal of preliminary skirmishing to be savoured, kissing and dallying, and she could not envisage such with Thomas.

And so Adam. She'd been scarcely more than two years old when he had returned to Sawston from Flanders, and she could not remember. Adam had always been there, at first in the background, then assuming a new importance when Uncle John died. He was easy-tempered and patient, content to leave discipline to Betty and Mary, and only recently was he often pensive and frowning. When the two women of the house had been absorbed in the affairs of the infant Thomas, Adam would take her on his knee, anxious that she should not feel neglected, and compel her to chatter nonsense, to giggle uncontrollably as he pretended to let her fall again and again. She enjoyed the gentle strength of his hands at her waist, on her legs, and discerned an odd pleasure that she never experienced with Betty Cowper. Then, suddenly — before the Thomas incident — Adam had taken her on his knee no more. He, unlike Betty, had decided she was more than a child.

She was in no way related to Adam. That was a beginning. The consequences of a bed relationship with a kinsman were awful — although she did not know what they might be. Perhaps the issue were monsters, or imbeciles, or stillborn. On reflection, Adam and Mary were kin. At least, they were cousins. Although she had a small opinion of Thomas, he was neither

monster nor imbecile. But was Adam's and Mary's kinship a factor in their apparent failure to produce further offspring?

She turned the possibility over in her mind carefully, conjuring a vision of Adam and Mary, together in their four-posted bed. If she were Adam she would reach out, feeling for the soft, secret parts of her, stifling any resistance, pretended or real, and satisfy the red male lust she had seen in young bulls and rams and stallions, savage, violent, wonderful. If she were Mary —

She would feel the warmth of him. Adam, her man. She would lay waiting, quiescent, sensing the swelling of his breathing, knowing it must be soon, knowing that in a moment he would turn — and, when he did, thrusting towards him, defiantly, hungry for his strength, opening like angry petals to envelop him, mouth and breasts, arms and thighs, the hot, bitter-sweet taste of victorious surrender, his panting breath on the lips, fingers clawing, hurting, ecstatic — and then the penetrating, sweet agony of a maidenhead ravaged, salt sweet on the tongue.

Sara choked, flung open the window of her bedchamber, then leaned out into the cool evening air. This was sinful. She breathed slowly, deeply, feeling the trickling sweat on her belly colden and her throbbing heart gradually calm. This was sinful. To covet was to sin. To desire adultery was itself adultery. She was a whore.

Her mother had been a whore. Golden, beautiful Rebecca Hewar had rutted shamelessly with a village ostler, and had borne a bastard, herself — Sara. She wished she might have known her mother but, even more so, she wished she had known her father. Rupe Dolling. Ostler or common trooper, he must have been a man to writhe the belly of a beautiful lady. He must have been a man.

Why is it, she mused, that women must wait to be chosen? Why can't a

woman choose? Her mother did, and they named her whore. A woman gets hot with wanting, just the same as a man — but, if she chooses, she's named a whore. A man is just a gay dog. A man can take his wife at any time, no matter how she feels. He can bully his chamberwench into lifting her shift or, if he prefers, he can stroll the brothels and, like an overlord, let the servile bitches grovel for his attention.

It wasn't fair. There was no reason why she — Sara — like her mother, shouldn't choose her man. Why should someone like Betty Cowper choose for her? Ribbons, perfume and bedtime were one thing, but nobody would market her like a plump capon, to be pinched and eyed, assessed and paid for. Suppose — just suppose — Sir John de Courcy made a bid for her? Could she wed him? In the eyes of Betty and Mary — perhaps even Adam — it would be a fine match. A bastard girl wed to a titled gentleman. She shivered. Sir John was flabbily stout and one-legged. He breathed brandy fumes and, under his wig, he was bald. Everything he said had a bawdy undertone, she had seen him flog an insolent tenant until he bawled for charity. Women, horses and cattle were all the same. The first filled his bed, the second carried him fox-hunting, the last made prime beef. Was this the man she dreamed would watch her unclothe, would reach for her in the darkness? —

No. Not for that first occasion.

Sooner or later she must wed and — there was no denying it — she would be allowed scant opinion in the choice of a husband. That was a woman's lot. But she wasn't married yet. Not yet. There was still time.

Time to choose a man for that first occasion. That, like her mother, she would have. Afterwards, it didn't matter. She could resign herself to years of passive yielding to a port-flushed, fleshy spouse and bearing his yearly brats, drained of all emotion and no more than the carpet on which he scraped his mud-clogged boots. But first she would choose her man. But there was

nobody — except Adam.

Odd, she considered, how few men she knew. There was Adam, of course, Thomas — if he counted — Sir John de Courcy, the parson and the Cambridge carrier, a dozen unkempt village men, none of whom she could name with certainty, Squire Milner — aged, married but childless. —

She searched her memory. There was the hare-lipped potboy of the Waggoners — another parish foundling — and the sixweekly packman with his pocked face —

There was nobody except Adam. It had to be Adam. And it had to be soon.

He was nearly forty. Well, that was better than fifty, or seventy. To be accurate, he was only thirty-nine.

Steeling herself in determination, she reviewed his assets. He wore his own hair — and there was no grey in it. He was pleasant of feature — hardly handsome, but pleasant. And he wasn't fat. Not like Sir John de Courcy.

It was difficult to envisage sharing a bed with Adam. Adam was a dear — a kindly brother. It was almost cruel.

She visualized again the four-posted bed. She would be buried in her pillow, waiting for Adam, watching him strip his shirt and seeing the whiteness below the tan of his neck, the muscles of his shoulders and buttocks, the dark hair of his chest and belly. When he was naked she'd pretend to gaze elsewhere but, with his head struggling in his nightshift, she'd look quickly, secretly — knowing that in a few seconds his loins would be hers —

It had to be Adam. Her mind was resolved. She was trembling and her breath quavered. There'd be no shrinking from it. If Adam were no jaunty blade, he was the best that Sawston could provide, and she'd take him.

But how and when? It wasn't the easiest thing. In the house he was seldom

alone, and she'd not follow him into the fields like a bitch. She could likely decoy him into her bedchamber on some innocent pretext, but they'd be only feet away from Mary and Betty, and there'd not be time. If Adam *knew*, he would arrange matters —

And if he spurned her? She considered. No, men didn't spurn an opportunity of deflowering a willing wench — and she was no ordinary wench. She was beautiful, as beautiful as Mary, youthful and virgin. No, he'd not spurn her.

MARY DELAYED for as long as possible her descent to the kitchen. Adam, she suspected, would be crushed with shame and apprehension, dreading the meal, while Betty — poor Betty — would be trying desperately to hide her embarrassed emotions. She would prefer that they faced each other initially without her presence. It would be easier.

She had heard Adam mount the stairs last night, heard him pause, and then his footsteps passing. She had thrust her face into her pillow, her body stretched and taut, her hands clenched. This was wrong, and she detested it — detested herself for inciting it, detested Adam for his weakness and Betty for her betrayal. Why had she done it?

She covered her ears, her eyes closed, shutting out the crucifying vision of what was happening, by her own connivance, beyond the plastered wall. Her tensed muscles ached and she wanted to scream.

The minutes passed. It must be finished now, she pleaded. It must be. Let them be finished.

Would Adam return to his bed? Would she recoil from the touch of his body, shudder at his breathing? It was an age, and her pillow was soaked. She never knew that, eventually, she slept.

With the light of day her feelings had sobered. Adam had not returned, and his place at her side was cold. How long Adam had stayed in Betty's bed — five minutes or five hours — was no longer important. It had happened. It was the price she had been prepared to pay to relieve the torment she recognized in her husband's eyes. If she had not succeeded, she had only cheated herself.

As she had anticipated, Adam's gaze was lowered to his plate and he glanced up only fleetingly. Betty's eyes, cornflower blue, met her own for a full second, expressing at the same time apology, gratitude and contentment. Mary smiled reassuringly. It was done, and Betty was least to blame. Sooner Betty than a brothel. Far sooner.

Thomas had already bolted his breakfast and waited only to depart the table. Only Sara seemed interested in Adam. She was a little flushed, Mary noted, toying absently with her food as she gazed thoughtfully at Adam's lowered head. Did she suspect? Had she seen or heard something? She had taken more than usual care with her toilet this morning, her cheeks pink from the towel, her hair smoothly brushed, a crisp white whisk on her bodice. She's becoming an enticing wench, Mary thought. It was a dangerous, seductive beauty — dark and poignant, too highly seasoned for Sawston. Of recent months she — Mary — had been too absorbed with Adam to spare much attention for Sara, but there was suddenly a third woman in the house — a woman to be reckoned with. Adam had said she had wanton blood in her veins, that breeding would out. Perhaps he was right. She'd have to watch Sara.

Adam, clearing his throat, was pushing back his chair. 'I'll be towards the Royston road,' he said, then brushed crumbs from his coat. Sara pushed her own plate away. 'You couldn't be going farther, Adam. What labour's there?'

'The stubble's to be burned off,' Adam answered, mildly surprised, 'the length o' the stream.' Sara had seldom displayed interest in the farm, but he was grateful for the conversation to ease his retreat. 'Then ploughing,' he went on, 'as long as the weather holds dry. It'll save a deal of trouble next spring.'

'By yourself?'

He grunted. ‘Dammit, no. I’ll have Dickson and Hayes, and likely old Price if his rupture’ll allow him. I’ve offered to send the fellow to London for surgery, but he’ll not have it.’ He paused. ‘There’s a good man at St Thomas’ — Cheselden — who can cut a stone, I’ve heard, in less than sixty seconds. In my day it was near an hour.’ Seventeen years ago Adam had been a surgeon’s apprentice, and still followed with interest the latest advances in London’s hospitals. If Rebecca Hewar had not borne Sara, swearing her child was Adam’s and compelling him to run to Marlborough’s army, he might today be William Cheselden’s equal, at Bart’s. Plaguey odd, he thought, how things go in circles.

Sara seemed vaguely disappointed, for no reason he could think of. She could hardly be concerned about stubble-burning, old Price’s rupture, or Cheselden’s sixty-second lithotomy — but she had at least given him an opportunity to break the intolerable breakfast-time stalemate. He made a pretence of retying his neck-cloth, then left.

It was warm work burning the stubble, with the near-white smoke acrid in the lungs and blanketing the spitting, seething flames that left the yellow fields scorched and blacker than the earth beneath. Whirling soot stuck to clammy skin, and in an hour Adam was filthy and parched. He didn’t need to work in the fields. As de Courcy had pointed out, he was feathered enough to support a London establishment and to hell with playing the chawbacon. But he had no yearning for London — although he conceded that three years as an apprentice surgeon at St Bartholomew’s allowed little insight into the more subtle aspects of life in the capital. The Margery acres had been his overriding concern for the past six years and his family’s for seventy. His father and grandfather had not been ashamed to dirty their hands in the fields and he had been born with the same inclination. Nonetheless, he mused, times change — and so do people.

De Courcy, of course, was right. He — Adam — was a wealthy man, and he wasn't wedded to Cambridgeshire soil. Fester it, there came a time when a man had to cry halt, didn't he? There came a time when he could stand back and let others throw a mattock, guide a plough or burn stubble.

He wiped a sweating mouth with the back of his hand. He'd never known idleness. An apprentice surgeon, a dragoon guard, a working farmer. Save for his boyhood, he couldn't remember a single day that hadn't been mortgaged. Aye, de Courcy was right.

There was, of course, Mary. Men and women were somehow different. It was he — the man — who made decisions. Yet Mary, his own wife, was his intellectual equal. There was no disputing it. Did she submit to his will, or did she, by some unintelligible means, guide his decision to her own benefit? It was worth thinking about. There was this incredible affair with Betty Cowper. A week or so ago the very thought of it would have been anathema, yet it had happened. He leaned his cheek against the long haft of his rake, meditatively, watching a flurry of sparks. 'Sblood — but it had been a delectable experience after all these years, whatever the pietists might say. There were plenty of men who did the same thing with any willing maid — gentry, doctors, parsons — aye, there were many a parson who blessed his congregation with the same hand that had explored a wench's petticoats an hour earlier.

I'll not question ye' motive, she'd said, so long as ye'll not leave me wanting. That was clear enough, and he, Godammit, needed her body like a thirsty man needed water. What was the point of pretending otherwise?

Still, it was a situation which mustn't be continued. If it were clandestine it might be different, but he couldn't brazenly consort with Betty whilst Mary, beyond the wall, knew — and could damn' near hear the creak of the bed. There were Sara and young Thomas, too, who might stumble on the

knowledge, and even the village —

To sell his acreage and move elsewhere might be the answer, and if he moved far enough — the Carolinas, for instance — Betty might choose not to follow. She'd find another place easily enough, perhaps a husband, which would be the best arrangement of all. He'd be sorry to lose her, and no substitute would be quite the same, but it would be a clean, swift remedy — like one of Cheselden's lightning amputations and, similarly, feelings would heal with time and life would resume its normal pattern.

He found himself thinking of Betty Cowper as someone else's wife, of someone else's head on the pillow beside her and, inexplicably, he was angry. 'Od's blood,! He spat from a dry mouth. This was jealousy! In twenty years he'd never known it — festerin' hellfire! — with Mary or with any of his earlier jades, he'd never known jealousy — Katrin or Maestricht, or Nell Something, or Kit Davies, or — He kicked at the ground, raising a scud of dust which sputtered into his face, causing him to cough and reach for his kerchief, his eyes streaming.

That evening he steeled his emotions as, with the autumn sky dusking earlier, Betty Cowper took a taper to the candles of the hall. 'We'll be needing a fire in a day or two,' Adam commented, his voice even. 'The nights are beginning to chill.'

'Aye,' she nodded, without hesitation, 'and that means logs to be cut, Master Adam, don't ye forget. So if ye want to roast ye' lazy toes ye can put a hone to ye' axe.' She was her old, roguishly-scolding self again, and Adam breathed with relief.

With all three women sewing the new materials purchased in Cambridge, Adam broached a bottle of Canary and, on a whim, lit a pipe of tobacco. He seldom took the weed except in male company, but tonight was a little different. Mary's eyes had smiled at him with a warmth that suggested she

understood his disquiet. It was the same as if she had pressed his hand, and he drew on his clay with the feeling that perhaps all was not as bad as he had decided. Sara was quiet tonight, he considered. Aye, she'd grown up, and no mistake. Tonight she'd taken up her hair in adult fashion, brushed to sable, silken perfection, and he'd not seemed to have observed before the delicate flush of colour in her cheeks. She looked up, met his gaze and held it for a long moment with eyes of lustrous jet before turning slowly away. Damme, Adam mused, she could turn the head of a Duke with a glance like that.

Presently he laid his pipe in the hearth and surveyed the three lowered heads before him. 'I'm thinking,' he said deliberately, 'of selling the farm and moving elsewhere.'

Three startled faces rose simultaneously, and Betty, wincing, sucked at a needle-pricked finger. 'Move elsewhere?' It was Mary. 'You mean — leave Sawston?'

He nodded, enjoying the incredulity in their eyes. 'Aye. There's more money going into commerce these days, but I should still get a good price. Mind ye, Mary' — he shrugged, — 'the Hewar property's rightly yours, and if ye want to keep it in the family I'll not quarrel with ye.'

Mary shook her head blankly. She had little affection for the Hewar house, in which both parents and her sister had died during one year, and the park and woodlands had remained untouched since her marriage.

'I don't think so,' Adam resumed. 'And it makes the matter simpler, m'dear. Y'see' — he hesitated, — 'I've a mind to move a long way.'

'A long way?' Mary frowned, puzzled. 'Out of the county? Not London?'

'London!' Sara's sewing fell to the floor as she rose excitedly to her feet. 'We're moving to London?' Her eyes were wide with delight. 'Adam! It's unimaginable! Shall we take a house? And a carriage?' She clasped her hands, her white teeth gleaming between her parted lips. 'I've always

dreamed of living in London! — ’

Adam grinned. ‘No,’ he said, ‘not London.’ Sara’s face fell. ‘A lot farther than London,’ he added.

There was a moment of perplexed silence, then Mary pouted. ‘You’re intent on provoking us, Adam.’

He placed his hands behind his back. ‘The Americas,’ he announced.

‘The Americas!’ Their consternation was immediate. Anguished disbelief showed in Sara’s face, astonishment in Mary’s. Betty stared silently. He nodded amusedly. ‘Aye.’

‘Are you serious, Adam?’ Mary’s initial surprise was being replaced by suspicion, and Sara, glancing at her, laughed.

‘Adam — you’re baiting us! The Americas? For a moment you had us trembling, I swear!’

‘I’m not baiting ye, my oath on’t. I was discussing the possibility wi’ John de Courcy, who has trading interests in the Colonies, and he showed me a map.’ He was talking to convince himself as much as his audience. ‘He recommends the Carolina territories, where there’s good planting to be had — tobacco, cotton, sugar — and fur-trading wi’ the natives. They all fetch top prices in the London and Bristol markets. Charles Town’s the capital an’ seaport, wi’ a good harbour and plenty o’ shipping, although likely we’d take acreage a few miles inland — more land than ye’ve ever seen.’ Caught up by his argument, he hurried on. ‘Labour’s cheap — mostly slaves that only need feeding and shelter — and bonded servants, o’ course. There’s men there who don’t know a sickle from a snuff-box makin’ fortunes — ’

If he had expected enthusiasm he was quickly disappointed. Sara, in particular, was appalled. ‘Adam — the Americas? But there’s nothing there ’cept savages and felons and miles of wilderness — ’ She had only a vague impression of the American Colonies, but none of it was inviting. Sawston

was remote enough, but the Americas? —

‘D’ye know how much sugar this country imports?’ Adam asked. ‘Ten thousand tons a year. *Tons*, mark ye! And it’s going to increase.’ The three women seemed oddly unimpressed. ‘And take tobacco. The American climate and soil’s perfect for it — and de Courcy tells me that corn can’t compete for profit. Even the town settlers wi’ a patch of garden are growing it — so what couldn’t a farmer wi’ a few thousand acres do?’

Sara made a sortie. ‘But where would we *live*? In a hut like blackamoors? There’s naught but forests and deserts, painted Indians and wild beasts — and Newgate hooligans that’d murder their mothers for a guinea — ’

Adam laughed. ‘That’s all fribble,’ he snorted. ‘Charles Town is a sizeable place’ — he had no knowledge of the dimensions of Charles Town, — ‘wi’ streets and houses, and the Lords Proprietors to keep law and order — ’ But, he considered, he mustn’t make it too attractive or his stratagem would be abortive. ‘Mark ye, it’s not the same as England, and there’ll be inconveniences. It’s a long voyage and no certainty at the end of it. Most of the labour’s done by slaves and bond-servants.’ He glanced at Betty understanding. ‘Betty’ll likely not want to come, and I’ll not try to persuade her.’ He paused.

Betty folded her sewing carefully, thoughtfully. ‘I’ve not known another house since I came from the Parish, a wench o’ twelve years, Master Adam’ — she smiled wanly, — ‘thin as a weasel and no shoes to my feet. That was when ye’ grandfather was master — ’

‘Aye, well — ’

‘Unless ye’ve no more use for me,’ Betty spoke quietly, ‘I’m not afeared o’ the Americas — or China or Turkey, or anywhere. Not unless ye don’t want me, that is.’

Adam shrugged limply. ‘It’s not a question o’ not wanting ye, Betty — ’

‘Then why shouldn’t she come, if she cares to?’ Mary interceded, her eyes intent on him. ‘If you’re going to say that the Americas are no place for a woman, then why go at all?’

‘Yes, why?’ Sara echoed.

‘It’s just that — well — Betty’s not bound to us,’ Adam protested. Damn everything. The whole business was going wrong. ‘She’s Cambridge born and bred, and I thought it likely she’d not want to change for some God-forsaken hovel in the Carolinas — ’

‘But you’re taking *us* to a God-forsaken hovel in the Carolinas!’ Sara was half angry, half tearful. ‘And who wants to grow reeking old tobacco?’

‘Aye, I was born and bred here,’ Betty conceded, ‘but it don’t mean much. I were born wi’ naught, and the Parish gave me little breeding ’cept hard work and bruises. If the Margerys hadn’t taken me I might’ve been shipped to the Americas twenty years since — and no choice in it.’ She paused. ‘It’s the Margerys I’ve always been with, Master Adam, and if ye’re intent on leaving Sawston — for anywhere — I’d like well to come with ye.’

Adam knew himself defeated. This, fester it, was the result of having a household of women to contend with. A man couldn’t get the better of three women when they were allied against him. He nodded glumly. ‘Well, if that’s ye’ feeling, I’ll not deny ye.’ He reached out Ids hands to the fire. ‘But there’s a lot to be considered before I settle my mind, and I’ll need more evidence o’ the prospects than de Courcy gives me. It’s not a thing that a man can decide overnight.’ The faces of the three women were already relaxing, and on Mary’s lips there was even the suggestion of a roguish smile. ‘But don’t think,’ he snorted, ‘that ye’ll persuade me against it if I decide, ye understand?’ But he had already abandoned the Carolinas.

THOMAS ENTERTAINED no particular desire to follow either of the traditional occupations of the Margerys — farming and soldiering. Farming, for certain, was a cold and muddy business in winter, and summer was scarcely better with its long hours of labour, its dust, and the dung-sticking stables which were his allotted chore. He neither shared nor understood the pride of husbandry with which his father and grandfather regarded their acres. Ploughed fields were just ploughed fields, whoever they belonged to — although, to be sure, the Margerys' were usually considered to be better than most.

And he had no inclination to add another sword to the two that hung over the hearth. There were no wars, and army service in peacetime was an empty, degrading occupation, even for officers, many hundreds of whom had sold out or were maintaining a threadbare existence on half-pay. The ranks were filled with criminals and undesirables, ill paid and fed, disciplined by the lash and the gallows, and subjected to years of penal drudgery in Ireland, the American and West Indian Colonies, Newfoundland and the Cape Coast. Fevers, dysentery and pneumonia slew far more than Huron Indians or Fanti tribesmen.

In the normal process of inheritance, Thomas knew, the farm would become his, but this might not be for many years; he was only twelve. There was time enough to decide whether he would sell or rent the property to another. In the meantime there was no reason why he should not persuade his father to allow him to undertake some occupation other than farming. His father, after all, had been first an apprentice surgeon and then a dragoon

guard, and could hardly object to Thomas acquiring similar secondary experience. But not, of course, as an apprentice surgeon or a dragoon guard.

But as what? The choice was limited. Commerce, the Law, the Church — and he had little taste for an office stool or a curate's frock. The Navy? Perish the thought.

One of the big merchant houses that he'd heard his father mention — the East India Company, the Levant, the Africa, the Hudson's Bay, or this new South Sea Company — might allow him a writership. Aye, that could be it. Many a young man, he'd heard, had gone pinchbeck and penniless to Madras and returned with a minor fortune. The trouble, Thomas reflected, was that he seemed to have no real interest in anything.

He withdrew his thoughts nearer home. He had always been vaguely aware of an undercurrent of disapproval in his father's behaviour towards him. True, he — Thomas — had never acquired the resolute temperament of his father or Grandfather John, or that legendary man of iron, Ralph Margery, but his elders were always complaining that English youth was soft — and God help us in another war with the French —

And he could not remember ever being free of Sara's domination. She had always been the stronger in everything, and they both recognized it. Not that Sara was uncharitable, or interfered with his pursuits. She was largely indifferent, sometimes condescending but never confiding. Once — and the occasion was stark in his memory — she had humiliated him beyond comprehension. He flushed, remembering how he had choked with a new, ecstatic emotion as Sara's determined hands had coaxed him to a shameful consequence, and how, intoxicated, he had fumbled beneath her petticoat only to be slapped, ridiculed and abandoned to his tears in the hot grass of Five-acre. He would never forget, and the fact that Sara had so easily evoked betrayal of the secrets of his ripening manhood had given her an inviolable

superiority thereafter.

Thomas experienced constantly a feeling of loneliness, although probably he did not know it as such. He seldom encouraged an acquaintanceship with the village boys, few of whom shared his benefit of schooling and whose crude pastimes were not his. Most of them treated him with reserve, a few with sneers, and he did not relish exposing himself to their critical eyes in his new rhinegraves at Sunday church. The boys wore home-cut breeches of serge or barras that had to be lowered to the knees for purposes of relief, and shop-made rhinegraves with an accommodating vent and button were an eccentric innovation.

There'd be a difference, of course, if he returned from foreign parts after three or four years with a tanned face, a laced hat and a thousand pounds in gold — a sum they'd never earn during several lifetimes. That'd provoke some deference in them.

Aye, a merchant house would be the answer, and likely a new and growing one would offer better opportunity. The South Sea Company, for instance, was to enjoy the exclusive right of trading to the eastern and western coasts of the Americas south of the Orinoco — territories rich with gold and silver, with soil of exuberant fertility and waters teeming with fish. The possibilities were limitless. If South Sea stock had been taken by the King, the royal princes and several ministers, it must promise a glittering future. He, Thomas, had a good head for figures, a fair hand and a little Latin. His father — or perhaps Sir John de Courcy — could surely negotiate a writership for him, though likely there'd be a waiting list of hopefuls. But de Courcy seemed to know everyone.

He waited for several days, seeking a favourable opportunity of approaching his father, who had been oddly preoccupied during the last week or so. It was never an easy thing for Thomas to engage his father in

conversation other than for trivial reasons. Timing, mood and circumstances had to be carefully considered, and for the moment Adam seemed even more insular than usual.

Then, suddenly, events forestalled him. Adam, returning from the village, brought news of another frenzy in London's Exchange Alley. A score of financial projects, illegitimately promulgated, were being pounced upon by the authorities, and there was the smell of ruin everywhere. 'There's a dozen offices closed,' Adam recounted, 'wi' the principals disappeared wi' the funds and a few thousand people left wi' worthless scrip.' He was secretly elated, congratulating himself that he had refrained from involvement. He'd always been right. Good farmland might fluctuate in value, but it was never worthless.

The news might be seven or even ten days old. 'And the South Sea Company?' Thomas ventured.

'The South Sea?' Adam was surprised that the boy even knew the name. He shrugged. 'That'll be a different matter. It's got Government support and privileges, same as the East India, and its credit's as good — '

The news, indeed, was old, and only a further two days elapsed before the discomfiting aftermath was revealed. The great South Sea Company, in encouraging the elimination of its humbler, illegal rivals, had struck a blow at itself. Suspicious shareholders, gauging that the mammoth undertaking might well be no different from the others, were jostling to sell. The £100 shares, selling at £300, £400, and even latterly at £900, had plummeted.

There was worse to follow. The Government, it was quickly disclosed, had promised more than it could bestow. The designated trading territories south of the Orinoco were Spanish — and Spain had already refused to concede privileges to English merchants other than permission to import a small number of Negro slaves and to send one ship a year with goods to Porto

Bello. The South Sea Company was a sham, maintained by its directors with misrepresentations of newly-secured markets and possessions in the South Seas, of mines of hidden treasure just waiting to be exploited — a splendid fairy tale, swallowed without hesitation by a greedy and gullible public.

Intrigued, Adam watched from the calm of Sawston as event followed shattering event, impatient when a day passed without fresh news. He was well out of it, and de Courcy, he suspected, was also thankful that his own investment was secure from the vagaries of 'Change. The South Sea scrip was just so much waste paper. Families of rank were reduced to poverty, and merchants, whose credit had so recently commanded thousands of pounds, were beggars, while physicians, lawyers, clergymen and others of high reputation were suddenly aware that they were penniless. A cry of rage, disappointment and despair rang throughout the country.

For Thomas it was a frustration of a different kind. He had reached a major decision and had mustered sufficient courage to propose it to his father, when some malevolent power had dashed his dream to the ground. It was undeserved and iniquitous. That there were other, sounder merchant companies that he might consider was irrelevant. The one that *he* had decided upon had been destroyed, almost as if deliberately to thwart him — Thomas Margery. Where now was his laced hat and his thousand pounds in gold? What else was there but years of mud and dung, Sara's aloofness and his father's unconcern? It was infamous.

*

For Adam, life resumed normally — as normally, that is, as the new situation allowed. Mary's demeanour gave no indication of her feelings, and Adam found it impossible to guess what they were. He climbed into bed beside her each night exactly as he had done for thirteen years, kissed her brow, snuffed the candle, then lay in the darkness listening until the soft regularity of her

breathing suggested that she slept. Then, as if his thoughts could no longer be overheard, he speculated on the room beyond the wall.

For Betty's emotions were not as completely controlled as Mary's. Despite her — and Adam's — efforts, there were unguarded moments when both were taken unawares. Their eyes would come together or, inadvertently, her fingers meet his, and she would turn quickly away, the faintest of flushes warming her cheeks, while Adam's heart jumped. He fought his weakness desperately, first by avoiding Betty's proximity as much as possible and then, annoyed with himself, deliberately engaging her in conversation so that, hopefully, the condition might be cured by familiarity. It was not.

Mary, at least, did not intervene. She had said that she would not again expose him to temptation, and she kept her word. There was a great deal of work to occupy his attention — hay to be cut and swathed, seed to be dryly stowed, ditches to be cleared of the clogging leaves of autumn, and a hundred other tasks in readiness for the coming winter. The continuing news of London's financial distractions had lost its earlier piquancy. The King had scuttled home from Hanover and his mistress, two or three minor politicians had been made scapegoats, and there were several suicides, but affairs seemed to be resuming normality and confidence in trade returning. There would never be a shortage of willing fools, Adam decided.

It was Betty who forced a conclusion. She must have contemplated her tactics for days, for she allowed him no opportunity of evasion. In the quiet of the barn, with her scooped apron enclosing the eggs she had pretended to search for, she faced him squarely.

‘Master Adam.’

He paused in his pitchforking. ‘Aye?’ It was inevitable, and it may as well be now.

‘It's not seemly, Master Adam, for a maid to make bold to a man — and I

tried hard, God help me. But I've got to know.'

'Know?' He was playing for time.

There was a pause as she surveyed him, her determination gradually mastering her timidity. 'Master Adam — ye can't take a maid that's wanted ye, then leave her empty an' foolish. Before ye came, I could only guess — but ye made it real and breathless and — ' She halted, swallowing, then, 'I'm not one of them tavern trollops that's always ready for men. I've not done it but once, Master Adam, and that wi' you — an' there's a hunger in me I can't abide. I'm 'shamed of it, and I've fought it, but it don't help.' She paused again. 'Master Adam — will ye have me on my knees abegging ye? — ' She burst into tears.

Adam flung down his pitchfork, and the eggs in her apron spilled, splashing about their feet as he reached for her. 'Godammit, Betty — I didn't mean — ' Her tears were wet on his lips. 'I'd not do a thing to hurt ye — my oath on't — but don't ye see? — ' She was waiting on his words, and he had nothing sensible to offer.

'Is it because ye find me forbidding?' she whispered.

'No, damme, it's not. Ye're a winning creature, Betty, and God knows I've been impatient for ye, a dozen times.' He drew a deep breath. 'That's the rub. I can't share the same roof wi' ye and not have ye. Not now. And if I did, I'd only be ravaging ye like a brute. Ye don't deserve that, Betty.'

'I don't care.' She shook her head. 'I don't care.'

He was silent, frustrated.

'Is it true ye don't want me to leave ye?'

He snorted. 'O' course not! — '

'And ye've really been impatient for me?'

'Aye, I've told ye, a dozen times.'

She raised her face, beseechingly. 'Then there's naught else, is there?'

Naught else to be concerned for. Will ye come?' Her fingers rose to his cheek. 'Say ye'll come?'

Adam nodded slowly. 'Aye.'

'Tonight?'

He hesitated for a long moment, then, 'Aye, tonight.'

SUMMER WAS departing with a final crescendo of bright, almost hot, sunshine that gave hopes of a mild winter and delayed the yearly culling of livestock that followed the lack of summer grass. Only a proportion could be maintained until spring; the majority were slaughtered and salted. Partridge and pheasant were being stalked and netted, legally or otherwise, the rowan berries reddening and the swallows flocking. The farmhands' muzzled ferrets stalked the earth burrows, harbingers of death, and the night-feeding otter was abroad.

October arrived with falling leaves and butterflies, the yellow-green of ivy flowers and grey clouds scudding before the winds. Motionless in the Granta an old heron stood, suddenly to stab with lightning speed at fish or vole. John de Courcy, Adam guessed, would be impatiently awaiting the first of the season's fox-hunting. There was autumn woodsmoke in the air, and the world had somehow quietened, ready for winter.

Hallowe'en provided an annual opportunity for Adam to arrange an evening of ale and victuals for his labourers and their families in recognition of another year's farming finished. A safe distance from the house the huge bonfire, building for weeks, was lit, sending the sparks soaring skywards to the excited admiration of a dozen small boys. There were pies and pastries, cold fowls, pigeons and eels, chestnuts to roast, and a bag of new-milled wheat flour for every housewife. The younger folk played bob-apple, shrieking, and talked — as they always did — of witches on broomsticks and strange men in black, ghosts and familiars. Adam chuckled, recalling the Hallowe'ens of his boyhood, when Grandfather Ralph would tell the story of

Matthew Hopkins, the Witchfinder General, who arranged three hundred wretches on witchcraft charges before Ralph Margery hanged him by the neck in this very county. Those malicious times, thank God, were past — but the tales made good telling on a windswept night when casements rattled and the spine-chilling screech of a barn owl could be heard from the distant woods.

When the last of the farm people had departed, Adam watched the glowing red embers of the bonfire for several minutes and then entered the house yawning. Only Sara stood in the kitchen. He picked up an apple from the table and tossed it to her.

‘It’s Hallowe’en, Sara,’ he grinned. ‘Take a bite from an apple in front of ye’ mirror at midnight, and ye’ll see ye’ future husband over ye’ shoulder.’

Sara had caught the apple deftly, thrown it in the air and caught it again.

‘If it were true, Adam,’ she laughed, ‘I’d be afraid to experiment. I might see someone I didn’t want, someone I couldn’t love.’

Adam shrugged. ‘That’d be unlikely, m’dear. In two or three years ye’ll have half the swains in the county at the door, and ye can take ye’ choice.’ He paused. ‘Besides, at sixteen ye have a fairy-tale view o’ marriage — knights in shining armour, handsome princes. There’re other things, like income, property, security — ’

‘And a title?’

He shrugged again. ‘It’s possible, although — ’

‘Like Sir John de Courcy?’

‘De Courcy?’ Adam frowned. ‘Why de Courcy?’

She was gazing at him challengingly. ‘He has a title, hasn’t he? And property, security? — ’

‘De Courcy? Aye.’ Adam was perplexed. ‘But I would’ve thought him a mite old for ye, Sara. Damme, a title’s not everything. There must be a dozen

young blades wi' prospects as good, or nearly, wi'out setting ye' mind on de Courcy.'

'A dozen?' Sara asked petulantly. 'Could you name me half that number, Adam? Sam Dickon and Jacob Hayes, and old Price and his rupture? Will Burridge the carrier and Matt Flood at the Waggoners? Are they the young blades with prospects?'

Adam had misunderstood her. 'Aye, likely you're right,' he conceded. 'De Courcy's not a bad match, when ye think of it. Like I said, there's more in marriage than knights in shining armour. John de Courcy, damme, is not much older than I am. He's some fine property at Halstead, and a good head for business.' He paused, musing. 'Lady Sara de Courcy, eh? I'll confess I'm surprised ye'd set ye' cap at John, but — '

In a moment Sara had flared, a moment in which Adam saw the proud and truculent features of Rebecca Hewar, her mother. 'John de Courcy? That pot-tossing old goat? Set my cap. did you say?' She shuddered. 'I'd as soon take a chance in the Americas as be a chattel of de Courcy's — lud! Is that the best you can think of? Do you suppose I'll have preference over his latest blood mare or the next consignment of French brandies? And where would I rank with his gambling, hunting, cock-fighting — and the tribe of plump bitches he keeps for his night pleasures?'

'Od fester it, Adam reflected, what's a man expected to say? Females have a monstrous capacity for twisting any theme in the most illogical way whenever it suits them. They just can't be anticipated.

'Ye're jumping to conclusions, Sara. And why concern yourself now? How old are ye? Sixteen?' He reached forward to gently pinch her flushed cheek. 'Ye're scarce more than a child, m'dear. When the time comes, I promise ye, ye'll not be foisted onto someone ye resent — ' He chuckled. 'It's a queer thing about years. At sixteen ye're determined ye've reached maturity, and at

forty ye're desperate to believe ye're still young — and wondering what happened to twenty years that've passed as swift as Michaelmas Quarter.'

Now, Sara decided. It must be now. Mary and Betty would be abed, and there might not be another opportunity like this for a long time.

'I'm matured enough to know that no man would refuse me if I offered,' she said quietly, 'unless he were an old noddy, or wife-ridden.' She paused. 'And you're neither. Adam.'

Adam was very far from interpreting her words. 'Isn't that what I said? Ye'll be having half the swains in the county at the door — '

'I mean you, Adam,' she persisted. The house about them was very silent. 'Wouldn't you have an appetite — if I were willing?'

Adam laughed, a little jerkily, puzzled. 'Aye, ye can swear on't. If I were a young jacka-dandy — '

He watched hypnotically as Sara unlaced the neck of her bodice, then raised her shoulders in a shrug so that the dress fell untidily to her elbows. Her face, flushed warmly pink, contrasted with the sudden whiteness below. Adam gulped, frowned. 'Sara — this'nt the place, damme — '

She shook her head. 'It's only provoking. If you want more, you'll have to come to my bedroom, and I'll be ready. Neither Mary nor Betty'll suspect. They'll both be thinking — '

Adam was speechless, staring, with ugly comprehension slowly dawning. Then he exploded. ''Sblood! Ye damned little slut! Are ye offering to be a whore in ye' own bedroom? In this house? Godammit — and making me ye' scabby puppet?' He was as frightened as he was angry. 'Faith — I've a mind to take a switch to ye' buttocks — sixteen or no — ' He choked. 'God's death — will ye cover ye' damned nakedness and take ye' lecherous carcass out o' my sight!'

Sara had recoiled as if struck in the face. Difficult though it had been for

her to take the decisive step of addressing herself to Adam, she had never for a moment imagined the possibility of rebuttal. No man with eyes in his head could dismiss an overture from Sara, of Hewart beauty. No man could be so insensible, so stupidly apathetic or so brutally impudent. The flush had drained from her cheeks and her widened eyes were no less incredulous than Adam's. It was inconceivable, but it had happened, and she felt herself sicken with a mixture of self-disgust and seething, bitter indignation at Adam's presumption.

Adam was mastering his first emotions. 'Cover yourself, Sara,' he repeated, 'and get to ye' room, d'ye hear? Mary'll speak to ye tomorrow.' This was a situation he had never remotely predicted, and it had stunned him into indecision. Sara was fumbling with her bodice, staring at him with an ashen face. Aye, it was this damning fusion of Hewart and Dolling blood that likely should be whipped out of her. Adam, however, was not the man for it.

But Sara was not yet finished. 'If you think I'm repenting, Adam, you're mistaken. And if you think I'm impressed by your pretence to virtue, you're mistaken again. You're not so delicate about Betty Cowper.'

Adam stiffened, and she laughed. 'You thought it was a secret? You're eager enough in a housewench's bedroom, with Mary's knowledge — and you name me a slut?' She tossed her head. 'And Mary, you say, will speak to me tomorrow? What shall she tell me? That thou shall not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant?'

The second shock had followed so quickly upon the first that Adam could only swallow helplessly at a knotted throat, and Sara had readily seized the initiative. 'So you'll skulk into Betty Cowper's bed like a toadying schoolboy, then rant and bluster when someone offers you better. At least' — she eyed him contemptuously, — 'I'm no housewench smelling of the kitchen, nor thirty-five years old and still a spinster. Your taste in mistresses

is as poor as your morals, Adam, but that's doubtless the result of your years as a common soldier. A diet of camp doxies and tavern drabs likely gives Betty Cowper the taste of a goddess — and your palate for more cultivated entertainment has been jaded.' She had relaxed her bodice and was patting her berth into shape. 'I should have known, Adam. I'll not cast you another pearl.'

Adam drew a deep breath. 'Get to ye room,' he hissed, 'before I take a strap to ye.'

She nodded. 'Yes, you might. It'd be in keeping with the Margery tradition of blood and bayonets.' Her lips curled, then she turned and was gone.

Adam stood, trembling with angry revulsion. This, fester it, was a pretty pass, and he'd come out of it badly — aye, trampled by a chit of a girl with an insolence that had left him speechless. 'Sdeath, she had to be disciplined or he'd no longer be master in his house. He had shied from sending Betty Cowper away, but there must be no avoiding the issue with Sara. There was a school for young ladies in Ely maintained, he'd heard, under spartan jurisdiction, and there she would be dispatched as soon as he could arrange it. Then next year, say, he'd have to find her a husband. The sooner the better. Let a husband have the handling of her. On Blenheim field he'd promised Rupe Dolling that Rebecca Hewar's brat would want for nothing, and he'd kept his word. But enough was enough.

In her bedroom Sara also stood, staring unseeing at a candle-flame that sent a rippling thread of smoke towards the ceiling. The jolting brunt she had sustained from Adam's repudiation had been replaced by an incensed resentment towards his attitude. It was unfair, hypocritical and insulting. Two Hewar women, Mary and Sara — kin to the Huddlestons, keepers of the royal forest at Newmarket — were being affronted by Adam, sometime apprentice whose proudest claim was that he had once ridden with the vagrants and

prison-scum of Marlborough's army. The immorality of the situation was of small consequence; mistresses, lovers and cuckolds were accepted distractions of married life, including the King of England's. The fact that an ill-bred, maturing house wench should be preferred by Adam — of scarce better lineage — to Mary, and that he had spurned Sara, was cause enough for a horse-whipping.

And tomorrow? Adam would think twice before telling Mary, but it was likely that he'd be considering her — Sara's — immediate future. Well, she wouldn't object to departing the Margery household — but not to one of these peremptory boarding schools where girls become sexless blue-stockings reciting Italian poets and meaningless Aristophanes. No, she'd not submit to that — damn Adam — and there was a little matter of making him rue his effrontery. If he enjoyed any self-esteem in the knowledge that he had maintained her in benignity and chastity for sixteen years, then she could destroy that in a single moment.

THE TWO cocks, the black and the red, were too wily, and harboured too much respect for each other to be provoked into fighting over the scraps that Thomas threw between them. The black ruled the cobbled yard and the red the barn, now filled with baled hay, and neither intruded upon the other's territory except to repel a common enemy — rat, pigeon or rook — when they formed a formidable alliance. The hens acknowledged both as their lords, and when harassed by one could seek sanctuary in the domain of the other without fear of pursuit.

Thomas would have liked to make the birds battle. He had earlier tried to bait the black by spitting into its face, as he had seen the cock-fighting fraternity do in Cambridge, but he had received a gouged cheek for his pains and had hastily abandoned the idea. Now, if the birds did fight, he hoped the red, with the help of his pitchfork, would avenge the hurt.

Winter was coming, and he hated winter with its icy winds that swept across the flatlands. The Cambridge road would become a morass, and his father would have to supply the parish with six days of free labour for road repairs. That, this year, might include Thomas, for Adam had never shirked his own share of labour, and Thomas was old enough to wield a mattock or batter flints into the ruts. Winter did not mean a respite from hedging and ditching, the careful eking of fodder to maintain the surviving cattle, the corroding smell of hot tallow when the women made rush dips, and chilblains.

If things had gone differently he might now be preparing for a winter in the golden sunshine of the Caribbean, but instead the enchanting names he had

rolled on his tongue — Cartagena, Santa Maria, Yucutan, Hispaniola — must be forgotten. Like his thousand pounds in gold they would remain figments of fantasy. He'd recall them, likely enough, when he was knee-deep in the frozen slush of a ditch, his feet and hands aching with cold and the cutting wind across the Fens bringing tears to his eyes.

He tossed a crust precisely between the two cocks, certain that they would be baffled into belligerence, but again he was confounded. Before the strutting feet of either had turned there was a whirr of wings as a sparrow swooped, snatched up the crust and leapt again for the sky, exulting. Thomas cursed.

'Twelve-year-old boys who use those sort of words need their mouths washed out with soap.' A shadow had fallen across him, and he looked up. It was Sara.

Thomas scowled. 'I'm nearly thirteen.'

'Ah, but of course. And that makes all the difference. Thirteen? You'll be taking a pipe of tobacco and a quart of ale at the Waggoner, no doubt — and likely a stroll with a wench after evensong.' She gazed at him musingly.

Thomas scowled again. 'Ye've no room to talk. Ye're only sixteen yeself. The way ye preach, anyone'd think ye were a dozen years older.'

'And there's a dozen years' difference between a maid of sixteen and dirty-mouthed little boy of thirteen, Master Thomas. Pretending to be a man is one thing, having a man's capabilities is something else.'

'Capabilities? There's not much a man can do that I can't. I can handle the plough team, pile a wall — and I'd use the poleaxe if they'd let me. I can scythe as well as any of the men — and a deal faster if I've a mind to it. There's not much, I can tell ye, that I couldn't do.'

Sara shrugged. 'There's more than a few village women that could work the same — and do. There're other things that mark a man from a boy, Thomas

— and you well know it. The last time you offered evidence — ’ She laughed.

Thomas stared at her, then flushed hotly. ‘That was two years ago. I was only ten.’ He swallowed. ‘And ye’ll not try it again, damn ye. Not now. It were easy for ye then, but ye’ll not make sport of me again!’

Sara raised her eyebrows disdainfully. ‘I’d not bother myself.’ She walked slowly towards the broken hay-bale on which he sat. ‘Manly is as manly does, Thomas lad.’ She prodded a toe into his ribs. ‘You’d be put to the blush if a maid offered you a tumble — even if you knew the way of it.’

He twisted away from her foot, impatiently. ‘I don’t know what ye’re talking of.’ He had a vague notion, and it was uncomfortable.

‘That’s what I mean,’ she nodded. ‘If you were a man, you’d know. But you’re not, Thomas. Zounds! — If a maid lifted her shift to her knee and winked a promise, you’d run like a turkey-chick!’

Hot-faced, he shrugged. ‘Oh — *that*? That’s naught. There’s nothing ye can tell me about *that*.’ He laughed uneasily. ‘Thing is, I don’t set much store by it — not like some people.’ He tossed a fragment of bread at the red bird, watched the red-combed head dart and withdraw. ‘Don’t know,’ he said, anxious to change the subject, ‘why we keep two cocks.’

Sara’s long sigh was charged with derision. ‘Quite the Quaker, aren’t you? The impervious one.’ She reached down for the hem of her petticoat. ‘Have you never wanted to dally with a wench, Thomas?’ She lifted a slim leg provocatively. ‘Unlace a soft bodice?’

‘I told ye,’ he said sulkily, ‘I don’t set much store by it.’ He wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. ‘Besides if Father knew — ’

‘With an offer of a tumble, you’d be concerned about your father?’ She lowered herself to the straw, her petticoat drawn to her knees. ‘Ah, Thomas — what sort of a man would refuse a willing wench because his father might

learn of it?’ She watched his eyes flicker to her calves, inches from him. ‘That’s it, lad — feel the softness of them — just feel, Thomas — ’

He swallowed. ‘Ye’re baiting me. If I touched ye, ye’d — ye’d raise a scream — ’

Sara lay back among the straw, her hands under her head and her eyes on the raftered roof. ‘Try me, Thomas lad. Just try me. I’ll not watch.’

He hesitated, reached forward tentatively, then, his courage failing, withdrew his hand hurriedly. ‘I’ve told ye,’ he muttered, ‘I don’t set much store by it.’

Sara laughed. ‘Lud, if all affairs were like this. I’d as soon play backgammon.’ She drew a deep breath, then drew up her skirt to her thighs. Thomas stared, then choked. ‘Godammit, Sara, ye’ve no smallclothes under! — ’

She closed her eyes. ‘Then you’re convinced, Thomas lad?’

BY LATE afternoon neither Sara nor Thomas had returned to the house, having been seen by nobody since breakfast. Mary and Betty had investigated the bedrooms, then stables, barn and outbuildings, and Adam, returned from the fields, strolled towards Granta River in the hope of seeing either or both the absentees. That the two should be simultaneously late in making an appearance was doubly puzzling, for they shared few common interests. Thomas, it was true, was a dreamer, and had been late for meals before, but never to the extent of four hours, whilst Sara was unlikely to involve herself in Thomas' erratic activities. The two might not, of course, be in company but it was odd, all the same.

The light was beginning to fade when Adam, his concern deepening, saddled his cob and made for Sawston village. He might have drawn blank here also if he had not, on a whim — entered the Queen's Head. A few minutes later his horse was being kicked into an unc customary canter on his hurried return to the farm.

'Faith! — ' Adam stared at Mary and Betty in disbelief. 'They've gone to London!' He nodded. 'Aye, they had the London coach waved down at the Queen's Head this morning, to arrive at the Belle Sauvage at eight tonight.' He raised incredulous shoulders. 'I don't understand!'

'London? *London*? But *why*? — '

Adam screwed up his eyes. 'Fester it — there's no sense in the thing!' Fie had not told Mary of his recent embarrassing exchange with Sara. Were the incident and Sara's flight related? But why Thomas? Perturbed, he walked to the window, now darkening. 'And it was no moment's fancy. They had

bundles — ’ He frowned, then added slowly, ‘And they must have had money.’ He glanced from Mary to Betty. ‘Damme — ’ They knew where he’d gone — to the small, brass-riveted box under his bed. When he descended his eyes were narrowed, hurt. ‘Aye,’ he muttered grimly. ‘They had money. A hundred guineas, as near as I can tally.’ He gazed at the floor sombrely. ‘If it were known, they could hang. The pair of ’em.’

Mary shook her head, still unconvinced. ‘It cannot be. Adam. There’ll be another explanation. What would a maid of sixteen and a boy of twelve do with a hundred guineas in London? You can’t be sure — ’

Adam thrust out his lower lip. ‘I’m sure, all right.’ He paused. ‘It’s just that I don’t know *why*.’ Perhaps, he thought, he did know why. At least with regard to Sara. But Thomas? —

He picked up his hat. ‘There’s naught else for it. I’ll have to follow them.’ Then he flung down the hat angrily. ‘‘Od fester it — it’ll be black night before I’ve covered five miles. There’s no sense in it — and the roads are bad enough in daylight.’ Only a fool would consider riding fifty miles of mud-clogged, pot-holed road on a November night. Besides, in ten years Adam’s visits to London had been rare and brief. Aware of the probability of pursuit, Sara and Thomas were unlikely to remain long at the Belle Sauvage, and London was a tangled place in which to seek two runaways.

‘De Courcy,’ he said. ‘That’s it. I’ll ride by way of Halstead. John’ll know London better — and likely have some influence with the magistrates. And he’s a chaise, which’ll be better for returning wi’. That’s it. Godammit! — ’ His mind made up, he stamped to the fireplace to stab a petulant heel at the glowing logs. ‘And when I find ’em, I’ll need to know chapter and verse. Sara’s for Ely School and finished wi’, as soon as I can arrange it — and there’ll be changes wi’ Thomas, apart from a raw hind. He needs a stronger hand than I’ve given him these last years, and I’ll see he has it.’ Resentment

was overcoming his earlier concern. ‘Aye, a few years i’ the dragoons would likely knock the loafer out of him. Given a week o’ bread and water, and the black hole, and I’ll wager he’d come to heel a mite smarter.’

‘You’ll not follow them tonight?’ Mary asked. ‘Adam — how will they fare in London — alone?’

Adam snorted. ‘Wi’ a hundred guineas between ’em, I’ll hazard they’ll fare damn’ well. Ye can more concern yeself wi’ how they’ll fare when I come up wi’ em.’

For all his show of indignation, Adam slept badly. Long before first light he was booted and spurred, his horse fed and saddled by lamplight and, as the sky towards Abington bleakly paled, he mounted and rode.

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At Halstead Hall, Sir John de Courcy had just returned from a savage gallop along the banks of the Colne, and stood feet apart as the equally mud-spattered Adam climbed from his jaded, steaming horse. ‘’Sblood! — ’ he began, but listened, frowning, to Adam’s brief explanation. Then things began to happen very quickly.

Ostlers scurried to stables and coach-houses, wenches to kitchen and cellar. In minutes Adam had rid himself of travel stains, donned clean boots and neck-cloth, and was applying himself to the hot beef and dumplings that Sir John insisted they should before departure. ‘Dutchmen might fight better drunk and plaguey Frenchmen hungry, but give an Englishman enough beef or mutton saddle and he’ll march to damn’ Muscovy.’

It was on the road, however, that the value of de Courcy’s company proved itself. There was something in his bluff manner that generated immediate obedience, and his blistering invective was capable of inspiring panic in the breast of the most obdurate innkeeper. Fresh horses were requisitioned at Chelmsford even though reserved for the mail from Harwich, expected within

the hour, then again at Brentwood and the village of Hackney. An hour later, outside London's Ludgate, the chaise lurched to a halt in the yard of the Belle Sauvage, and the two men, tired, stiff and hungry, climbed to the ground.

Both yard and inn teemed with activity. The stage from York was disgorging its passengers, and swearing porters jostled for hire. Postboys, brimming with self-importance, shouted for way, and ostlers grappled with the heads of horses eager for the road. Inside, a swarm of sweating ale-wenches scampered desperately among the tables to satisfy the wants of clamouring customers. The room, clogged with tobacco smoke, was a seething cauldron of discordant noise.

Had anyone seen a girl of sixteen and a boy of twelve alight from the Cambridge coach yesterday? It was a hopeless question that evoked only disinterested shrugs from the harassed domestics. Perhaps — but who would notice? There was brandy to pour and puddings to serve, beef to carve and the York mail already arrived. Yesterday? Perhaps. But who would notice?

'No more than we might expect from London simples,' de Courcy sniffed. 'Let's make peace wi' our bellies, Adam — then we'll take chairs to Bow Street.'

At the magistrates' office near Covent Garden the two men received more sympathy but little promise of assistance. There were only eight constables, they were told, to maintain law and order in the whole of Westminster, and the city was plagued with housebreakers, highwaymen, pilferers and other hooligans, like so many locusts. There were street-roaming Mohocks and apprentices, assaulting citizens and damaging property, coiners and forgers, pickpockets, incendiaries, extortioners, footpads, murderers and ravishers. The constables, of course, would be given a description of the two missing young persons, but —

In silence Adam and de Courcy took coffee at nearby Will's. Only a half

mile away, at Smithfield, was St Bartholomew's Hospital, where Adam had once spent almost three years as an apprentice surgeon. That was before he had married, before his soldiering with Marlborough, but recent enough for him to recall how easily the sprawling maze of streets and alleyways that covered both banks of the Thames could swallow up two people determined to avoid apprehension. It was like trying to find two particular herrings in the entire Atlantic Ocean.

'Ye can never tell, Adam,' de Courcy suggested. 'The runners from Bow Street might do better than ye think. The children have never been in London before, and they'll be plainer than a pair of blackamoors at a sheep fair, ye'll see.' 'Aye, and not only to the runners. They've a hundred guineas, ye'll remember, and more than a few Newgate kerns would murder for ten.' Russell Street, beyond the mullioned windows of the coffee-house, was thronged with traffic and people. Where, among these teeming thousands, did one begin to search? Aldgate, or Alsatia, Holborn or Southwark? 'Damme, John, it could take a year — and there's no certainty they intend to stay in London.' He returned his gaze moodily to the street. 'Well, drinking in a coffee-house isn't going to find'em. John' — he shrugged, — 'I'll not ask ye to waste more of ye' time. I'm grateful for ye' help — '

De Courcy snorted. 'Are ye supposing I'll leave ye here alone? What d'ye think ye'll do?' He shook his head. 'Fester it, we haven't been here more than a couple of hours. There's a few more people I know, but I suggest we divide forces, Adam. We'll cover more ground. Inns and eating houses'll need to be looked at. They've got to sleep and eat, and wi' their lack of experience they'll do the obvious. Aye, they'll take an inn, I'll wager, not a lodging house — and that narrows the field. And I'll hazard they've not gone too far — the Eagle and Child, the Greyhound, the Swan, Spread Eagle, the Mermaid. Try them first, Adam — '

‘The Mermaid?’ Adam looked up. ‘The Mermaid off Cheapside?’ He had not thought of the place for years. Fourteen years. ‘Sblood — d’ye remember Nell Something?’

De Courcy stared, then chuckled. ‘Nell Something — aye. A scrubby sutler’s wench wi’ Wood’s Dragoon Guards. She damn’ near put a musket ball into me. But I’ll say one thing — she had bottom.’

‘We were discharged together, but she came to London while I homed to Sawston. She mentioned the Mermaid — said I could ask for her there. Mind ye, that was fourteen years ago. Aye, she was a game ’un. If I can trace her without trouble she could be worth a dozen Bow Street runners.’

De Courcy raised his eyebrows. ‘She could — if she’s not dead, and if she’d not raddled.’

But Nell Something was neither dead nor raddled. At the Mermaid, Adam’s inquiry provoked knowing winks and a referral to the Three Herrings in Bell Yard, which sent him hurrying back across Fleet Ditch to the Strand. The Three Herrings was a shabby, single-roomed tavern within yards of Lincoln’s Inn Fields, catering for equally shabby lawyers, barristers and tradesmen. There was no sign of Nell Something, but when Adam mentioned her name the solemn faces around the fireplace melted into grins. ‘Mistress Nell, sir?’ An untidily-wigged clerk pointed through the open door to another across the road. ‘The azure one with the large brass knocker. Ye’ll save a guinea or two if ye take the edge off ye’ thirst here. She’ll charge ye treble.’

The azure door was opened at his knock by a trimly-dressed, plump-bosomed maid who admitted him without question to a hall thickly carpeted and expensively papered. ‘Mistress Nell, sir,’ she informed a curious Adam, ‘will be at your disposal in a few minutes.’ She took his hat and cloak and retired with a provocative simper.

Mistress Nell? Could she be Nell Something — the tow-haired doxie in a

faded dragoon's coat, who slept in the sutler's waggon? If it were, then she had done well to earn a place in a house like this, for the higher-paid gentry. Prostitutes, from twelve years upwards, frequented every street and tavern, and for a few coppers or measures of gin would take a patron to some bug-ridden cock-loft or utilize the darkness of an alley. A house like this, however —

‘Good day, sir — and what shall be your pleasure? Brandy first? Ye’ll not taste finer this side o’ Calais, as anybody hereabouts’ll tell ye. The ladies will be down shortly.’

Adam turned. Aye, it was Nell Something — fuller, older, but still Nell Something. Her once unruly hair was sleekly brushed and curled into confidants, favourites and heart-breakers in the latest fashion, her plum-coloured dress of armozine might have come from a Pall Mall haberdasher, and her rich perfume no mere lavender water at five and twopence the pint. She smiled at him, her head to one side, not yet recognizing.

He chuckled. The last time I saw ye, Nell, I promised I’d take a strap to ye if I found ye wi’ another man. That was after ye gave me a soldier’s farewell. Remember?’

Nell’s eyes narrowed, then widened with glee. ‘Adam! Adam Margery! ‘Swelp me if it ain’t!’ She flung herself at him, regardless of her delicate tiffany gorget crushed against his chest. ‘For fourteen years I’ve been waiting for a boot headed dragoon to come through that door. What kept ye away?’

Adam laughed. ‘One day I’ll tell ye the whole story, every damn’ day of it, if it’ll please ye — but it’s ye’ help I need now, Nell, not gossip — ’

‘Help?’ Nell pouted. ‘Aye, ye always came to Nell Something when ye had trouble — and after fourteen years wi’out hide nor hair of ye, ye come marching in as bold as a drunken trumpeter, asking for help. That’s just like a bloody dragoon.’ She shrugged. ‘Well, I can drink as well as listen — ’ She

reached for a bell-rope and, when the maid reappeared magically, ordered brandy and glasses. ‘And not the usual dross,’ she warned. ‘One o’ my special bottles, ye understand?’

Adam, perplexed, asked, ‘D’ye mean ye’re the mistress of this’ — he glanced around him, — ‘this — ’

‘Brothel, stew, bawdy-house — ye may as well say it. Aye, I am. Nine wenches, Adam lad, all choice pieces, and clean. A doctor ’tending every week, and any jade poxed goes back tc alley-raking. An’ there’s accommodation for gentlemen who want to bring their own ladies, wi’ no tale-telling.’ She winked. ‘Ye’d never credit some of the quality that come here o’ nights. There’d be a few coronets a mite tarnished if Nell Something told what she knew.’

Adam laughed again. ‘I’ll believe ye. Ye’ve done well for yeself, Nell.’

She nodded. ‘And I offered ye half of it, remember? Ye’d have done better here, I promise ye, than growing turnips in Sawston.’

‘Turnips are more predictable than a mixture o’ nine wenches.’ The brandy was superb, and de Courcy could not have matched it. He shrugged. ‘But, as I said, Nell, I need ye’ help.’

‘Aye.’ She waved him to a chair. The magistrates, doxies, or money?’

He told her briefly, watching the sudden flicker of interest in her eyes when he mentioned Sara. ‘Rupe Dolling’s brat, eh?’ she mused. ‘Strange, ain’t it?’ Frowning, she reached for the brandy bottle to refill their glasses. ‘De Courcy’s a mite optimistic if he thinks the runners’ll be much help. Most of ’em are bigger rogues than the thieves they’re supposed to catch. No, for a quick result ye’ll have to try Wild. By yeself, it’ll be hopeless. Wild’s ye’ man. Ye’ll pay high, but it’ll be certain.’

‘Wild? Who’s Wild?’

Nell sniffed. ‘‘Seasy to see ye’re a bumpkin from the country. Jonathon

Wild's got an office in Cock Alley, facing Cripplegate Church, and another in Newtoner's Lane, handled by his man Abraham, a Jew. Wild's a thief-taker. Leastaways, he takes and arraigns thieves that don't agree to him disposing o' their goods. Mostly, when property's been stolen, he undertakes to recover it — in exchange for a fee that's likely to be half the value o' the goods. This means o' course, that he's in league wi' most of the housebreakers, shop-lifters and pickpockets in London — Levey, Flood, Blueskin Blake, Oakey, Sheppard' — she shrugged, — 'I could name ye dozens. They get a better price for their spoils from Wild than they'd get from the pawnbrokers, and he has his finger on every crime that's committed. Likewise he has his informers everywhere. If a rogue concedes, Wild protects him. If he don't, Wild arrests him.'

'Ye mean that a robbed person applies to him *knowing* that he's in league with the thieves?'

'Ah, but Wild's crafty. He claims that he has no interview with the thief, that he merely leaves word in certain places that, if the goods are restored, a reward will be paid and no questions asked. I'll not deny he's a liar, but most people are ready enough to recover half the value of their property — when they might otherwise get naught. On the other hand, he's put several murderers into Newgate — for the reward that's offered.'

Adam was uncertain. 'And ye think he'll locate Sara and Thomas?'

'If they're in London, he'll have 'em found — my oath on't. Time's the trouble, Adam.' She echoed his own fear. 'They've a hundred guineas, ye say — and there's some sharp-eyed jackals abroad. But if Wild lets it be known that they're to be kept safe, there's not many who'll choose to defy him. Wild's a rope-walker, d'ye see? Once he's issued an order, he *must* see that it's followed — or disobedience viciously punished. Otherwise his authority would disappear overnight, and he'll likely find himself betrayed and in

Newgate. So, if he accepts ye' brief, Adam, he'll move fast — a lot faster than ye' Bow Street runners.'

'We-ell, if ye say so.' There was very little choice. The day was already advanced, and he could now hardly hope that Thomas and Sara would be found before nightfall. Where would they be spending the night? Where, i'faith, had they spent last night? John de Courcy, of course, might have inspired some movement from the reluctant authorities. He had intended calling, he'd said, on Sir John Fryer, a Holborn magistrate with a greater sense of urgency than most of his fellows, but there was no promise of greater success than at Bow Street. 'Aye, ye're right,' he conceded. He was grateful that Nell had not inquired the reason behind the children's flight. Like de Courcy, she seemed not to consider it.

Adam found the house in Cock Alley — conveniently close to Newgate — without difficulty. There were several loungers about the door who eyed him with mild speculation, but moved aside civilly enough as he approached. Inside, in a room sparsely but cleanly furnished, one man was reading aloud from a paper whilst another, more richly dressed, listened. Both wore swords.

'A book of accounts, two watches — both gold, two rings, five pieces of lace — each of ten yards, fifteen pounds in mixed coin — ' At Adam's entry the man paused, glancing across at his companion, who rose with a smile.

'Good day, sir. I am Jonathon Wild, at your service, and this' — he waved a hand airily at the other, — 'is my assistant, Quilt Arnold. If it has been your misfortune to suffer loss at the hands of rogues, it may be that we can offer some relief, but first there is a consultation fee of five shillings, in advance.'

Surprised, Adam fumbled for a crown piece — a week's wages for one of his labourers. Wild, stabbing a pen into an inkwell, wore a full-bottomed wig that accentuated his own smallness of build. His cravat of striped muslin was of the latest fashion, his coat of expensive figuretto, and all four fingers of

each hand carried rings.

‘Now, sir’ — his pen was poised over a ledger, — ‘your name, if you please, and your place of residence. Then, if you will, details of the robbery, the property taken, and its approximate value.’

‘Not property exactly,’ Adam said. ‘Two young people.’

Wild’s intelligent eyes rose from his book. ‘People? Crimped?’

Adam shrugged. ‘I’d think not — yet.’ He related briefly the events of the previous twenty-four hours, and Wild grunted at a mention of Bow Street. When Adam had finished, Wild rubbed his nose thoughtfully. He had a thin, gypsy-like face, expressive and ingenious, and his teeth were white between well-shaped lips.

‘Do you know how many people there are in London?’ Wild put down his pen. ‘More than a half-million. Aye, London’s not just the City of Westminster and Holborn. It means Southwark and Lambeth, Chelsea, Hampstead and Camberwell. Do you know that if the population of London marched past that window’ — he pointed, — ‘in single file, it’d be *five days* between the first and the last?’ He glared at Adam triumphantly.

‘Are ye saying ye can’t help me?’ Adam asked.

Wild chuckled. ‘I’m saying that there’s a lot of people in London, Master Margery. As a country gentleman it’s possible you don’t know the task you’re asking. It could mean months of searching — ’

‘Months?’ Adam turned to leave. ‘Even the Bow Street officers couldn’t be as damned tardy as that. And if that’s all the advice ye have to offer — ’

‘Not so hasty, Master Margery!’ Wild chuckled again as he raised a conciliatory hand. ‘I said it *could* mean months of searching. It depends entirely upon the resources applied. Why, with sufficient people employed, we could run our quarry to earth within hours — make no mistake.’

Adam nodded. ‘Then ye’ll begin immediately?’

‘As soon as I say the word,’ Wild affirmed ‘Master Arnold here will set into motion a search that will uncover every street and alley in London, every tavern, tenement, ordinary, lodging, cock-loft and warehouse. We shall scrutinize every coach, hackney, chair and river wherry, and not so much as a basket of herrings will cross the Bridge but we shall know the number and size of every fish. Not a man, woman or child will move twenty paces between Tyburn and Stratford without us being aware.’ He paused, still smiling. ‘Could Bow Street do that for you?’

‘Good. Then I’ll wait on ye’ word — and the sooner the better. I’ll be at the Belle Sauvage — ’

‘A moment, Master Margery.’ Wild’s glance fell over Adam’s worsted coat, his knitted wool hose and out-moded steinkirk. ‘You will understand that, for myself, I have little personal interest in these affairs other than the prevention of crime, the apprehension of criminals and the restoration of stolen property to its rightful owners. I make no claim for payment, and am content to accept whatever gift my client, in his gratitude, thinks fit to give.’ He sighed. ‘There are many others, however, who will serve only for gain, and a search of these proportions will, of necessity, involve such people. I cannot pretend that it will be cheap — ’

Adam thrust out a lip. ‘In the profession ye maintain I’d have thought ye’d learned not to judge a man’s credit by the cut of his coat, Master Wild. But I’ll tell ye. And ask anyone within ten miles o’ Cambridge, an’ they’ll tell ye also. The Margery’s own nine hundred acres of the richest-bearing soil in Cambridgeshire and two hundred o’ park and woodland — lately belonging to the Hewars. Both sides o’ the Granta River for a mile, Master Wild. Barley, wheat, cattle and sheep. If ye’d like a sponsor, I’ll bring Sir John de Courcy, Justice o’ the Peace, here tomorrow — or, damme, tonight if ye prefer — ’

‘Please, please, Master Margery! — ’ Wild raised his hand again. ‘There is no need. Money’s a distasteful subject between gentlemen. Had you been a pauper I would have given you immediate assistance, although of course’ — he shrugged, — ‘it might have been limited. I am sure, however — ’

Adam grunted. ‘What’s needed will be paid, my word on’t.’ He was mildly nettled that there might be the slightest doubt about it. A Margery’s credit was good with every merchant and monger in Gihabridge, and never a bill had been left unpaid beyond the next quarter-day. ‘Ye said a search could bring results in a few hours. That being so, I’d be grateful if ye’d get the matter started. Ye’ll not find a plaguey thing sitting there.’

‘Very true. Master Margery.’ Wild turned to his companion. ‘Quilt, m’lad — you know your business, eh? And you have the descriptions? Then off with you to Newtoner’s Lane, as quick as you will. A start can be made tonight in Holborn and Westminster at least, and you can offer a ten-pound bounty. At dawn, if nothing’s found, we’ll widen the net and we’ll print handbills. Be sure the Bridge is watched, and the boat steps — ’

Quilt Arnold, with a nod, departed briskly through a rear door, and Adam, mollified by this show of efficiency, took his leave of Jonathon Wild. He might have been less assured, however, had he observed the wink that had accompanied Wild’s instructions to his assistant, or know that, within seconds of his own leaving, Quilt Arnold had reappeared in the Cock Alley office.

‘I could have told ye,’ Arnold complained, ‘that a wench and a boy, wi’ bundles, came off the Cambridge coach at the Belle yesternight — and they had guineas. Jerry Rann were watching ’em, being interested in their coin, an’ I thought likely — ’

Wild threw back his head and laughed. ‘Quilt, m’lad, you’re a gamecock wi’ a knife or a cudgel, and ye’ve the best fingers I know for picking a

padlock, but you lack cunning. You'd rifle coppers from a church box and leave a gold cup on the altar.' He leaned back, placing his ringed hands neatly together. 'Had we delivered Master Margery's chickens tonight he would, for so brief a search, have paid twenty — perhaps thirty — guineas. By tomorrow night he'll rise to a hundred, and the day after — who knows? — perhaps a thousand. Our country friend has a well-lined purse, Quilt, and we'll see it a little thinner before he returns to his Sawston, eh?' He paused, pondering. 'Find Jerry Rann, Quilt — he'll have followed the pair to their lodging — but do nothing more. When the time's ripe, but not before, we'll return the missing property.'

LONDON WAS more immense than they could possibly have imagined, and even Sara's confidence was shaken. Fleet Street, Ludgate Hill and Cheapside between them embraced more people than the whole of Cambridge, and no building in the world could be so vast as great St Paul's, that towered over Newgate like a black mountain against the winter sky.

The yard of the Belle Sauvage had been garish with light — from the tavern's windows, the torches of link-boys waiting hire, lanterns on staves — but the shadows of the narrow street beyond twisted and flickered. There was movement there, too, of vague figures content with the darkness, and Thomas shivered. 'I'm hungry,' he complained. A mouth-watering aroma came from the tavern's bustling interior.

The coachman was demanding his yet unpaid fare, and Sara satisfied him with five golden guineas from the neck of her bundle, counting the coins into the palm of his hand. Five from a hundred in one day was a little concerning; she must watch her resources carefully.

'I'm hungry,' Thomas repeated. He was also frightened and homesick, and for the past eight hours had increasingly regretted accompanying Sara on this madcap adventure. The memory of the barn, where the red cock had watched cynically as he moaned with a new-found, shattering emotion, was as cold as the November night that penetrated his coat. There could be many such moments, Sara had urged, but not at Sawston, not in the hay of a barn. Wouldn't he prefer the nakedness of her in the comfort and privacy of a bedroom? Didn't he claim to be a man? For how many years must he tolerate a child's status at the Margery farm — when he knew what he now did?

Well, then — it must be London. Sawston was a sleepy backwater, but London offered everything. He was apprehensive? But didn't he claim to be a man?

Aye, it sounded fine — then. In any case, the possibility of refusing — and then being a victim of Sara's contempt thereafter — was painful. He had agreed, a little bewildered and not really believing that it was going to happen. But it had happened — and here he was, in London.

Not that he had yet seen much of the City; it had been dark before the coach reached the Epping thicks. He had glimpsed some fine houses in Hackney village — their last pause for a change of horses — but otherwise his vision had been limited to the cramped, unlit interior of the mail, smelling of damp upholstery, its meagre windows misted, and shuddering noisily with every rut and pot-hole of the seemingly endless road. And every mile had taken him farther from Betty Cowper's glowing stove, the hanging flitches and burnished copper pans, his white bedroom under the eaves. Perhaps Sawston hadn't been so bad —

But of course, he reasoned, it would be a short-lived thing. It was too incredible — like a patchwork dream — to last. There would be consternation at the Margery farm, and his father would come thundering after them. And there'd be the devil to pay. He shivered. Likely it'd be better if they took the first coach back. He glanced at Sara. No, perhaps not.

Thomas could not know that Sara's unconcerned air was artificial, and that for several hours she, too, had been experiencing the gnawing of doubt. She had bolstered her courage by the thought of London — where all things were possible — festooned with lanterns like fairy-land, thronged with courtly gentlemen and silken ladies, liveried servants and fine carriages. True, the light from the windows of the Belle Sauvage was reflected dully by the sweating, dung-smirched cobbles, and she could hear the clatter of dishes

from within, but the link-boys were departing and the Cambridge coach stood empty, horseless and forlorn. The tumult surrounding their arrival had died and the yard was empty. The shadows of the street seemed to have crept closer.

She drew a deep breath. Things would be different tomorrow, in daylight. London couldn't all be like this — dank and lonely. There was St James's, and the Whitehall, and Covent Garden — that she knew for certain. The problem was, what now? She eyed the inn doubtfully. It was an obvious haven, but it was also the terminus of the Cambridge mail. Adam would have quickly discovered the mode of their departure and, if he were sufficiently determined, might reach London before dawn — before Sara and Thomas had even awakened.

To be sure, she was not to be run to earth as easily as that. Besides, a coaching inn could be expensive. There must be somewhere else. But where? The street in each direction was dark and uninviting, and there were tendrils of mist fingering the wheels of the abandoned coach. Then both she and Thomas whirled, startled, as a voice spoke from behind them.

'E'en, mistress — master. It'd be vittles ye're seeking? Or safe lodging? Or a hackney-coach? It's a dismal night for Christian folk to be abroad in London — 'specially if ye're strangers, I say.'

He seemed to have appeared from nowhere — a man of medium height, with broad shoulders under a dark, calf-length coat. For the moment, as he doffed his hat, they could not see his face.

'Jeremiah Rann, ye' servant. Ye'll pardon the intrusion, but ye looked to be needing some help. Like I said, if ye're strangers, London can be a mite baffling at first.' He glanced at the bundles at their feet. 'What would be ye' embarrassment?'

'Thank you, sir, but there's no embarrassment,' Sara said firmly. 'We're

about to take rooms — ’

He sniffed. ‘In the Belle? Aye, strangers are usually gulled into it.’ As he moved a pace nearer the fight from a window fell on his face, fleshy, shrewd-eyed. ‘Ye’ll be cheated, I promise, wi’ stale food and thievin’ prices — and likely sit up all night wi’ the bugs.’ He shrugged. ‘But if ye can afford a shilling for a herring pretending to be trout, or pheasant that’s seen no more of Hampshire than a Leadenhall pigeon-loft — then the Belle will suit ye.’

‘I’m not likely to be snared, sir — and you flatter yourself if you believe that London baffles us, as you put it. Were it daylight, and we able to see our direction, there would be no concern — ’

He leaned forward to peer more closely at them, then chuckled apologetically. ‘Ye’ pardon, mistress. I had mistaken ye for a pair o’ country hayseeds off the Cambridge coach. We get ’em, ye see, agape an’ gawking, an’ fair game for every villainous trick ye’d imagine — an’ Jerry Rann likes to see fair play.’ He paused. ‘But I see ye don’t need to be told. It’s a night for footpads, and likely ye’ve arranged an escort to see ye safe to ye’ lodging.’

Sara nodded. ‘Of course, but — ’

‘But they’ve failed to meet ye?’ Rann grunted. ‘Aye, the shabby fellows are likely skulking in some tavern wi’ too much money in their pockets. There’s no relying on people these days. A few more cart-tail floggings might make a difference — teach ’em to respect their betters.’ Then he laughed. ‘But naught’s lost, mistress. If ye’ll tell me ye’ lodging, I’d consider it a duty to lead ye there, safe an’ quick, eh?’

Sara hesitated. From beyond the closed door of the Belle Sauvage, behind them, she could still hear a murmur of noise. There would be people there, eating and drinking, a warm fire and the security of a bedchamber, bugs or no. It was late, and Ludgate Hill was dark, cold and lonely.

‘The truth of the matter is,’ she confessed, ‘we had not settled our minds on a lodging, but in the circumstances I think the Belle — ’

‘Pshah! I’ll not allow it, mistress! If it’s warm, sweet rooms ye want, an’ honest vittles, then Jerry Rann’s ye’ man!’ He swooped on their bundles, taking one in each large hand. ‘No more’n a few minutes, my oath on’t!’ Before they could utter a further protest he had turned and was striding into the darkness of Ludgate Hill, his cloak flying. They stumbled after him.

With scarcely a sideways glance, Rann turned northwards into a still narrower and, if conceivable, even darker thoroughfare. But there were lamps glimmering ahead, and on their right reared a massive gate and postern, dwarfing the adjacent houses. ‘Newgate,’ Rann grunted. ‘Newgate Prison,’ then hawked and spat. Thomas shivered. The great iron lanterns splashed pools of cold yellow onto the greasy cobbles below, and he hurried past them as if their touch were leprous.

Not knowing where they were, they had no choice but to follow Rann — still grimly grasping their belongings. They crossed the narrow jump of a bridge spanning a stinking void of blackness. ‘Master Rann — ’ Sara pleaded, but they had plunged into a complexity of gaunt alleyways, reeking indescribably, and twisting so often that they might have crossed their own path a dozen times.

Once Rann halted suddenly, listening with head cocked. ‘Master Rann — ’ Sara tried again. He hissed her to silence, and they stared at him and at each other. In a moment he uttered a low growl, whirled, then strode off seemingly oblivious to their company.

Sara wanted desperately to let the man go, so that she and Thomas might — even with difficulty — retrace their steps to the Belle Sauvage or some other reputable hostelry, but in Rann’s hands was every penny the pair of them possessed — the greater part of a hundred guineas stolen from Adam’s

bedroom. Happily, Rann could not know the value of his burden, but she could not dare be separated from him. To be moneyless was to be helpless.

Thomas — famished, cold and miserable — followed blindly behind Sara. What stupid folly, he reflected, had provoked him into this disastrous adventure? Who was this fellow — this Jeremiah Rann? And where was he leading them? This was not the London — ablaze with lights and thronged with people — that Sara had described. This was darker than a midden-hole and twice as stinking.

Rann, who seemed to be familiar with every inch of his surroundings, was proceeding at a pace which was completely indifferent to their own ignorance. But now he halted, surveyed them with an expression that suggested he resented their continued presence, and said. ‘Here ’tis.’ A dozen broken rickety stairs climbed upwards to a narrow landing and a door set in a wall from which damp plaster was falling. Rann fumbled for a key.

‘This is a *lodging*?’ Sara inquired. She heard the scrabble of a rat at her feet, and shuddered. There was a sour smell in the air, and the silence was death-like — but she was no coward. ‘Warm, sweet rooms, I recall you said, Master Rann — not a shabby tavern like the Belle Sauvage.’ She paused. ‘If you please, sir, we’ll not inconvenience you further — ’

Rann’s answer was to shoulder open the door and then throw the two bundles into the darkness beyond. Sara stamped her foot. ‘Master Rann! Didn’t you hear me? We have no intention of remaining in this — this hovel! If you’ll return us to the Belle Sauvage there’ll be a crown for your trouble — ’ But Rann, ignoring her, had pushed through the door, and Sara could hear the scrape of flint against steel. Followed by Thomas, she climbed the crumbling stairs. Beyond the door a candle sputtered, and then a second.

The room was as beggarly as the outside suggested. Flaking walls surrounded a rough-planked floor scattered with debris — clothing, bottles,

several wallets and purses, a urine bucket. In one corner was a tumbled bed pallet, while in a soot-blackened chimney cavity stood a cold, ash-filled brazier. For the moment, however, Sara had eyes only for Rann, who on his knees, was plucking at the tied neck of one of the bundles he had carried.

Sara gasped. ‘You damned rogue! So that was it!’ She threw herself towards him, reaching for the bundle, but he half rose and, with a quick sweep of his arm, thrust her aside. Thomas hesitated, and Rann sniffed. ‘Aye, ye’d best not, cully, ’less ye want a smashed mouth.’ He returned his attention to the bundle, and a moment later grunted with satisfaction. Several handfuls of guineas cascaded, tinkling, to the floor.

‘There never were lodgings!’ Sara flung the words at him, near to sobbing. ‘You’re a thieving imposter! You knew all the time — there never were lodgings!’ Anger was overcoming her dismay. ‘They’ll hang you for this, sirrah — do you hear? You’ll hang at that reechy Newgate of yours! — ’

Rann was arranging the guineas into neat piles. ‘Ninety-five,’ he said. ‘Ninety-five guineas.’ He looked up at her. ‘Newgate, is it? And how did the pair of ye come by ninety-five guineas, eh? Likely as not ye’re both pick-purses yesel’s — and ye’re talking o’ Newgate?’ Fie chuckled, then began to shovel the guineas into capacious pockets. ‘Ye can thank ye’ good fortune. I’ll not detain ye, nor deprive ye of ye’ luggage, and I’ll not lay information — ’

He had taken his eyes off Thomas and, when the boy sprang at him, Rann sprawled off balance. A second later Sara’s nails furrowed his cheek, and he roared, flailing. But their effort was short-lived. As before, Rann flung Sara aside as if she were a doll. Then, pulling himself to his knees, he grasped Thomas by his neck-cloth and hammered a blow into his face that sent him spinning to a wall with eyes glazing and nose streaming crimson. On all fours, the boy began to retch. Savagely, Rann wrenched him upright, hauled

him, sagging, to the open door and, with an oath, hurtled him into the darkness. Then he whirled on Sara.

‘So ye scratch, eh?’ He fingered his gouged cheek. ‘Regular spit-cat, ain’t ye?’ He grunted. ‘Well, I tamed spit-cats ’afore — wi’ a strap. Ye’ll not scratch again, my little trollop, I’ll warrant — ’ He moved towards her.

She hissed. ‘Lay a finger on me, you filthy kern, and I’ll see you flogged to a pulp — ’ But he had gripped her, clamped a heavy arm across her throat and thrown her down easily. She fought desperately and hopelessly, kicking, clawing, writhing, but a blow to her temple dazed her. As her senses swam, he lifted her long skirts over her shoulders and, reaching for a length of twine, tied them, bag-like, to imprison her head and arms. She was helpless, and he rose to his feet, panting.

‘Ye spit-cat. I’ll humble ye.’ He pushed back his cloak and began to slowly unbuckle his belt. Then he stopped. At his feet Sara was convulsing as she struggled to free herself from the stifling restriction of her skirts, her young body arching. She had lost a shoe, and one bombazine stocking had fallen below a knee. Her thighs were white.

Rann sucked a lip, speculatively, for several moments, still breathing heavily. A breath of cold air dragged his eyes towards the still-open door, and he walked towards it, closed it quietly and pushed home a bolt. From behind him came the muffled sound of weeping. He turned, grinning, and began to unfasten his breeches.

Sprawled in the alley, Thomas was vomiting. His lacerated face and scalp ached and throbbed, his clothes were filth-smirched. This wasn’t happening. This wasn’t real. He’d awaken soon, to find his head on a pillow, the sun streaming through the latticed window, and Betty Cowper’s voice rousing him to breakfast. But there was a fetid stench in his nostrils and his shirt was wet against his heaving chest. This wasn’t the London that Sara had

described.

THE NIGHT mist had given way to rain, which increased by dawn to a steady downpour. Gutters were awash, and uncobbled streets gelatinous seas of mud. The tawny Fleet, roused and swollen, heaved and swirled between the piles of Holborn's bridge, bearing its indescribable filth and debris into Thames. For a few days, at least, the City would be free of the stink which, at times, wafted as far as Chelsea and Woolwich.

Wherries and hoys threshed from bank to bank on the crusted, rain-stippled surface of the Thames, and laden barges crawled downriver to the forest of masts beneath the Tower, the Indiamen at Blackwall and the Americas trade at Deptford. Upstream, at Westminster, the rain lashed into the grey marshes, tangled with reeds and sedge and yellow flags. The sky was sullen, promising nothing, and chimney smoke flattened in the wind.

Adam Margery, following a morning of frustration, had met de Courcy at Lloyd's, in Lombard Street, thronged with gossiping idlers from the Exchange and the banking and merchant houses of the locality, drinking coffee — still dismissed by the older school as 'syrup of soot and essence of old shoes'. Copies of the *Post* and the *Gazette* were being brandished, and there was continuous talk of Barbados sugar, the Madras settlement, indigo and cochineal, the Guinea trade, bills of lading, and the plaguey 'Light Horsemen' who nightly plundered the river's cargoes. Adam and de Courcy, silent and morose, stared through a window distorted by rain. The bell of St Stephen's, in nearby Walbrook, was tolling the hour.

'Jonathon Wild.' De Courcy shook his head. 'I'd have advised against it, if I'd known. He's a sly cully, Adam — as any on the bench'll tell ye.' He took

a mouthful of coffee and grimaced. ‘Damn the filthy stuff. It’ll ruin me palate!’

Fie paused. ‘Aye, he sails festerin’ close to the wind, does Wild — but just not close enough to be plucked. Gow Jones — the high constable o’ Holborn Division — has been watching him for years, and Fryer’d give his Hilary stipend to have him in irons.’

‘Likely so,’ Adam said ill-humouredly, ‘but if Jones and Fryer spent less time watching Wild, they might give more attention to searching for young Thomas and Sara — which Wild is doing.’

‘Dammit, Adam, I sympathize wi’ ye,’ de Courcy shrugged, ‘but ye can scarce expect the entire law forces o’ London to be all agog for two missing children. There’s children lost, abandoned, and murdered every day — ‘ Adam sucked in his breath, and de Courcy continued lamely, ‘Aye — well — not that Thomas an’ Sara will likely be murdered, ye understand, but encouraging Wild’s double-dealing don’t help the Law — ’

‘To Hell wi’ the Law,’ Adam snorted.

De Courcy stared down at his cup. ‘I’ve had a bellyful of this bilge. Let’s find some brandy.’

‘Aye,’ Adam nodded, ‘if ye will. Then we’ll to Cock Alley. Wild said he’d send word to the Belle Sauvage, but since we’ve not been there since dawn he’d likely miss us. ’Sblood — it’s been two days! He must have uncovered something.’

But in Cock Alley Jonathon Wild had uncovered nothing. ‘D’ye know there’s near three-quarters of a million people in London, Master Margery? And two hundred thousand in the City Mile alone? I’ve got searchers as far abroad as Brentford and Greenwich, Highgate and Catford. It’s a vastly expensive undertaking, Master Margery — ’

De Courcy snorted disgustedly, but Adam ignored him. ‘There must be

more ye can do — somewhere ye haven't searched. We've talked with the Cambridge coachman. He recalls taking them up at Sawston, and setting them down at the Belle Sauvage — where Sara paid him wi' guineas. But they didn't rake lodging at the Belle. They vanished. And that was two nights ago. What would they do, alone, on a foggy night, in London?'

'They could be within only a quarter-mile of Ludgate Hill — Newgate Street, Cheapside, Fleet Street, Chancery Lane — gone to earth in some cheap cock-loft or cellar. On the other hand, in two days they could have gone into Surrey or Middlesex. If so, we'll need to widen our net — and this means still more searchers, higher costs — '

'I'm not concerned wi' the cost!' Adam flared. 'I told ye before, I'm no pauper. Give me a figure, and I'll sign ye a note.' He reached for a sheet of paper. 'A hundred pounds? Two hundred? — '

'Od fester it, Adam!' De Courcy protested, but Adam was deaf to him. Wild shrugged carelessly. 'As a gentleman. Master Margery, I've not for a moment doubted ye' resources, nor ye' integrity, but' — he shrugged again, — 'shall we say two hundred — for a beginning?'

'A beginning!' De Courcy spat, but Adam's pen scratched over the paper. Wild smiled blandly then, taking up the note, folded it neatly between slim fingers. 'Ye can rest assured, Master Margery, that we shall scour every nook and gutter. If ye'd be advised, ye'll stay close to the Belle. There's no profit in ye tramping the streets.' He picked up his cane. 'And if ve're returning that way, I'll walk a pace wi' ye.'

Accompanied by a disgusted de Courcy, they walked into Holborn and, at the junction with Newgate Street, paused under the blackened walls of the prison. Adam stared musingly towards Ludgate.

'When they left the yard of the Belle,' he calculated, 'they wouldn't have gone south'ard. There's nothing there except Thames-bank. They must either

have crossed Fleet ditch towards the Strand, or turned east'ard towards St Paul's, or on towards Smithfield.' He tried to envisage what he, himself, might have done had he walked from the Belle Sauvage on a dark November night, but there was no knowing. Besides, Thomas and Sara might not have had a free choice —

Jonathon Wild plucked an elegant French snuff-box from his waistcoat. 'There's naught to be gained by plaguing ye' mind, Master Margery. Why don't ye enjoy a few hours o' leisure? A playhouse, say, or an opera? There's Master Handel at Drury Lane, or there's Covent Garden — or, if ye prefer, the Chelsea Bun House or the Cider Cellar — '

Adam was not listening. He was staring, incredulous, at the shadowed postern of the prison, beyond which was the cavernous arch that separated the debtors' and felons' quarters. Two or three beggars sprawled there, feigning lameness or blindness, a street lawyer in cheap wig and shabby black, a woman with a doleful 'Two a penny Yarmouth codling!' and several slovenly urchins. But there was someone else.

In a refuse-cluttered angle of the wall, with his cheek pressed against the black stonework, was Thomas. His hair was dishevelled and his eyes closed, his clothes soiled, his face smirched with mud and dried blood. There was an ugly gash on his brow, and one foot was shoeless.

'Thomas! S'death! — ' Adam's arm was around the boy's shoulders. 'What's happened, lad? And where's Sara?' De Courcy was swearing, fumbling for his brandy flask, and Wild's snuff was scattered.

Thomas opened his eyes, then choked on a sob. 'Father! — ' His knees sagged.

'Hold, lad!' Adam lowered him gently, and de Courcy's flask was at his lips. Thomas choked again, and winced as the spilling brandy stung his broken lips. De Courcy, kneeling with his timber leg out-splayed, grunted.

‘He’s had a buffeting, Adam, but there’s naught broken. Wi’ a bed and a bellyful o’ hot food he’ll be spry as a fightin’ cock tomorrow.’

‘Godammit, Thomas — what’s happened?’ Adam asked. ‘There’s two days gone. Where’ve ye been? Where’s Sara?’

Thomas shook his head miserably. ‘I don’t know. I don’t know. There was a man at the Belle Sauvage — ’ He began to retch. ‘Jerry Rann, he said — ’

Jonathon Wild slipped his empty snuff-box into a pocket. ‘Gentlemen, ye’ll forgive me. I’ll take me to Cock Alley. Likely there’ll be news — ’

‘Aye, ye do that, sirrah,’ de Courcy sneered. ‘For two hundred pounds ye’d expect at least news. All these searchers o’ yours — ’ He rose clumsily to his feet. ‘Strange thing they ain’t seen the lad when he’s standing i’ the middle o’ Ludgate Hill, eh? Where are they searching, eh? Brentford, did ye say? And Catford?’ He laughed contemptuously — but Wild had gone.

‘Thomas, lad — ’ Adam tried again, but the boy was sobbing jerkily, shaking his head. Adam spoke over his shoulder. ‘John — a hackney, if ye will. We’ll get him back to the Belle.’ He hesitated, then, ‘No fester it — we’ll go to Bell Yard, to Nell Something.’

The pencilled eyebrows of Nell Something’s maid rose in astonishment as the azure door opened, but she asked no questions, and Nell was down within seconds. ‘Stab me!’ she blurted. ‘Where’d ye find that lumpkin?’ She stared. ‘It’s Thomas, ain’t it? Gripes, what’s happened?’ She led the boy to a damask couch, careless of his muddied clothes, and sent the maid scuttling for cordial, hot broth, towels and water, then brandy for the men. Her hands were gentle as she bathed the crusted blood from Thomas’ face, then she stood back. ‘And the girl?’ she asked. ‘Rupe’s girl?’

The colour was slowly creeping back into Thomas’ cheeks. ‘There was a man,’ he said. His tongue probed at his swollen lips. ‘Jerry Rann, he called himself.’ Nell grunted.

‘He said he’d find us lodging,’ Thomas went on, ‘better ’n’ cheaper than the Belle Sauvage, and didn’t give us much chance to refuse. Then, when he got us there — ’

‘Where?’ Adam interrupted, but Thomas shrugged. ‘I don’t know,’ he confessed. ‘It were too dark — and I doubt if I’d known in daylight anyway. He took the money — ’ He glanced up quickly at his father, then his eyes dropped. Adam nodded grimly, ‘Aye, I know,’ he muttered. ‘Go on.’

‘He battered me, then threw me into the alley. That’s where I hit my head, and I was near senseless. I must have lain there for hours — I don’t know — and then likely I crawled. There were gutters an’ puddles — an’ then the rain — ’

‘And Sara?’ Adam insisted.

The shame flooded, crimson, into the boy’s face. ‘I left her,’ he whispered. ‘I couldn’t — y’see — I couldn’t — ’

‘Ye mean she’s still with this kern — Rann — ’ Adam turned to Nell. ‘D’ye know of him, Nell?’

‘I know *of* him,’ Nell frowned. ‘I heard he’s a regular trick o’ dressing as a porter, picking up the trunks o’ unsuspecting travellers, and disappearing with ’em. Where he lodges I don’t know, but I’d’ve thought that Jonathon Wild’ — she was puzzled, — ‘I’d’ve sworn he were one of Wild’s people — ,

‘Wild!’ John de Courcy exploded. ‘Od’s blood! I might’ve known it!’ He smashed a fist into a palm. ‘The swab’s made fools of us, Adam — ’

‘I don’t see — ’ Adam began, but de Courcy was buttoning his coat. ‘Don’t ye, b’God? I’ll tell ye, Adam — Wild’s hand in glove wi’ this festerin’ Rann. One’s robbed ye o’ two hundred pounds and the other a hundred — and the pair of ’em laughing at how easy it were to pluck a pair o’ country chickens. Well, wi’in the hour they’re going to learn that there’s one country chicken

that bites back.’ He reached for his hat. ‘My sword’s at the Belle. Are ye coming?’

*

A furious Jonathon Wild faced Quilt Arnold across the table, snarling, his veneer of gentility abandoned. ‘Blast ye’ stinkin’ hide, Quilt — I told ye to have Rann watched, didn’t I? And what’s happened? The damned boy appears as plain as ye like in the middle o’ Newgate Street. Are ye blind, or just plaguey dim-witted?’

‘Jonathon — I swear’ — Arnold pleaded, — ‘we ain’t taken our eyes off the place since ye ordered it. Rann’s come an’ gone a dozen times or so, but not the others. They ain’t been seen. Do nothin’ more, ye said — an’ nor we ain’t.’ He scratched at an armpit. ‘If the boy left Rann’s lodging, it must ’ave been before we started watchin’.’

Wild emitted an exasperated hiss of breath. ‘Are ye satisfied, ye thick-skull, that Rann still has the girl?’ Arnold shrugged, his face blank, and Wild snarled again. ‘Then find out — ye damned oaf! Listen to me. The boy’s already mentioned Rann’s name, and wi’ de Courcy’s Bow Street cronies it won’t be long before they begin to speculate, d’ye understand? And maybe Gow Jones sniffin’ around. We’ve taken two hundred pounds o’ Margery’s, and we’ll have to deliver the girl. So’ — his finger stabbed at Arnold’s chest, — ‘find her. Now. Find Rann, and if he ain’t got the girl, find out why. If ye let the girl slip through ye’ fingers again, ye’ll be found floating in Deptford creek — d’ye understand?’

Arnold nodded, picked up his cudgel and turned. Then he halted. In the doorway stood John de Courcy with, at his back, Adam Margery.

On the instant Wild was a model of amiability. ‘Gentlemen!’ he smiled. ‘Your appearance is opportune. I have been discussing the latest development with Master Arnold here, and I think I can say that, given an hour or so, we

can quickly bring this matter to a happy conclusion. As I say — ’

‘Ye’ll say naught,’ de Courcy growled, ‘and as for giving ye an hour, ye’ll begin by giving us that note for two hundred pounds. After that, ye’ll lead us to ye’ hireling, Rann.’

‘Hireling? My dear Sir John! — ’ Wild raised his hands. ‘Rann’s a rogue, and I knew nothing of his involvement in this matter until an hour ago — as ye did yeselves. It was an incredible chance that ye found the boy before my own searchers. Faith, I can still hardly believe it — ’

‘Then ye can believe this,’ de Courcy said. ‘Do as I’ve just told ye, or I’ll spit ye to yonder door.’ He tapped the hilt of his sword.

Wild’s suavity vanished abruptly. ‘I’ve been very patient with ye,’ he pronounced slowly. He surveyed the portly de Courcy, allowing his eyes to fall to the knight’s timber leg. ‘But I suggest ye’re hardly in a position to threaten anyone — and Master Margery, I see, isn’t even armed. Be advised — ’ His cold lips were derisive. ‘Go back to the Belle Sauvage and sit by ye’ fire. It’ll be safer for ye.’ He sniffed. ‘Ye’re a mite too old to play the fire eater.’

De Courcy looked a little thoughtful. Then he sighed and, very deliberately, drew his sword.

For a large man, Quilt Arnold was capable of moving very quickly. He was a cudgel man, the victor of a hundred vicious brawls in the alleys of Holborn and the City, whose weighted bludgeon could fracture a skull or an arm with a single whiplash blow. Now that bludgeon whirled in Arnold’s hand, savagely, at de Courcy’s head.

But de Courcy, inconceivably, moved even faster. His blade flickered delicately, a blur of light. Arnold’s bludgeon spun in the air and clattered against a far wall, and then Arnold shouted with pain as de Courcy nonchalantly thrust through the shoulder. ‘Bleedin’ Lucifer!’ he choked,

reeling. 'Ye've spiked me!' Wild's own sword was half drawn, but remained so. The razor tongue of de Courcy's blade licked again, magically removing Wild's six waistcoat buttons, two cuff buttons and a dildo curl over each ear. Wild stood very still.

Awkwardly astride on his timber leg, de Courcy spun his sword around his wrist like a cane, flung it upwards and caught it deftly with the ease of a fairground juggler. The point was at Wild's throat. 'Now,' de Courcy said, conversationally, 'let's start again. First, the note.' Wild drew the folded paper from a pocket and de Courcy pushed it into his own. 'Now, Master Wild, ye'll lead us to Rann.' He glanced at the white-faced Arnold. 'Get ye to a surgeon. Ye'll live, cully, wi' a stiff muscle that'll plague ye every November. Ye can take my word for it.' He turned back to Wild. 'Shall we walk?'

*

They walked — Adam, de Courcy, and Wild — northwards from Cock Alley, skirting Smithfield towards Cow Cross. Adam remembered the locality vaguely. He had watched two dogs matched for a purse here, during his apprenticeship days. That must have been 1701 — or was in 1702? Now the place seemed meaner, somehow — the houses smaller and dirtier, the alleyways narrower. There were people, some furtive-eyed and others drunkenly unstable, children thin-faced, filthy and noisy, slatternly women with a vicious oath for a screeching infant, an invidious stink of damp plaster, ordure, unwashed bodies and gin-soaked breath. Occasional open doors revealed dark, sordid interiors, broken walls and crumpled, soiled bedding, and huddled bundles of rags oblivious to the outside world. This was the London never trodden by the bewigged gentry of Strand and Covent Garden. This was the London of law-fleeing criminals, prostitutes and disease, where a stranger walked in constant hazard, where children were murdered for the

sake of the few coppers their clothes would bring — to be spent on gin and a night of stupefaction. No doctor or parson walked here, no dirt-men shovelled refuse and no hands cared to repair the broken casements, the splintered tiles, the peeling, lecherous walls. A single public pump provided water of doubtful origin for several streets, the hub of community gossip among the clatter of pails and fish-kettles. The gutters were clogged with rubbish, infested with rats.

Jonathon Wild, who had trodden in silence since they had left Cock Alley, halted. He nodded at a door at the head of a series of crumbling steps. ‘That’s it,’ he said surlily. ‘If ye must know, it’s been watched for two days, and the girl ain’t left yet.’

Adam glanced about him. ‘I don’t see anyone.’

‘Ye won’t,’ Wild answered.

‘And Rann?’

‘He’ll not be here in daytime. There’s naught to his profit here.’

Adam climbed the steps, tested the door with his hand, then kicked it open. There was no sound of movement from within. Bracing himself against the stonework, he pushed with all his strength. The flimsy planking shattered and the door burst open with a clatter.

‘Sara? — ’ Adam walked into the unlit room, his feet among scattered debris. De Courcy and Wild followed. There was a grimy palliasse in one corner, a rusting brazier below a chimney, and remnants of bread and bacon on a rickety table — but the room was unoccupied.

Adam turned to face Wild, his eyes narrowed. Wild shrugged, his puzzlement genuine. ‘I don’t know,’ he muttered. ‘The place was watched, I tell ye — ’

‘Aye — and whatever gin-sotted kern ye used didn’t see young Thomas leave, and I’ll hazard didn’t know there was a second way out!’ Adam

pointed to a second door in the opposite wall. Wrenching it open, he stared into a small, puddled courtyard surrounded by ramshackle roofs. 'What's over there?'

'Bunhill Fields and Finsbury,' Wild said morosely.

NINETY-FIVE GUINEAS were as good a night's haul as he'd ever had — and seldom easier come by. He'd seen the dull glitter of gold as the girl paid the coachman, and from that moment there had been no doubt in his mind that his vigil in the shadows would repay him handsomely. But he'd made a mistake. He should have seized the bundle and run for the darkness. It would have been simple enough. He could not, however, resist the temptation to play any game slyly — besides, it was less physically demanding on a cold November night.

He had taken a circuitous route to Cow Cross to confuse his victims and, if possible, to shake them off. They had refused to be shaken off and, furthermore, he had heard the unmistakable sound of following footsteps. The owner of those footsteps he could not guess, but he knew the reason for them. Among London's criminal community, dog did not hesitate to eat dog, and there was one man, at least, who had a keen interest in every crime committed — Jonathon Wild.

Jerry Rann breathed an oath. Nobody disputed Jonathon Wild with impunity. Wild was a jackal — a vicious jackal. Rann resented Wild depriving him of a pewter button, but that wasn't the worst of it.

He — Rann — had followed one blunder by another, 'Od fester it. Aye, the boy had earned his smashed mouth, but he ought to have thrown the girl after him while there was still time. They could never have led law officers, or anyone else, back to his lodging — even if he chose to remain there on the morrow. Reaching for his belt, angrily intent on laying it across her buttocks, the sight of her helpless, struggling form had stayed him. She was young and

clean — no lady of fashion, likely, but a sweet difference to the dishevelled, sweating drabs of Cow Cross. The inches of smooth thigh about her rumpled stockings and the breasts thrusting at the thin cotton of her shift had sent the blood pounding in his head, and he had reached for her. That had been his biggest mistake. B'God she'd fought, kicking and twisting, but he'd thrashed the resistance from her, and eventually she lay still, exhausted and sobbing as he'd had his way with her.

At dawn, released from the trammel of her skirts, she had sat unmoving on the dirty mattress, her face white, her swollen eyes fixed on the wall opposing her. She had not spoken. He had offered her bread and bacon, but she had ignored him, and he stood, chewing noisily as he contemplated her.

Aye, he should have disposed of her last night, with the boy. It was too hazardous in daylight. Mind you, there was a way. He could finish it with a knife, and let the river have her corpse — after dark. He'd done more than enough already to hang, and murder couldn't promise him worse. He glanced again at Sara. He'd committed a lot of crimes in his time, but never murder and, s'blood, it would be a crying waste of a wench like this. If she could be broken, a brothel-keeper would pay handsomely for her. Scores of similar wenches — and younger — were sold into brothels, where they became old and diseased before their mid-twenties, bemused by gin, their spirits whipped from them. Could he trade this wench?

By mid-morning he was becoming uncomfortably conscious of the passage of time. There might be a hue and cry for the girl. Somebody — probably a creature of Jonathon Wild — had shadowed him last night, and the boy was loose. Wild, at least, would not share confidences with Bow Street yet, but there was no point in waiting for trouble to come a-chasing. If Rann were wise, he'd determine his next move quickly.

Sara did not resist as he tied her hands behind her, and she still sat silently

and listless when he left, locking the door. The cobbles were still wet from overnight rain, and there was less stench than usual. The sky was overcast, threatening more rain to come. He looked carefully to left and right, but there seemed nobody with more than casual interest in him. Not that this meant much. No shadow advertised his presence. He walked towards Smithfield.

She sat, coldly numb, studying a crack in the wall that twisted from ceiling to floor like a black serpent. Her pelvis throbbed, her breasts ached, and her lips were raw from her own biting. She had survived a nightmare.

The animal had gone. She shuddered, remembering the lash of his belt, his brutal hands, the stifling weight of his sweat-reeking body and, more than anything, the savage, relentless lust of him that had left her crushed and whimpering.

He had slept with his wet, snoring mouth against her neck, she terrified of stirring lest he awaken and reach for her again. Near to dawn, however, grunting drowsily, his hands had scrabbled at her body, and her flesh crawled. Resistance was useless, and she had lain staring at the ceiling, choking back her nausea and praying that he soon be finished.

Thank God, he had gone. He had left her tied and the door locked, so for certain he was returning. Did he intend to keep her prisoner indefinitely? She shuddered again. Such a thing was surely impossible in civilized London? There were law officers — and surely Adam would be in London by today, searching for her and Thomas. And where was Thomas?

She felt dirtied, lepered — and she had neither eaten nor drunk since the previous day. She couldn't have swallowed food — certainly not the bacon and stale bread from Rann's grubby hands — but she was parched with thirst. Faint street noises penetrated the wall, but there was no window. Didn't anyone know she was here — or care?

The hours dragged by. It might be afternoon or evening; she had no means

of knowing. The sliver of light beneath the door gradually faded, then disappeared. Her wrists were not tightly secured, but her arms and shoulders ached, and she was cold. Perhaps, she began to think, Rann had abandoned her.

But he had not. She heard his feet on the stairs, and cringed. The lock rattled impatiently, the door creaked open, and a few seconds later, a candle-flame flickered, shielded from the draught by his cupped hand. He stood over her and grinned.

‘Time for a change o’ residence, mistress.’ He motioned her to her feet.

She rose, shaking off his hand. ‘You’re a thief, an abductor and a ravisher. You’ll hang.’

‘Not if Jerry Rann c’n help it,’ he sniffed.

She stared at him. ‘Do you suppose you’ll not be hunted, and do you suppose I’d not recognize you from a thousand others?’

‘Ye might,’ he conceded, grimly, ‘if ye were here to recognize anyone.’

She was silent, then. ‘You’re going to kill me.’

‘No,’ he shook his head, ‘that I’ll promise ye — that is, so long as ye behave peaceful. If ye don’t — ’ He grinned again as he swung her cloak over her shoulders and buttoned it at the neck. ‘Ye’ll be needin’ this where ye’re goin’.’

‘No! — ’ he grated, ‘not that door. There’s some pryin’ eyes out there that I’m a mite shy of.’ He nodded at the other wall. ‘*That* door, m’dear.’ She winced as his fingers bit into her arm. ‘Remember,’ he warned. ‘One screech an’ I’ll stick ye. It ain’t far, and we’re goin’ by quiet ways.’ He paused. ‘Wapping.’

THOMAS HAD recovered from his bruises, but, at Nell Something's insistence, remained at Bell Yard while Adam and de Courcy scoured the area between Cow Cross and Finsbury. Neither Rann, Wild, nor Old Scratch himself, Nell swore, would reach for Thomas beyond the azure door, and Adam believed her. Jones, of the Holborn division, scenting Wild's involvement, had detached two officers to the same business, but it was a fruitless search. Jerry Rann had disappeared — gone to earth, Jones said, in any of a score of snug backwaters.

John de Courcy breathed fire and outlandish oaths, to the amusement of Nell's young ladies — who similarly spoiled and teased Thomas to his continuous embarrassment. Adam had handbills printed, promising that 'one hundred pounds reward will be paid to whosoever provides information leading to the apprehension of one Jeremiah Rann, footpad and pickpocket, late of Cow Cross, or to the recovery of the person of Sara Hewar, sixteen years, abducted by the aforementioned Jeremiah Rann from the yard of the Belle Sauvage...'

He had also written to Mary, in Sawston, telling her that Thomas, at least, was safe. Adam would have liked to pack the boy home, but Thomas had developed an uncharacteristic obstinacy, declaring that only he could identify Rann, and so should stay. In addition he added — just once and in a whisper — that he had abandoned Sara on one occasion, and he'd rot before he did so again.

The empty days passed, and November became December in a London sodden with continuous rain. With the domestic scene comparatively

untroubled and Change Alley once again in fine fettle, conversation in clubs and coffee-houses resumed its normal pattern — those frog-eating, Pope-ridden Frenchmen, the Jacobites, the Duchess of Shrewsbury, the latest lottery. The King's Guards, in damp scarlet, paraded in Whitehall with drums and hautboys, and young rakes argued for war and another opportunity to beggar their neighbours across the Channel.

Cause might be found on the Ohio, the Senegal — and surely in India, where John Company, from its office in Leadenhall Street with the sign of a fleet of merchantmen tossing on the waves and a huge wooden seaman between two dolphins, had built several forts and could muster a small army of Indians and Europeans. The English, with a modicum of help from the Dutch, had thrashed the French at Blenheim, Ramillies, Oudenarde and Malplaquet, and could do so again — anywhere in the world. There were popular songs about Hearts of Oak and Roast Beef of Old England. Broadsheets showed St George depicted as an honest English tar seated on a lion, flourishing in one hand a tankard of strong beer and in the other a cutlass spearing a noble sirloin. True, Marlborough, Captain-General, was seventy, and unlikely again to command an army in the field, but what mattered were men and money. England had prisons full of men, and wars were golden investments.

It was a dark afternoon, with the rain turned to sleet, when a little man with a teak face and a strangely rolling gait was ushered into Nell Something's parlour, to stand with sodden feet apart on the puce carpet. He touched his forelock. 'Haitch,' he said, 'Toby Haitch, seaman, late o' the gun-brig *Growler*.' He glanced from de Courcy to Adam, then extracted a creased hand-bill from the soggy folds of his cloak. 'This wench — Sara Hewar — '

Adam sprang from his chair. 'Sara? Ye know where she is?'

The seaman scratched an ear. 'Aye — leastways, I c'n hazard a guess. Five

miles off Wight, course west b' south'ard before a good followin' wind — though a mite wet.'

Adam gaped, and Haitch added, 'The *Elizabeth* transport, wi' felons an' whores for His Majesty's plantations.'

'Plantations? Ye're saying that Sara's on a *ship*?'

'Aye,' Haitch nodded. 'Like I said, the *Elizabeth*, out o' London. She were lying at Wapping two months 'afore slipping ten days ago — when the wench were taken aboard.'

'Ten days! Dammit, man — the handbill's been printed near three weeks! — '

Haitch looked mildly hurt. 'Likely so, but I ain't got no learnin', and it were only this forenoon it were read to me.'

'Festerin' blood!' Adam pressed a hand to his brow, then drew a deep breath. 'Tell us all of it, man — from the beginning.'

Haitch scratched his other ear, frowning. 'I'd been paid off from the *Growler*, y'see, a month since, and looking fer another berth that weren't in a rot-gutted King's ship. This *Elizabeth*, now, were wanting hands, and the night before she sailed I took on.'

'Then how are ye here?' Adam asked.

'Well, I didn't fancy spending no last night in a stinkin' prison ship. She'd been alongside two months, ye'll understand, and needed a few days o' sea to blow the stench from her. So, when the Master were below, I goes ashore, meaning to be back aboard by first light.' He grinned. 'Well, wi' a few rums, an' a doxie — by the time I got back to Wapping the *Elizabeth* had slipped fer the tide and were somewhere off Tilbury.'

Adam grunted impatiently. 'And what's that to do wi' Sara Hewar?'

'It were the night 'afore, like I said. I'd just stowed me gunny when a man comes aboard holdin' fast to a wench. She weren't no felon, that's for certain.

He talks to the Master, quiet like, and I heard the chink o' money. Then the man left, 'n' the wench were put below wi' the other women. Bein' a mite curious, I kept me ears open — and heard the Master tell the supercargo to add the name o' Sara Hewar to the indenture list.'

Helplessly, Adam turned to de Courcy. 'Is it possible, John? What does it mean?'

De Courcy was thoughtful, but he nodded slowly. 'Aye, it's possible — more's the pity. It's possible.'

'But how could it happen? Sara's no felon!'

'It's the transportation system that's to blame, Adam. Since the Crown Solicitor can offer only five pounds a head for a felon's transport to the Americas, it's not easy to find shipowners willing to do it. So, to make the business worthwhile, the Crown transfers the felons' indentures to the shipowner, so's he can sell 'em in the Colonies for, say, another seven pounds apiece. That makes 'em worth twelve pounds each, which'll show a profit over the cost o' food and passage.'

'And Sara?'

'Aye — well — she represents another seven pounds to an unscrupulous owner — likely more. And, once aboard — or ashore in the Colonies — it's no use her crying she's innocent. Half o' Newgate'll likely screech the same, given the chance.' For several seconds Adam stared at him, incredulous. 'Are ye saying that Sara has been transported to the Americas as a bonded felon? Is there naught we can do?'

'There might be, given time — and if we knew where she was bound for — Virginia, Maryland, the Carolinas, Jamaica — '

Toby Haitch interrupted. 'That I can tell ye. The Carolinas.' De Courcy shrugged. 'Well, that's something, i'faith. Charles Town. There are people I know there, and I can write by the next available vessel — but ye'll bear in

mind that Sara'll be in Charles Town weeks before any letter, and likely sold and a hundred miles away.'

'Suppose — ' Adam was desperate. 'Suppose we took a fast coach to Plymouth, say, or Falmouth — then a boat to intercept the *Elizabeth*? — '

De Courcy looked at Haitch doubtfully. 'In this weather it'd take us a week — maybe more — to reach Plymouth. The roads'll be quagmires — '

Haitch shook his head. 'There's no sense in it. The *Elizabeth*'s a good sailer, whatever else she is. Besides, if ye got to Plymouth, and *if* ye got a craft, where'd ye lay for? Mid-Channel? West'ard? Have ye ever tried to sight a single sail that might be anywhere in two thousand square miles? No, ye ain't.' He laughed. 'Ye can sail yeself ragged and see naught but green brine and reeking bilges.'

'Od's blood!' Adam spat. 'Ye don't suppose I can stand idle here while Sara's in a festerin' prison ship, do ye?' He recalled the fetid 'tween decks of the *Resolution*, sixteen years earlier, which had conveyed him to Rotterdam and Marlborough's army. Strong men had wept and vomited — and that voyage had lasted only a few days. Sara would be at sea for eight weeks or more. He strode to the window. 'There's naught else for it. I'll have to take ship and follow.'

Haitch whistled softly between brown-stained teeth. De Courcy was silent for several moments, then said. 'I'll not quarrel with that, Adam. The question is, what ship and where from? There's a regular Americas trade out of Deptford, but likely Bristol's better. Then, again, ye might go to Bristol and be kicking ye' heels for weeks before ye found something bound for Charles Town. There'll be a lot o' ship-owners delaying departure till Christmas is past. Ye *might* settle for a passage to Port Royal, say, or New Providence, hoping a local craft'll take ye on to Charles Town.' He plucked at a lip. 'Or — there's another way — '

‘Ye can swim,’ said Haitch.

‘No,’ de Courcy went on. ‘There’s the *Paladin*.’

Haitch cleared his throat, looked about for a place to spit, then changed his mind and swallowed it. ‘The *Paladin*,’ he muttered. ‘Fitting at Deptford, ain’t she? A slaver. A rot-gutted blackbird. That’s worse’n a prison ship.’

‘The *Paladin*?’ Adam glanced up. ‘Ye mean she’s sailing to Charles Town?’

‘Aye, in two days,’ de Courcy nodded, ‘but not direct. She runs down to the Guinea coast first, to trade for Negroes, then the Middle Passage. It’s just possible, if there’s no French guard-ship, that she’ll load what she needs on the Senegal. If not, it’ll be the Gambia.’ He paused to consider. ‘Under different circumstances, Adam, I’d let ye take the *Paladin*, in ballast, by the shortest route to Charles Town. But ye’ll understand that every shilling I have — and a lot that I’ve borrowed — are pledged to the *Paladin*’s first venture. And time’s not on my side. Ye understand?’

‘Damn ye, John — o’ course.’ Adam gave a rueful grin. ‘And I’m grateful, believe me.’ He walked to the window, perplexed. ‘Ye suppose the *Paladin*’s a wise choice? There could be some plaguey delays — ’

‘Not as many as ye’d suppose. John Roxtro’s a good seaman, and he drives his ship. He has to. He’s got a damned perishable cargo.’

‘Aye, and a lot of it’ll bloody well perish.’ It was Haitch.

But it was settled and, that being so, there was more to be done in two days than seemed possible to achieve. No time was left for a return to Sawston. There was a sea trunk to buy, shirts, shoes and kersey hose, a broad-brimmed hat called a Monmouth Cock, muslin neck-cloths, canvas pantaloons for ship wear, a grogram cloak. De Courcy insisted upon a pair of fine pistols from Coutts of Houndsditch — terrifying the gunsmith by putting a ball from each into the same knot-hole at thirty paces before pronouncing them adequate.

There was no time for Adam to reflect upon the prospect of a voyage to Africa and then the Americas. A few days earlier he would have laughed at the suggestion — now he was grateful, after three weeks of frustration, for positive employment. Sara, he consoled himself, was no infant. Transportation was damned galling, but it wasn't a death sentence. Thousands of men, women and children had survived the ordeal and been little the worse for it — and Sara was healthier in body than most of the wretches who crammed the prison ships' holds.

Thomas proved to be the first problem. For the only time in his life he faced his father determinedly, demanding that he come to Charles Town also and swearing that, if returned to Sawston, he would abscond again immediately and find a ship of his own. He wasn't, he declared, going to be packed home like a schoolboy. 'There's things that've got to be done,' he said obscurely, 'and I'll not be put off. Ye can thrash me if ye like, but it'll not change the outcome.'

Adam had no intention of thrashing the boy. He was more surprised than annoyed. De Courcy, who had hitherto spared little regard for Thomas, eyed him with a new interest, and then, as Adam hesitated, announced gruffly that the experience might be no bad thing. Nell Something swore for an hour, naming Adam and de Courcy bootheaded oafs and scabby rag-pickers for even considering Thomas' participation. But the matter was determined. Thomas would accompany Adam. It was perhaps a good thing, Adam mused, that time did not allow Mary or Betty Cowper to add an opinion.

Toby Haitch was the second problem. The stocky seaman had brought information of Sara's whereabouts, but Sara was not yet recovered. Nor was there proof that the information was genuine. Adam had already suffered from the duplicity of Jonathon Wild, and he was not to be bitten a second time. Haitch himself finally provided the solution. He, too, he offered, would

sail in the *Paladin* — as an able seaman, if the master would have him. He had no relish for slavers — rotgutting blackbirds — but he knew what he'd seen and heard in the dark waist of the *Elizabeth*, and a hundred pounds was a hundred pounds. Mind you, he had left his chattels in the *Elizabeth*, and if Adam could accommodate him with a few guineas? —

At Deptford, Captain John Roxtro accepted the appearance of Adam, Thomas and Toby Haitch with a hint of disapproval in his eyes, but he was courteous enough. Expecting a rude, gruff man, Adam was surprised. Roxtro, in his fifties, was quiet of voice and thoughtful, with a clean-shaven face as tanned as Haitch's and greying hair tied in a neat club on his neck. Like Haitch also, he stood with feet widely braced, and rolled as he walked.

'She's a well-found craft,' he conceded, nodding at the yards above their heads. 'I wouldn't command her if she weren't. Capacity? Five hundred blacks in two half-decks — if ye can get that number. Men for'ard, children 'midships an' women aft.' He led Adam below to the long, empty maindeck, into which daylight filtered from grated scuttles in the ship's sides. 'They're shackled together, y'see, in pairs — handcuffs and leg-irons. Aye, it won't smell as sweet as this wi' four or five hundred o' the cattle aboard — but we treat 'em better than most. There were one two-hundred-and-thirty tonner out o' Liverpool, trading from the Bonny, that had ten die before she left the river and three hundred dead in the Middle Passage — an' that's a mortal waste o' owner's money.'

'The *Elizabeth*? Aye, I saw her slipping downstream. She'll be running sou'-west'ard to the horse latitudes to pick up the trades. No fear o' the French, but there might be from buccaneers — Calico Jack Rackham, Charlie Vane, Anne Bonny and Bart Roberts — they're still off the southern colonies, but the *Elizabeth*'s capable o' showing 'em a clean pair o' heels, as the *Paladin* is.'

Roxtro signed Haitch without hesitation. ‘Paid off from the *Growler*, did he say?’ He sniffed. ‘Well, I’ll not ask questions. He’s a seaman, which is a sight more than most o’ the lousy tavern scum I’ve had to sign. Good seamen don’t like slavers.’ He gave a nod, indicating the brief tour over. ‘Ye’d best get ye’ baggage inboard. I want to be in the estuary by forenoon.’ Adam and Thomas shared a tiny cabin space reluctantly ceded by the mate, who then possessed himself of the even smaller berth of the quartermaster. Adam eyed with mixed feelings a rack of ten muskets, with ring bayonets fixed, against one bulkhead. There was no ventilation save by the narrow door, and the space promised to be a stifling oven in the heat of the tropics.

They dined with Roxtro in his cabin over the stern feeling, as they ate, the unladen *Paladin* curtsy gently in the river swell, as if anxious for the moment, a few hours hence, when she would be unleashed from the slovenly dock to make her way to the clean, green sea. The cabin was large, well lit from the fine stern windows, and Adam experienced a moment of resentment before realizing that the space was not frivolously employed. It was obviously to be used as a wardroom for the ship’s officers, and there was a large surgeon’s chest in one corner in addition to another rack of muskets. ‘No, not the blacks,’ Roxtro said, observing Adam’s glance. ‘There’s more to fear from mutiny wi’ the gutter-rats we have for a crew.’

‘And other ships?’

Roxtro shrugged. ‘As I said, it’s better to run. We don’t carry any heavy metal, and the crew’ll have no belly for fighting. There’s a French guardship in the vicinity of the Senegal to drive off any English, Spanish or Portugee slavers, but she’s a slow old scow, and the *Paladin* can sail three miles to her two. In American waters, a buccaneer could give us more trouble, but our course’ll be a mite northerly of pirate latitudes, and it’s likely we’ll not sight one.’

In his own cramped berth Adam tossed uncomfortably for hours, listening to the slap of water against the jetty piles and the gentle creaking of ship's timbers. It was not until the early hours that he drifted into an uneasy sleep. Long before first light, however, he was awakened again by a medley of strange noises — the clatter of feet, distant shouts, the squeal of a windlass. He jerked upright, only to buffet his head on the deckhead, inches above him. He groaned.

He rose and dressed, with Thomas still slumbering, then climbed to the upper deck, the jetty had disappeared and the ship was in midstream with both shores just visible in the greying, cold dawn. Roxtro, muffled to his eyes, flung a hand towards the empty reed-stippled mud-flats to starboard. 'Plumstead marshes,' he yawned. 'Ye'd best have a cup o' hot ale to warm ye' belly.'

TWO WEEKS out of London, the *Elizabeth* plunged and rolled off St Catherine's Point, having taken the whole day to beat the twenty miles from Selsey. The wind, two days earlier a brisk north-easterly, had shifted drastically, and now every mile was a tedious, clawing tack, lurching the vessel until her maindeck ports were awash and the spray exploding as high as the foreyard. The galley fire had been cold for two days, and the crew — who had not seen dry clothes since slipping from Wapping — smouldering and surly at being reduced to hard biscuit so early in a voyage. With a lee shore scarce a mile to starboard, the prospect of Portland's race ahead, and no sign of the wind easing, nerves were raw and tempers short. There was a muttering that the captain should have run for Portsmouth, to let this festering south-wester blow itself tired; beyond Portland — if they scrambled past it — there was no shelter for forty miles, and no cargo of plaguey felons was worth the hazard.

But if the crew were wet-skinned, nervous and disgruntled, the plight of the hundred and ninety felons below hatches was a hundred times worse. The two holds had been already rancid and filthy before the ship left Wapping. Now, with the decks slippery from several days of seawater, vomit and the slop-pings from the untended urine buckets, the odour of unwashed bodies and the foul bilges below, the stench was choking. In separate decks, men and women sprawled and huddled against the bulkheads and stanchions, in darkness, sucking air through chinks in the planking. The stronger kicked a space for themselves and defended it with feet and fists. The weaker, cramped and nauseated, slumped with knees to chin, or, with faces to the

stinking deck, prayed for unconsciousness.

Once in each day — a few minutes of breathless luxury — the hatch was opened to allow the mate and several seamen to descend with a beaker of water, and victuals — a pound of bread or meal to every felon supplemented by meat offal and other waste from the fo’c’sle and wardroom rations. The water was invariably tainted and the victuals often shortmeasured, but the clean, salt air flooded the hold, and the stifled, retching felons stirred, scrabbling for a handful of bread, a lungful of sweet breath and a fleeting glimpse of a tiny square of grey-white sky, regardless of the mate’s cudgel. Then the hatch closed, the light vanished, and the stench returned to foul the nostrils.

Within a week, a score of the felons were fluxed from the rotting offal — sheep’s paunches, entrails and skins eschewed by some Thames-side slaughter yard — and, forbidden to relieve themselves on deck, polluted the buckets even more or lay helplessly in their own filth. Any who had been free of lice before boarding the vessel became quickly infested, and among the groans and oaths, the retching and sobbing could be heard another sound — the continuous scratching of itching, bitten bodies.

The *Elizabeth* had lurched into the comparative shelter of Weymouth Bay, with no hope of passing seaward of Portsmouth and in considerable hazard of grounding northward of Weymouth, when the wind dropped as if severed by a knife. It might have been an opportunity for a day’s respite at anchor, to air and dry the holds, take on the last of fresh provisions, and make ready for the long Atlantic crossing, but the captain, wary of the wind resuming, was not to be caught on a lee shore again. He turned southwards, gratefully into mid-Channel. Besides, every day’s delay meant another day of victuals for the felons below and a hungry crew for’ard.

Sara had not interpreted the full significance of the moored *Elizabeth*, or

Rann's low-voiced conversation with the ship's captain, until she had been thrust into the blackness of the women's deck. Her late addition among the already closely confined felons was rudely unwelcome. Stumbling blindly among the crouched bodies and outflung legs, she had been kicked and punched amid obscene invective and, when she had cried out helplessly, told to shut her face. The fetid air clawed at her throat, and the slimed deck brought her heavily to her knees. A hand tore at her hair, wrenching her full length, where she lay choking and terrified, her face in nauseating wetness. Then a strong grip fastened on her shoulder, hauled her, unresisting, into a narrow haven between two sweat-reeking torsos, and an ill-tempered voice ordered her to 'snuff ye' pipin' or take a fist i' the teeth'. Sara had remained still.

That first night had been bitterly cold, despite her cloak, and, sickened though she was, she had been grateful for the warmth that her neighbours' bodies afforded. Incredibly, in her exhaustion, she must have slept — even briefly. She awoke in the early hours to find herself firmly clasped in the arms of her amply-built benefactor of the previous night, smelling strongly and grunting. Sara's acquaintanceship with lice began from that moment.

Dawn brought the merest glimmer of light from the ill-fitting hatch cover, but not enough for Sara to distinguish much of her surroundings. In the gloom several women were stirring, coughing from the cold, scratching and spitting, or scrambling over their cursing fellows to reach the buckets. Sara was suddenly uncomfortably aware that her captor's hands were examining her — hips, thighs, breasts, face. She jerked away in distaste, but the other chuckled. 'Fer Chris'sake lay quiet, will ye?' There was a sniff, then, 'Ye're a young'un, ain't ye? Where ye from? Newgate? Marshalsea?'

Sara shuddered. 'I'm not a felon. There's been a mistake — '

'Aye, ain't there always?' The fingers had continued their appraisal,

probing suggestively, and Sara, seething with a fresh disgust, strained to release herself, but a hand closed over her breast and squeezed like a steel claw. Sara shrieked.

‘There, my pretty. It ain’t worth it, is it? An’ ye’re goin’ to be a long time a-lying aside me.’ The grip relaxed, and Sara sobbed. ‘I’m not a felon, I tell you. I’m not — ’

There was a screeching rattle as the hatch cover was thrown back. On the instant the hold heaved with violence as seventy women fought to reach the foot of the ladder. An officer with a cudgel was descending, followed by four seamen with laden hods of bread. Several of the felons were battling desperately with fists and nails, and the officer’s cudgels flailed as the seamen laughed.

‘Keep ye’ distance, ye scabby bitches! D’ye hear? Keep ye’ distance, or ye’ll have empty bellies, I promise ye! — ’

Sara pulled herself to her feet. ‘Sir! — Your attention, I beg you!’ Her voice was almost drowned by the commotion at the foot of the ladder. ‘I’m not a felon, sir — will you hear me? — ’

The officer’s eyes wandered over her, then flickered back. ‘What are ye prattling, baggage? Is our little *Elizabeth* not to ye’ liking? Ye’d prefer an Indiaman, wi’ waxed decks an’ painted cabins, eh? Chocolate in ye’ bed an’ the captain’s table for dining?’ He paused. ‘If it weren’t for gimcrack magistrates ye’d have been dragged on a hurdle to Tyburn, instead o’ which ye’re passaging at Treasury expense to the Americas — ’

There was a concert of hoots and catcalls, and a raucous voice added, ‘Aye, Master Mate, an’ for an extra pound o’ bread ye can earn yeself a softer passage, in ye’ bunk — or the sail locker if ye’re modest!’

The mate snorted disgustedly. ‘After two years o’ sea I just might — wi’ my nose stuffed, an’ a blindfold — *an* wi’ a bushel o’ festerin’ Paris Pills!’

The *Elizabeth*, Sara calculated desperately, must still be in the Thames. There had been insufficient time for her to travel farther — but, once in the open sea, all hope of salvation would surely be gone. ‘Master Mate! — ’

‘Stow it, brazen-face. Ye’ll get no favours. Any o’ the crew found rutting wi’ a felon’ll be flogged at the gratings, an’ the women likewise.’ He grinned. ‘An’ ye’ve Big Jenny for a consort, eh? Ye couldn’t get better on a John Company flagship, my oath on’t!’ He swung himself up the ladder and the hatched cover screeched again. The hold was in darkness.

‘There, my pretty, it don’t do no good, do it?’ The woman at her side reached up for her. ‘And like he said, we’ve got Big Jenny. She’ll see ye don’t go hungry, nor parched.’ Sara felt the fleshy arms around her, then a hand on the lacings of her bodice. She stiffened, but the other held her fast. ‘Now. my kitling, jus’ lay quiet an’ let Big Jenny coax ye.’ There was a smirking laugh from the darkness, several feet away, and Sara choking in her misery, sobbed, uncaring.

THE WATER of the bay was of virgin sapphire, its glassy calm marred only by the silken ripple that followed the *Paladin* as she glided leisurely under the barest canvas to give her way towards the shore-line. From the fore chainwale the voice of the leadsman hung in the air, reed-like. 'An' a half four! — ' A seaman stood on the fo'c'sle, waist-stripped, his eyes fixed aft and in his hands the mallet with which he would strike away the pin that alone restrained the poised anchor cable. His shoulders were lobster red and peeling, smarting from the sweat that poured from him.

The sun smote with the force of a hammer, searing, intolerable. Tar melted in the plank seams, demanding that the decks be constantly swilled with brine and the small boats half filled. Paintwork blistered and cracked, and the horny hands of seamen were scalded by the simmering touch of brass and iron.

In the waist Captain Roxtro raised an arm. On the fo'c'sle the mallet fell with a clap and the cable roared, spilling into the bay. Shoreward, a storm of birds, multi-coloured, rose screaming. Roxtro turned. 'Get those damn' rags in — and move ye' rotten hides! Mas' Mate — I'll have a minion loaded, if ye please, wi' powder only.' He walked to the side, pulling open his glass. Four hundred yards away a gentle surf creamed on the bleached sand, dazzling, hurting the eyes. Beyond, stretching to the horizon, was the forest — another sea of tumultuous green. The wheeling chaos of birds sank into the trees, and the silence came.

At Roxtro's elbow Adam shaded his eyes, puzzled. 'This is it?'

Roxtro, the glass to his eye, did not answer immediately. Then he merely

said, 'Aye.'

The landfall was hardly to Adam's expectation. He had visualized landing stages, other ships loading, compounds of waiting slaves, perhaps a fort, and military — all that meant a quick turn-round for the Middle Passage. Here there was nothing — nothing save a deserted beach and an unearthly silence.

Roxtro snapped his glass shut and pursed his lips. 'Mas' Mate? — '

The gun thundered and Adam jumped. Powder smoke flattened over the calm water, thinning, and again the trees erupted birds indignantly screaming, like wind-swirled snowflakes. If the gun was intended to have some other immediate effect, Adam's straining eyes could detect none. Roxtro seemed undisturbed, ordering empty water casks to be piled on deck, an awning to be rigged, and the slave-decks to be swilled with watered vinegar. 'Ye'll see,' he told Adam, 'why we shipped thirty kegs o' vinegar.'

Adam might have commented that the ale issued daily to the crew could not have been distinguished, but, 'Ye're going ashore?' he asked. Roxtro shook his head. 'No. We wait.' He wiped the sweat from his face with a handkerchief. 'It's damn hot.'

During the weeks at sea Adam had learned that Roxtro could not be pressed for information. In his own time, and not before, he would volunteer it. Adam held his tongue.

The passage southwards had been uneventful, if monotonous, with Roxtro's course well westward of the Madeiras to lessen the possibility of encountering Barbary corsairs, who had slave-taking designs of their own. Off the Senegal he had paused only to confirm that a French guardship lay off Fort St Louis before continuing — with the guardship trailing clumsily for a day to see that the Englishman intended no intercourse with shore. Then, two days ago, despite an indifferent wind, he had taken in sail to ensure passing the mouth of the Gambia in darkness, and now, unreasonably, he had

dropped anchor off a wild, lonely coast exactly the same as that for a hundred miles.

‘English, French, Spanish, Portugee — they’re all trafficking, an’ there’s seasons when the blacks are in short supply.’ Roxtro finally chose to explain. ‘Trouble is, Sir John de Courcy’s not registered wi’ the Royal Africa, so that rules out the Combre River — on the Coast — or Gambia Colony. There’s Company factories in both places, and military. Likewise wi’ the Senegal — French territory.’

‘So ye’re going to poach ye’ own?’

‘‘Sblood, no. Slave-traders don’t hunt their own cattle these days. Ye might suppose all these plaguey blacks are alike, but they’re not. In the interior there’s scores o’ different tribes, continually warring an’ raiding. It’s the captives from these affairs that are sent to the coast, to the factories. Aye, these tribal kings know the value o’ slave flesh, an’ they’ll take every opportunity o’ carrying off a neighbour’s people. Some of ’em will even sell their own.’ He paused to raise his glass at the shore, shimmering in the heat, then resumed.

‘Like I said, there’s different blacks — Togo, Fanti, Ebo, and a lot o’ others who come from God knows where — some good, some poison. There’s some’ll work like plough-horses, others that’ll die on ye as soon as ye lift the kedge. That’s one reason for avoiding the factories if ye can arrange something different. Ye have to take what the factor has, or wait in the hope o’ something better coming downriver. An’ ye can wait for weeks, wi’ four or five other slavers waiting wi’ ye — an’ all scheming an’ bribing to get the pick.’

Again Roxtro scanned the empty beach. ‘There’s another festerin’ reason for keeping clear o’ the Combre and the Gambia. They’re stinkin’ midden-holes. Sunstroke, fever, dys-entry, malaria, yellow jack — an’ pox. Among

the local blacks there's not a female between eight an' eighty that's not rotten wi' it. That's for a beginning. The military loses half a company a month. There's naught else, ye see except black whores, rum and the native fire-brew that'll send a man raving. If I put the *Paladin's* scum ashore we'd not get back enough to muster one watch.'

Adam was beginning to understand. 'Ye mentioned arranging something different. That's why we're here?'

The other nodded, frowning. The sun was directly overhead, its white heat penetrating even the mainsail spread as an awning over their heads. Roxtro dabbed at a speckled rash in the creases of his neck. 'Damn hot,' he muttered.

Adam's interest in the complexities of slave-trading was subsidiary to an urgent desire to reach the Carolinas as quickly as possible. The last six weeks had probably been wasted, and he was doubting the wisdom of accepting de Courcy's offer.

'There's another source o' blacks,' Roxtro was saying. 'The Moors — the real slave-masters. Their capital is a place named Timbuctoo, a thousand miles inland, where no white man's been. Leastways, they've not lived to tell of it. No, not the Barbaries — they're a bastard, coastal breed.' He nodded towards the shore. 'There's things over there, Master Margery, that ye'd never dream of. Eight thousand miles — think on it — and white men have never seen more than ten of 'em!

'Aye,' he mused on. 'Eight thousand miles, it's said, clear to Egypt an' the Red Sea. Mountains, forests, deserts, an' it stands to reason there must be towns and cities, an' more wealth than the world's ever seen. For three hundred years all we've done is scratch the coast for a few miserable slaves, an' ivory an' skins.' His eyes narrowed. 'I'll wager there's diamonds over there as big as ye' fist, to be had as easy as picking 'em up. The mines o' King Solomon, for a beginning, and enough gold to stand higher than St

Paul's.'

Roxtro's speculations left Adam unimpressed. 'Ye've a Moor to provide ye with slaves? Here?'

'It's possible, but I can't be certain. These Moors are arrogant, independent devils, and the Royal Africa's charter don't mean a thing to 'em. A couple o' miles off that beach there's a slaving-station belonging to a man named Seku Baber — a compound where his captured slaves from the interior are mustered an' rested before being herded to the European factories — English, French or Portugee. After being driven a few hundred miles some of the blacks are plaguey near death, so they're given a day or two o' food an' rest.'

Adam nodded. 'Then can't we go ashore?' The sooner the slave-decks were filled, the sooner they would sail.

Roxtro chuckled. 'This isn't Harwich Quay, Master Margery. It's Africa. Unless ye've a platoon o' the West Coast garrison wi' ye, ye don't sally into unknown country. Seku Saber knew we were here the moment we dropped anchor, an' our gun has told him we want to trade. He'll let us know if and when we can come ashore.'

Adam eyed the beach with fresh interest, but the sands were deserted of life. In places the palms came almost to the water's edge, and the jungle seemed an impenetrable wall of vegetation — thornbush trailing by vines, grass higher than a man, contorted mangrove with, among the green, the splashed colours of bohinia, hibiscus, mimosa, gladioli and the flaunting flame tree. 'Aye,' Roxtro grinned, 'it looks inviting from a distance, don't it? Like a sleeping serpent — and just as lethal.'

In a brazen, torrid sky the sun ploughed remorselessly westward. Save for a look-out, relieved hourly, the crew were at leisure — sleeping, mending and washing clothes, or smoking their pipes around a tub of water in the bows. Although sweltering on deck, it was insufferable stifling below. On the sprit

mast, forward, the Union Jack hung faded and listless, and with scarcely more than ballast the *Paladin* hardly moved in the mirrored water.

By five in the evening, however, the air was noticeably cooler and the shadows longer. The tumbled forest was an olive green under the sky of deepening grey. Adam, with the day's sweat drying on his skin, was reaching for his discarded coat when Roxtro said simply, 'There ye are.' Adam jerked his eyes shorewards.

On the sand, motionless, was a man on a horse — having appeared, it seemed, from nowhere. At four hundred yards Adam could distinguish little except that the man was clad in flowing white and carried a lance. Roxtro, with his glass to his eye, grunted. 'Aye, it's a Moor.' He wheeled. 'Mas' Mate! I'll have the long-boat lowered, if ye please — an' smartly!' Then he vanished into his after cabin, to reappear minutes later in a laced coat and hat, buckled shoes and a sword. 'No,' he shook his head at Adam's approach, 'I'll need to be alone on this occasion. There'll be no trading tonight, only a time set for it.'

With Thomas and a throng of curious sailors, Adam watched the long-boat crawl easily towards the beach. Through Roxtro's glass he could see the bow-man wade through the shallows and the boat's prow climb from the surf and ground. Roxtro's stocky figure approached the horseman and halted. Any conversation that ensued must have been extremely brief, for within seconds the horseman had wrenched his beast about, rowelled savagely, and vanished into the bush.

Some minutes later Roxtro tumbled again into the waist of the *Paladin*. 'Tomorrow,' he said. 'We'll go ashore at dawn.' He seemed well satisfied.

The night was humid, with most of the crew sleeping on deck beneath a sky scattered with jewels. The gentlest of breezes from the shore brought a warm scent of tropical flowers and, less comforting, the night noises of the jungle

— a distant coughing shriek, the angry chatter of monkeys disturbed by some nocturnal prowler, fluttering wings among rustling foliage, and the steady, incessant whisper of the surf. The jungle, it seemed, did not sleep.

Adam awoke with the sky's glare in his eyes, blinked, and yawned. Then he jerked upright and pulled himself to his feet. On the distant beach, in precisely the same position as on the previous evening, was the mounted Moor. At the *Paladin's* side the long-boat lay low in the water, already laden with samples of trade goods — muskets, bags of powder and shot, bolts of cloth and a miscellany of pans and buckets, cheap trinkets, pins and buttons. 'Aye,' Roxtro said, appearing on deck in his laced hat, 'we'll be going ashore in a few minutes. If ye want to come ye'd best hurry. Seku Baber's not a man to be kept waiting.'

Adam dashed water into his face, donned his coat and his Monmouth Cock, then descended to the sluggishly rolling long-boat, in which Toby Haitch and four other seamen already waited, cutlasses in belts. Roxtro also wore a sword and a brace of pistols, and Adam realized, guiltily, that his own pair of fine flintlocks were still in their box, stowed in his baggage. Roxtro waved his apology aside. 'Don't make no festerin' difference. Once ashore we're in Seku Baber's hands, and another pair o' pistols won't save us if he decides to have us spitted.'

'Some o' these Moors insist on gold,' Roxtro explained as they pulled shore wards. 'But if they're trading themselves, as well as slavin' — for ivory, say — then they prefer trade goods. Gold don't mean much to the inland blacks. They can't spend it, nor make anything from it, and they'd sooner have an iron kettle or a length o' dyed calico. Best of all, they like a musket. Not that I'd recommend firing a charge from any o' these.' He nodded at the trade muskets in the belly of the boat. 'Ye'd likely lose half ye' face.'

Oddly, after six weeks at sea, the beach beneath Adam's feet seemed

damnedly unsteady, and it was an effort not to walk with the same roll that had amused him in the gait of Roxtro and Haitch. With a bolt of striped calico over his shoulder, he stole a glance at the Moor.

The man wore a loose white robe and a white turban, with a trailing scarf that, presumably, could be pulled across the lower part of the face. He had soft leather boots fixed with vicious prick-spurs and, instead of the lance of yesterday, carried a long, plaited whip curled about an arm. It was his face, however, that intrigued Adam. It was black — ebony black — and he had always supposed a Moor to be only slightly darker of skin than a Spaniard, although, i'faith, he had never seen a Spaniard.

With the seamen shouldering the trade samples, the Moor, without a word, turned his mount into a narrow jungle track, invisible from the sea and overhung by foliage. Following, the party found themselves in a green gloom, humid and oppressive, walled by impenetrable, chaotic vegetation and carpeted by a spongy, rotting slough in which they sometimes stumbled ankle deep.

In seconds the sweat was pouring from Adam, saturating his shirt, breeches and the armpits of his coat. It stung his eyes, and he could taste the salty wetness of it on his lips. The air was vibrant with the hum of mosquitoes and, aloft, in the cathedral remoteness of the tree-tops, the screech and chatter of birds. A tiny green snake slithered from his feet, and he shuddered, hurrying on.

This — 'Od's blood — was a far cry from his well-tilled Sawston acres — and what was he doing in a steaming African jungle when he wanted to be thousands of miles away, in the Americas? Mary would never believe it.

How far was this festering camp? Goddam — the Moor seemed intent on leading them all the way to this mythical Timbuctoo that Roxtro mentioned. A thorny tendril slashed his face, and he could hear the seamen, more heavily

laden than himself, cursing behind him. It was surely impossible that a forest so succulently green could be so savagely hot and so thickly swarming with droning, biting insects.

Ahead, the Moor had dismounted and was leading his horse by the bridle. The pace slackened, for which Adam, his legs aching, was grateful. He was aware of a strange odour — not the warm reek of his own sweat, nor the sickly fragrance of the surrounding vegetation. The new odour was a rancid mustiness, unpleasant, like that of a ratcatcher's pack of skins or — aye, that was it — the stables when young Thomas had shirked his cleaning chores. He sniffed. Odd, in the middle of a jungle —

The Moor halted, and Adam almost stumbled into the horse's hindquarters. The jungle had ended abruptly.

Before them was a dun-coloured plain, sparsely grassed, stretching towards a further confusion of trees distant by two or three miles. The sun beat down mercilessly, the glare agonizing, but for the moment they had eyes only for the slave-station.

Below was a long mud wall some six feet high, enclosing a roughly rectangular compound two hundred yards in circumference, with a single timber gate. At one corner, on a small tower twice the height of the wall, an antique cannon pointed its muzzle inwards. The gun, although light, seemed far too weighty for the flimsy structure upon which it stood, and could hardly have been fired with safety. Grouped in a second angle of the wall were a thatched house, a forge, and a stove-house with a smoking chimney.

These things Adam noticed only momentarily, his attention absorbed by the open space of the compound, crowded with Negroes. Of both sexes, and of all ages, most of them naked, they stood, squatted or sprawled, filling the entire compound from wall to wall. Few seemed to stir, but remained motionless as though stupefied, their eyes to the ground or head to knees,

their black bodies glistening with sweat and indifferent to the black swarms of flies and mosquitoes attracted by the now overpowering stench that Adam had earlier noticed. Roxtro chuckled, groping for his kerchief. 'We're in luck. Master Margery, eh?'

Adam had seen a Negro only twice before in his life — once a small boy in a brocaded silk attending on a lady in Drury Lane, and once at the Cambridge theatre, where a plumed African had swallowed flames and thrust bodkins into his flesh. He had entertained no more expectation of seeing five or six hundred Negroes in one locality than he had of seeing the same number of two-headed heifers.

On both sides of the wall Moorish overseers paced, with muskets slung on shoulders and each trailing a long scourge. But they were strangely few in relation to the great press of Negroes, seemingly sufficiently numerous to easily overrun their captors. The blacks, however, huddled in long lines, showed less interest in their surroundings than penned cattle. Once through the gate, Adam could see that they were chained together in tens or twelves, with one Negro in each group armed with a light switch. There were almost as many women as men, with children, white-eyed and cowed, and even breastsucking infants. 'Look at 'em,' Haitch grunted. 'Festerin' animals. If they stink like this in the open, what'll they be like below decks?'

'Like twelve pounds apiece,' Roxtro grinned, 'that's what. And nothing to pay to Royal Africa — that's if we can load an' slip without falling foul of a Navy sloop.'

'The sooner the better,' Adam added. He didn't like the little he had seen of Africa — its burning heat, flies, its tangled, steaming jungle, the stench of this slave-station. If Europeans had investigated no more than ten miles inland, Adam was not surprised. He was exhausted after two. Besides, he had no right to be in Africa. If only Mary and Betty could see him now — he

almost chuckled — with his face scorched red, his sweat-sodden shirt sticking to his body, his legs filthy to his knees, and this ridiculous Monmouth Cock.

Their dismounted guide led them towards the thatched house. Here, and around the adjoining stove-house, were a number of natives seemingly not members of the slave colony. Several were young women, not uncomely, who eyed the new arrivals with coquettish interest. One made a suggestive gesture, and her sisters giggled. A cloud of steam issued from the open front of the stove-house, adding a further pungent odour to the sourness of the first. ‘Dabba-dabb,’ Roxtro volunteered. ‘Indian corn boiled wi’ salt, malagetta and palm oil.’ He mopped at the angry rash on his neck.

Beneath the porch of the thatched house another Moor sat in one of several canvas chairs. Of indeterminable age, his appearance was little different to that of any of the overseers although, inclined to stoutness, he was perhaps slightly lighter of skin and wore a short black beard sprinkled with grey. His eyes, as they fell over the approaching seamen, were half closed as one hand toyed with the ringlets of a young Negress crouched at his feet. Behind his shoulder a boy of five or six years, with small face twisted in apprehension, wielded a fly whisk.

The Moor leaned forward. ‘Ah — Captain Roxtro. The blessing of Allah and his prophet Mohammed be upon you. You have exchanged the stinks of Deptford for the stench of Africa, eh?’ His English was perfect.

SEKU BABER turned his half-closed eyes towards Roxtro. 'If I'm not mistaken, Captain, you are anxious to embark a cargo quickly and depart without the knowledge of your Royal Africa Company.' He seemed mildly amused. 'You want slaves, I have slaves, and, since you are quit of Company tribute, you will doubtless be prepared to pay a little more than you might on the Gambia?' He nodded at the compound. 'They're Wolofs, Captain — from Senegal country. Strong stock, clean and healthy. You'll not find a sign of yaws, or a lame dog. That I'll swear by the Holy Caaba.' His fingers stroked the cheek of the woman at his knee. 'There are four English ships anchored in the river, Captain — *Triton*, *Veteran*, *Bristol Maid* and *Gildart*, all half empty and desperate to complete loading. Also' — he smiled, — 'the frigate *Winchester*, Captain Bellars, is off the estuary.'

Roxtro's kerchief was again dabbing at his flushed neck. 'The stock will, I'll hazard, pass scrutiny, Excellency.' He pursed his lips thoughtfully. 'Wolofs? Then ye brought 'em across the Gambia. Why tramp 'em down here? Ye could've taken 'em to the Royal Africa's factory a sight easier, and likely lost a few less. 'Specially' — he mused, — 'with *four* ships in the river. O' course' — he paused again, — 'if ve've been raiding in the wrong places, and maybe got the kings an' the forts out o' humour, ye'd best be avoiding St Louis or the Gambia.'

The five seamen sat on their haunches in the shade of the porch, casting speculative glances at the throng of young Negresses, provocatively whispering a few yards away. Seku Baber had changed the subject. 'If your men would desire an hour's amusement, Captain, they can take the women

into the bush. Unfortunately I have no alcohol — ’

Roxtro shook his head. ‘Later, perhaps, Excellency. If we can agree a price per head — and I’ll need maize, palm oil, fresh water — ’

The eyes of the woman at Seku Baber’s feet gazed unseeingly at the dusty compound, drifted indifferently over the waiting seamen, then rested on Adam. She was young, Adam decided — perhaps Sara’s age — although it was difficult to assess an African’s age. If she were white, i’faith, she’d be counted a shapely piece, with her plump, rounded shoulders, small, well-shaped breasts and slim waist. Her hair, longer and finer than that of the Wolof women, was tied high on her head with a length of scarlet cloth. Aye, Adam considered, even though black, she’d turn a few heads in Cambridge. Her features were finely chiselled, almost delicate, her lazy eyes of pure jet. One hand toyed with the rawly-dyed cotton of her kirtle while the other lay on the knee of Seku Baber. Her skin shone like black silk.

Aye — but Roxtro was still talking. ‘Three hundred men — none more than forty years — an’ two hundred, or thereabouts, o’ women and children mixed, an’ no woman pregnant more’n six months. All subject to examination. No yaws, no flux, no disabled. Any that die before departure to be replaced.’

Seku Baber, pushing the woman aside as he rose, uttered a brief sentence of Arabic. Almost immediately, in the compound, there was a sudden vast convulsion. The heavy whips of the overseers curled high, smashing into black flesh. A pall of dust was rising, and amidst it Adam could see the Negroes with switches lashing at their manacled fellows. With dust and stench filling his throat, Adam coughed.

As the Moor walked out of earshot, Roxtro turned. ‘Master Margery — Haitch — I’d be obliged if ye’d lend ye’ aid in testing the stock. It’s not difficult. Look for sores an’ ulcers, inflamed eyes, an’ signs of old injuries.

Then, there's flux — and it's important. Keep 'em standing to see there's no discharge, and make sure there's no oakum plug in the anus. These Moors are damn' crafty. Finally, there's age. If the head's shaved an' oiled, it's likely because there's grey hairs. So look at the teeth. If they're bad, they're old. Same's for women — '

The blacks moved in continuous file like dust-spattered cattle, the whites of their eyes shining in resigned, expressionless faces, indifferent to crawling flies and only occasionally raising an arm to ward away a stunning blow from an overseer's whip. A line of women crooned an unceasing, sing-song lament, swaying as they walked, the black orbs of their breasts tossing in unison. Children wailed, anxiously clutching a mother's rags or stumbling, thumb in mouth, among the dragging feet of their elders.

'Oakum plug in the — *what?*' Haitch asked. He eyed an approaching group of Negroes uneasily. 'I'm a seaman, not a festerin' pox-doctor — '

Behind them, Seku Baber's woman had pulled herself to her feet. 'Englishman! — ' She addressed Adam in a whisper, and he turned, startled, his hand rising to his Monmouth Cock. Did one doff a hat to a Negress naked to the waist?

'Englishman! Me Tamulu — Christian, like you!' She shot a frightened glance at Seku Baber, twenty yards away and his attention on the compound. 'Please quick — you try take me with you, hey? Me Christian, you Christian. Seku Baber heathen Mussulman — beat me many times, make me animal — ' Her whisper was desperate. 'You quick take me, hey?'

Perplexed, Adam looked about him for Roxtro, but the captain, his kerchief dabbing at his neck, was already among the compound slaves, probing, pinching. The woman began again, urgently. 'You quick take me, hey? Seku Baber use me dirty like animal, then sell me maybe Portugee bagnio, maybe give me to Sarakol chief — '

‘Haitch? — ’ Adam hissed, but Haitch grinned. ‘Don’t ye look at me, Master Margery. Like I said, I’m only a festerin’ seaman. Where’d I keep a black doxie, eh?’ He turned away.

In the compound a Negro, entangled in a chain, had fallen, bringing several of his file to their knees. An overseer was lashing at them mercilessly, and a child screeched as the leather tore a bloody furrow across face and neck. The women were wailing, swaying, their feet churning the dust.

‘Me Christian. You take me quick, hey? — ’

The stench from the compound, of excrement, sweat, urine, was nauseating. Adam shrugged. ‘Aye — well — ’ Seku Baber’s gaze had fallen on the porch, and the woman, Tamulu, froze — a gleaming ebony statue, her breasts lifting and falling as her white teeth clawed at a lip. Seku Baber looked away. ‘If he know, he flog me — ’ Two of the seamen had sidled away, and from the hidden side of the cottage Adam could hear women giggling excitedly, then a masculine laugh. ‘They dirty Wolofs,’ Tamulu denounced. ‘Black bitches — open legs any time, any man. Open legs for goat, donkey, likely. Plenty pox, likely. Me Christian. You take me quick? — ’

‘Sblood, Adam speculated. Why me? I don’t even belong here. He gave the woman a non-committal nod, then walked towards Roxtro. ‘There’s a woman here — ’

‘Ah — ’ Roxtro, the sweat pouring from him, looked up from a bending Negro. ‘I wouldn’t if I were ye, Master Margery. She’s likely alive wi’ maggots. If ye’ve an itch, we’ll find ye a clean wench on board — ’

‘No, dammit! This woman — Seku Baber’s woman — says she’s a Christian. Wants us to take her wi’ us — ’

Roxtro, previously only half attentive, glanced quickly about him and straightened. ‘Don’t ye dare, Master Margery! Ye don’t know Seku Baber. He’s not as tame as ye might think. Have ye ever seen a grown man gelded,

an' his nose an' ears taken off for good measure? If ye so much as look at his personal woman we'd never reach the beach alive, ye understand? We're slave-trading, Master Margery, not rescuing distressed doxies — 'specially blacks, an' 'specially not from Seku Baber!'

'She's a Christian — ' Adam pleaded.

Roxtro spat. 'Christian? So was Judas Iscariot — an' so's every slimy child-murderer hanged at Tyburn. What does it follow, eh? If it worries ye, I'll wager a year's pay she's lying. The holiest water she's ever seen is the stinking Senegal River!' He returned his attention to the line of slaves, his probing fingers moving from the buttocks of one to the mouth of the next.

Swallowing his repugnance, Adam followed suit. It was no plaguey difference, he tried to convince himself, than a Cambridge cattle market at which he searched for glanders or sore udders. But horses and heifers had the smell of sweet hay on their breaths; these blacks stank like mangy polecats. Passively, men and women lifted their rags, stooped for his convenience, bared their teeth, and stood apathetically as he peered at eyes, hands and feet. The touch of their sweating torsos disgusted him, and he itched abominably — whether from a rash like Roxtro's, the bites of mosquitoes, or some pollution transferred from the Negroes, he could not tell. Behind him, on the porch, the woman Tamulu still stood, watching silently.

'Couldn't we offer to buy her?' he asked. 'The Moor must have a price.'

'He might, an' he might not,' Roxtro grunted. 'If he has, it won't be a scabby trade musket or twenty yards o' dutty. If he knows ye're interested, he'll swear she cost him sixty ducats — and I can get a dozen plantation blacks for that figure. On the other hand ye might find yeself nailed to yon wall by ye' tongue. Only a damn' half-wit would offer to buy a Moor's personal woman.'

Twenty years earlier Adam had been an apprentice surgeon, no stranger to

the fetid smells of St Bartholomew's Hospital and the cankers and gangrenes of the poor wards. But that was twenty years ago. This was different. Fully half of the Negroes bore festering whip-lash wounds or sores at armpits, mouth and genitals, pestered by flies. Feet, particularly those of children, were bleeding from long marches across stones and thorn, and all were chafed raw by the constant rubbing of their manacles. 'Nothing,' Roxtro opined 'that can't be mended by a dab o' tar.' He glanced about him with an oath, searching for his two missing seamen. 'What did I tell ye? Give 'em one sight of a doxie an' they can't get their breeches opened fast enough.'

The Moors were herding the Negroes into convenient groups for driving to the beach. Adam was relieved to be allowed to accompany them, although the business of transferring the slaves to the *Paladin* and the trade goods to shore promised to be tedious. Haitch, to his disgust, was required to remain with Roxtro. 'Sblood,' he growled. 'Poking a finger up the hinds o' two hundred blacks rates more than a festerin' seaman's pay — '

'Better ye' finger than the other,' Roxtro assured him. 'Some o' these drabs'd burn the end off a boathook.'

In the *Paladin* a cursing mate was stowing each arriving party of slaves below decks, the men in the forepart, the women aft, fastened together in pairs by handcuffs on wrists and riveted irons on legs. A score of cone-shaped buckets were positioned about the deck for use as privies, and a number of pails filled with vinegar, into which — when the stench of the slaves became overpowering — red-hot bullets would be dropped to create an acrid steam. Already, only partially filled, the atmosphere of the holds was thickening, the heat choking, with the thin stream of air through the gratings a negligible relief from the fetidness within.

Roxtro returned aboard at noon. 'Wi' luck we can finish loading by nightfall,' he said. 'Seku Baber's providing two or three pirogues to help

embark the blacks — an' I'll hazard he'll be as anxious to see us gone as we will.' He scanned the western horizon for sign of a sail, but the mirror-like sea was empty. 'We could do wi' a blow,' he mused, 'but at least we're secure from the *Winchester* for the moment — if she's got intelligence of our landing.'

He walked to the hatch grating and sniffed. 'Aye — we could be a mite overcrowded, but we can stow 'em spoon-ways. We've got a fair batch o' cattle, Master Margery, and wi' a quick passage we'll give Sir John de Courcy a handsome return on his first venture.' Amidships a large copper furnace was being fed with fresh water and sackfuls of ground Indian corn to form a puddling-like mess that steamed and bubbled. 'About a peckful to every ten blacks,' Roxtro said. 'And three times a week we give 'em horse beans, which binds 'em and keeps down flux. Aye' — he nodded — 'we treat 'em better than most, I can tell ye.'

'What happens,' asked Adam, 'to slaves that sicken, and ye can't mend?'

Roxtro shrugged. 'They go over the side — quick.'

'Ye mean — *before* they're dead?'

'O' course. In a slave hold an infection can spread like ye'd never believe. If the cattle die on board the owners lose, but if they're thrown off to preserve the ship, the underwriters are contracted to compensate.'

By five in the afternoon, with the *Paladin*'s long-boat and Seku Baber's three pirogues plying steadily between ship and beach, more than half the slaves had been embarked and stowed under the persuasion of the mate's cat-o-nine-tails. Adam suddenly realized that he had not seen Thomas since dawn, but a seaman pointed to the foretop where, he said, the boy had retreated to avoid the stench of the cargo. By six, Roxtro could afford to tell off one boat to load fresh water, maize, palm oil, and quantities of fish, nuts and dried fruit. Adam, debating whether his cabin space was yet cool enough

to be tolerated, found Toby Haitch at his elbow, grinning.

‘Ye’d best brace ye’ yards, Master Margery. There’s a morsel o’ trouble for ye — up for’ard.’

‘Trouble? For me?’

‘Aye. I bundled her into the fo’c’sle — there being no place else — ’

‘Her?’ Adam stared.

‘Aye. Seku Baber’s piece. She must’ve mingled wi’ the blacks boarding the long-boat — an’ our hands wouldn’t have noticed the difference. Anyway, I see’d her on deck an’ steered her into the fo’c’sle — that being the only place empty, wi’ the hands elsewhere — ’

‘Seku Baber’s piece? Festerin’ blood! — ’ Adam shot an anxious glance around him. The waist was in a state of confusion, with a file of slaves being urged to descend into the pit of the hold from which the mate’s angry obscenities could be heard. Seamen were piling water breakers and other fresh stores recently raised from a pirogue alongside, while a second pirogue — crowded with blacks so that its gunwales were only inches above the water — waited to discharge. Two Moorish overseers had climbed the side and were gazing about them with expressionless curiosity, and the rancid steam from the furnace was filtering into the rigging. Roxtro, on the quarterdeck, was issuing brief orders through a speaking trumpet at several hands astride the main yard.

‘Damn ye’ eyes, Haitch! — Why did ye? — ’

‘What else could I do? I see’d her talking to ye ashore, and then ye spoke to Captain Roxtro. She’s no plantation black — ’

‘My oath, she’s not!’ Adam threaded his way across the littered waist to the quarterdeck ladder. If Seku Baber’s woman was aboard then the sooner Roxtro knew about it the better. Fie — Adam — wasn’t going to involve himself —

Roxtro exploded. ‘Seku Baber’s woman! Hell’s scum! D’ye realize there’s still two hundred cattle to get aboard? I told ye — didn’t I — to leave the bitch be? Ye don’t know Seku Baber, Master Margery. He’s a blood-hungry monster when he’s roused — an’ I’ve nine hands ashore, apart from the blacks!’ He threw down his trumpet angrily. ‘Ye must have given her encouragement! — ’

‘I did nothing.’ Adam retorted, his own anger rising. ‘In any case, it could be hours before the Moor misses her. I should have supposed that one Christian was worth a thousand o’ these heathen brutes.’ He shrugged. ‘If ye must, ye can send her back.’

‘Ye’re damn right — she’s going back! An’ I don’t care if she’s the Pope’s parlour-maid! — ’

The fo’c’sle was a dirty cave strewn with bags, crumpled bedding and discarded clothing — and smelling scarcely better than the slave-hold. Tamulu rose from a dark corner. ‘Please — quick — you take me with you, hey?’ She had removed the scarlet cloth from her hair, which now cascaded over her shoulders and breasts, and substituted a skimpy rag for her dyed kirtle. Her dark eyes were wide with pleading. ‘Seku Baber — ’

‘Aye, milady,’ Roxtro grunted grimly. ‘Seku Baber’s having ye back — an’ quick — ’

She shrieked, flung herself to her knees and grasped at the hem of Roxtro’s coat. ‘Please! He thrash me — kill me, likely! You take me quick, hey?’

‘Dammit, Roxtro,’ Adam protested, ‘ye can’t send the wench back to be flogged to death — ’

Roxtro snorted. ‘Can’t I?’ He turned to Adam. ‘Listen, Master Margery. This one little jade can ruin this entire venture, an’ that means ruining ye’ friend, de Courcy. Mark that for a beginning. We’re here wi’ out the Africa’s licence, and we’re only half filled wi’ cattle — even assuming we get my

hands off the beach live. An' they're Christian, too — leastways, no less than this scheming bitch. I've been a slave-captain too festerin' long to beggar my owner for the sake o' one black.'

Tamulu, glancing frantically first at Roxtro and then at Adam, began again. 'I not go back! I sooner jump in sea!' Roxtro was attempting to prise her fingers free of his coat-skirt, without success. 'You want wench for bed, hey? You take me quick — have plenty time, six time, twenty time likely! Seku Baber heathen Mussulman — '

'D'ye see?' Roxtro said. 'Ye don't have to provoke Seku Baber to gain yeself a black whore. We'll have two hundred of 'em in the hold by nightfall — an' if ye want, ye can indulge wi' every stinkin' one of 'em.'

'Od's blood!' Adam flared, then shook his head, conscious that there was no profit in arguing with Roxtro. 'Look — I'm convinced the Moor'll sell, if he's offered enough, and I'm prepared to bid. If he does sell, ye can dispose of the woman in Charles Town as ye wish. I want none of her, but I can't see her dragged back to Seku Baber wi'out a fight.' He hesitated., 'If ye'll lend me Haitch and the cock-boat, I'll go ashore meself.'

Roxtro mopped his neck, then thrust the kerchief into a pocket, scowling. 'Ye can take the bitch back — an' before Seku Baber comes looking for her, that's for certain. What ye discuss wi' him is ye' own concern, Master Margery. If he decides to have ye impaled, there's naught I can do to help ye — an' I can't go crying to the Gambia garrison or the *Winchester*, That's the hazard o' trading without Africa Company blessing — not that Seku Baber'd care a damn for the Africa anyway.' He glanced down at Tamulu. 'And why ye'd want to risk ye' neck for one mangy black is more'n I can fathom.'

SHE HAD screamed and kicked, and buried her teeth in Toby Haitch's forearm, earning herself a cuff from him that quietened her sufficiently for them to bundle her into the cock-boat on the larboard side, hidden from the Moors' pirogues. She had sat sullenly as Haitch pulled ashore but, setting foot on the beach, had almost flung herself away, and they were compelled to half drag, half carry her towards the forest path. Once in the jungle the matter was easier, for the wall of foliage on each side allowed her no choice but to go forward or back and, with Haitch's threatening figure behind her, she stumbled forward.

The track was gloomier than before, and evening had brought out the mosquitoes in their swarming myriads. The two men sweated and itched, slapping at their bitten arms and faces with curses. Nightfall could not be far distant, and Adam dared not contemplate their return in complete darkness. There was Seku Baber to interview first, and there might be no return. It was incredible. Only a few weeks earlier he had been contentedly farming his acres in peaceful, rural Cambridgeshire, without a worry beyond harvesting, milking and the Royston corn prices. If anyone had suggested that February would find him plodding through an African jungle with a black slave woman, he would have called him lunatic. At forty, and his mettlesome years far behind him, he must himself be mad.

The mud wall of the stockade loomed suddenly ahead of them, and Adam's momentary relief was replaced by a wave of trepidation. Haitch spat from a dry mouth. 'There 'tis, Master Margery. D'ye suppose the old bastard'll feast us or flay us?' Tamulu crouched, whining, her face grey, but Haitch had

gripped her arm. Adam felt sick.

The gate was unbarred and unguarded, the trampled centre of the compound deserted save for a pair of scrawny dogs sniffing at the earth. By the porch of the thatched house, however, were several Moors sitting on their haunches, eating with their fingers from a single great trencher set between them. Their muskets, swords and lances lay within reach. Beyond them a line of horses was tethered, among them an albino mule and some donkeys and, huddled against the stove-house, a small party of blacks of both sexes. The shadows were long, thrusting across the dun-coloured compound like reaching fingers.

‘Your arrival is well timed, Master Margery!’ From the darkness of the porch Seku Baber’s voice spoke. ‘I had discovered the bird had flown an hour ago, and waited only to discover your reaction — for there was nowhere else to go but the ship. In a few more minutes, when we had finished our meal, I would have given my reply — which would have been expensive for your captain and certainly painful for your crew.’ He chuckled.

Tamulu had sunk to the ground, her face to the dust. ‘Excellency — ’ Adam began, but the Moor shook his head. ‘If you have not dined,’ he suggested, ‘perhaps you will join me?’ He indicated his own platter. ‘Mutton, I am afraid, but fresh killed — and I would suppose you have not enjoyed fresh meat for six weeks, eh? Your man, if he wishes, may join mine.’ Haitch stood stolidly unmoving. ‘Your first visit to Africa, Master Margery? The true faith, of course, forbids me alcohol, but I can offer you sherbet, a drink made from fruit juices, which you will find more refreshing than your brandy and rum — ’

‘This woman, Excellency — ’ Adam tried again. ‘As a Christian I have a sympathy for her — ’

Seku Baber laughed. ‘If you are going to ask what I think, Master Margery, you waste your time. The creature is less than the dust on which you stand.

She, did you say? No, not even that. There are things in Africa, Master Margery, beyond your knowledge or understanding, and best left alone — for unwittingly you may give grave offence. No — let the matter be. You have returned my property, and I am grateful. There is nothing more to be said.'

'If I give offence, Excellency,' Adam said, 'it is, as ye say, because of my ignorance. But I am also a Christian, and taught that I must offer tolerance and charity to my fellows — '

The expression on Seku Baber's face changed from amusement to sudden disgust. 'Tolerance and charity? You have the impudence to equate these things with Christianity? Your Catholics and Protestants massacre each other, your priests are drenched with the blood of those who refuse to abandon their own faiths. Torture, fire, death and rapine have followed Christians everywhere they have trodden, and you have murdered thousands of my faith simply for living in their own country.' He rose to his feet. 'And who, do you suppose, are responsible for the multitude of slaves that Africa spills into the world? Were it not for Christians, I would be a poor man, Master Margery, for the few house-slaves and women we keep are as nothing in numbers to those you crowd into your ships' holds. And you prattle of tolerance and charity?'

Adam shrugged. 'I'll not argue theology, Excellency, nor defend slaving, or the misdeeds o' Christians. Likely there's good and bad in all religions. It's this one woman.' He nodded at Tamulu, still motionless on the ground. 'I'll agree she's your property, an' she's deserted ye — which likely deserves punishment in ye' reckoning. At the same time, I'll hazard ye've set a price on her — '

'In the Name of Allah the Compassionate!' The Moor raised his hand. 'I have been patient, Master Margery, because you are a stranger in Africa, but you will not listen. Do not, I warn you, offer me money for one of my own

household. It is the same as if I asked for your English wife to share my bed — and the offence would not be lessened though you knew your wife to want it so.’ He paused. ‘Value? What value would you put on your cuckoldry, Master Margery? What price would you ask for your wife’s body?’

Adam was silent for several moments. Then he nodded. ‘Aye, I’ll concede ye’re right. I hadn’t looked at it in that fashion, but ye’re right, and I’ll ask ye’ pardon.’

Below him the woman had reached forward to grasp his ankle. ‘Please, quick? — ’ Haitch’s face indicated nothing, but somehow Adam sensed reproach. Dammit, the Moor was right, wasn’t he? These Mohammedans had different customs, like maintaining several wives, and concubines. It was impertinent of him to attempt to impose English conventions. The Moor’s not vicious, as Roxtro claimed. Still —

’Sblood, he thought — I’m not convinced. ‘Excellency,’ he said, ‘I beg that ye humour me in one thing — that ye’ll not punish the woman. She’s defaulted, but no harm’s done an’ nothing’s lost — an’ likely with clemency she’ll be more loyal. Moreover, I’ll take wi’ me a respect for ye — ’

Seku Baber’s eyes flickered from Adam to Tamulu, then back to Adam. ‘The English,’ he said softly, ‘have only one admirable quality. Persistence. Even when faced with the absolute impossible, you persist.’ He walked forward slowly until he stood over the prone Tamulu, then drew back his foot and kicked her in the stomach. She moaned.

‘I trade in slaves, Master Margery,’ the Moor went on smoothly, ‘among other things. Wolofs, Poules, Sarakolles.’ He kicked the woman again, deliberately. ‘There is only one language they understand, and it is not Arabic or English, or tolerance and charity. It’s the whip. And you will find the same language spoken in your plantations. If I showed clemency to a single recaptured slave, a hundred would attempt to escape tomorrow.’ He pointed

to the small group of blacks crouched against the stove-house. ‘You see those cattle, Master Margery? They hew wood, light fires, prepare food and raise our tents, fetch water — and the women give amusement to my overseers when we camp. They are held in check only by fear of the whip or hot iron. They watch us now — and when they see punishment given, they will be satisfied.’

‘Then ye’ll just give her a flogging?’ If the woman had to be punished, well, there were far worse things than a flogging. In London — in the pillory, at the cart’s tail, or in Bridewell on court days — women were whipped readily, generating among the public amusement or indifference, but seldom sympathy.

‘A flogging, Master Margery — but not *just* a flogging. You will understand that I am not one of your noble Drury Lane Othellos. When Seku Baber orders a flogging it is questionable whether death would not be a lighter punishment — since only a few survive, and then likely to be maimed. As an example to these cattle, Master Margery, I do not hesitate to hack off arms or legs, or’ — he shrugged, — ‘for small matters, such as a theft of food or a tool spoiled, the loss of nose or lips encourages greater care.’ He smiled. ‘So you see, Master Margery, a flogging is not to be ignored.’

So he had accomplished nothing — except to deliver the woman into the hands of a tyrant slave-master. Roxtro had warned him, but he — Adam — had been guiled by the Moor’s fauldess English, and had inferred in him English standards of behaviour. English standards? ‘Sblood, what were they? The Moor, pox take him, was right. What better were the English than any others? Did the Mohammedans burn women for counterfeiting a handful of coins? Or crush a man to death with weights because he refused to plead? Or sell wenches of ten years into prostitution, or hang boys for circulating scurrilous leaflets?

It was still hot. Damned hot, despite the lengthening shadows. Haitch's eyes were on him, mutely accusing. Did the plaguey fellow think it was his fault? Neither he nor Haitch carried weapons, and there were four armed overseers within yards — in addition to Seku Baber and a half dozen blacks. And there were twenty Moors on the beach, beyond the jungle — and nine English seamen, with two hundred blacks still to embark — and John de Courcy's investment —

'It ain't right, Master Margery,' Haitch said. 'Ye should have left well enough alone. The poor bitch ain't harmed ye — '

Adam choked. 'Blast ye, Haitch! Did I bring her aboard? Did I put her into the fo'c'sle?' He turned to Seku Baber. 'Dammit! — '

'Damn nothing, Master Margery,' the Moor answered. He made a gesture, and two of the overseers climbed to their feet. The blacks had turned their heads, watching, and Tamulu screamed.

God's blood, Adam swore. Like Roxtro said, why was he so festerin' concerned about one mangy black? Today, in rainswept, February London, a dozen unwanted infants would be abandoned by impoverished mothers. Today, a dozen innocent citizens would be knifed, clubbed or drowned, a hundred more die prematurely from typhoid, smallpox and dysentery. His own niece — Sara — was locked in the hold of a stinking prison ship. So why was he so concerned about one mangy black?

Tamulu crooned, rolling her head, her body sagging as the overseers lifted her. Haitch bunched his fists, but the other Moors had risen to their feet. There was no sound save the hum of insects and the woman's whining, the blacks by the stove-house motionless and expectant. Seku Baber smiled.

With the ease of long practice the overseers fastened a noose of rope around her wrists, then drew her up until she hung from the porch, her feet free of the ground. One of them tore the breech-rag from her, and she pulled up her

knees, revolving slowly. There was sweat on her breasts and shoulders. Gyrating, her eyes met Adam's momentarily, but they were blank of recognition, wide and white, her features twisted and ugly with terror. He looked away, and in that moment heard the sickening crack of the first blow followed by an animal screech that made his belly writhe.

Adam had seen floggings before — of both men and women. Eight years earlier a redcoat had been sentenced to 12,600 lashes against killing his colonel's horse, and had survived 1,800. He — Adam — had watched and heard victims begging for the mercy of death, but he had been detached and, if he had never enjoyed the spectacle as did many others he, like them, neither experienced compassion. This — Tamulu — was different. He was responsible for her flogging even although, eventually, it could not be avoided.

He watched, hypnotized. Her screech had not died, and her mouth was still agape with agonized disbelief, when the second blow smashed into her. Adam found himself clenching his teeth until his jaws ached. 'Sblood — but why was he concerned? She was only one black among thousands to be flogged, and blacks weren't even the same as whites. They were nearer to animals — and who criticized the whipping of animals?

But — dammit — cattle who broke from their pastures weren't flogged to a red pulp for their disloyalty. He had lost count of the whip-blows. The woman's body was taut, straining, her head thrown back and her glazing eyes fixed on her tethered wrists. The overseer's arm rose and fell. How many? Twenty? Thirty? The minutes were hours.

The panting overseer passed his whip to a second, and the few seconds respite was sufficient for the flies to swarm over the torn torso. Tamulu no longer made any sound. She might, Adam thought, be mercifully senseless, but her eyes were still wide in a grey, blood-splashed face.

The third overseer had almost exhausted himself when Adam turned sullenly to Seku Baber. ‘Ye’ll be wasting any further effort, Excellency. She’s dead.’

The Moor nodded. ‘I had observed it, Master Margery — but we shall continue a little longer. A flogging is, as I mentioned, an excellent Wesson for my cattle, and I would not wish to waste it.’ He smiled. ‘Will you take sherbet now?’

‘Festerin’ blood!’ Adam’s indignation flared. ‘Ye’re flogging a corpse? Ye’re a damn’ filthy heathen!’

‘A rot-gutting heathen,’ Haitch confirmed.

The smile on Seku Baber’s lips hardened very slightly. ‘You mean that this is worse than your custom of hanging corpses in irons? Or fixing heads on the spikes of your London Bridge? But you are Christians, of course — and there are different standards for Christians.’ He fingered his beard. ‘I am growing a little weary, Master Margery, of your presumption. Would you be quite so sanctimonious, I wonder, at the wrong end of a bull-hide whip?’ He spoke swiftly over his shoulder in Arabic. The overseer with the whip wiped his sweating brow with his forearm, grinned, then nodded.

Before anyone else could move, Toby Haitch, swung a gnarled fist which struck Seku Baber full in the face. The Moor’s aquiline nose split like an over-ripe plum, cascading blood as its owner spun backwards, sprawling in a tangle of arms and feet on the porch floor. Haitch, poised on his bowed legs, reached the nearest overseer by the scruff of his robe, butted him viciously, then drove a knee into his groin. The man’s mouth contorted as he yelped, incredulous, before crumpling helplessly.

‘Bloody, stinkin’ blackamoors!’ Haitch announced. He spat. ‘Ye’d think they owned bleedin’ Africa.’ Then, ‘Ware boarders, Mas’ Margery!’

Adam whirled — just in time to see the whip in the hand of the third

overseer curling high in the air above him. To stand his ground would be disastrous; he could only retreat or attack — and after Haitch's action there was no room for diplomacy. Adam flung himself forward, reaching for the overseer's neck. He could not equal Haitch's fist-fighting ability, but a dozen years of ploughing and scything had given him hands as strong as any seaman's, and he'd not be outdone. The overseer, taken unaware, stumbled backwards, and Adam's thumbs groped for his windpipe. There was naught else for it now.

Behind him there was a further commotion. He had lost sight of Haitch and the others, but Haitch, he'd wager, could take care of himself — and none of the Moors had picked up his arms when they rose from their food. As for himself, he had enough to contend with. He gouged savagely, forcing his man to his knees and watching his eyes swell, his tongue puke from a cavernous, rancid mouth. A desperate hand clawed at his cheek, a last choking convulsion, and then — sooner than he had expected — the Moor slumped.

Adam scrambled to his feet, anxious to help Haitch, but the seaman stood with arms akimbo, a Moor senseless at his feet and another running for the gate. He grinned at Adam. 'What'd ye do, Master Margery? Wring his rot-guttin' Islamic neck?'

'A small matter o' trachelodynia,' Adam chuckled, then sucked in his breath. 'Haitch — behind ye! Seku Baber!'

'Stab me,' Haitch grunted. 'I near broke my knuckles on the heathen swab.' He spat on his palms. 'Well — I'll wager hell not come to scratch a second time — '

But Seku Baber was standing in the porch with a musket in his hands. The blood from his shattered nose filtered over his lips and congealed in his beard. His eyes were malevolent as he thumbed back the hammer. Three feet away from him the naked corpse of Tamulu revolved slowly, blackened by

flies, in the sultry air.

The muzzle of the musket moved from the chest of Haitch to that of Adam. ‘You, Master Margery,’ the Moor said thickly, ‘I shall kill. This insolent cur’ — he nodded at Haitch, — ‘I want alive. He is going to scream for death, but he will be alive for an eternity — two days, three days’ — he raised the musket to his shoulder, ‘but first you, Master Margery. I regret there is no time to make your peace with your Lamb of God — ’

There were ashes in Adam’s mouth. He watched the curled finger tighten on the trigger, and tensed. He saw the hammer fall and the priming flare in the pan, the powder-smoke obscure the Moor’s narrowed eyes. There was a shattering detonation, his ears sang, and something stung his cheek. He grunted instinctively, but he was still on his feet, with every muscle taut and his teeth tightly clenched. The porch was choked with black smoke and, below it, on the ground, Seku Baber’s feet jerked like a puppet’s.

‘Goddam! What? — ’

Haitch gave a hooting laugh. ‘It were one o’ Roxtro’s trade muskets!’ The Moor lay on his back, his heels drumming, his gown drenched with red slime from a hideously mangled face, his hands flailing. The musket had fallen across him, its lock smashed and still smoking, the barrel twisted and useless.

‘Faith,’ Adam breathed, ‘I might’ve named Roxtro a scoundrel, but I’m damn’ glad he is.’ Seku Baber had fallen back, motionless. ‘Is he dead?’

‘If he ain’t, he soon will be,’ Haitch said. ‘And the same’ll be for us, Master Margery, if we don’t get under way — an’ smartly. There’s twenty or more Moors between us an’ the *Paladin*, an’ when they learn about this they’ll be clawing at the ship as well as us. Captain Roxtro’ll have to lay off — wi’ or wi’out us.’

The stunned overseers’ were stirring, one pulling himself to his knees. ‘Leave ’em,’ Adam said. They kicked the remaining muskets under the floor

of the porch as the blacks against the stove-house watched sullenly, then made for the compound gate. The sun was sinking into the shadowed jungle ahead of them, and they had difficulty in locating the path. ‘‘Sdarker than a plaguey Irish brothel,’ Haitch commented. Then both men halted and turned.

From their rear, from behind the mud wall of the compound, came a spine-chilling animal howl that sent them both backing into the trees. Adam shuddered. ‘What in damn’ creation was that?’

Haitch shook his head. ‘Likely the blacks murderin’ the overseers. We’d best sheer off — an’ smart, Master Margery. This ain’t no Grotto Garden wi’ bells an’ candles — an’ no use shouting for a wherry if Captain Roxtro’s pushed off.’

The jungle closed around them, black, humid, fetid. Progress would be slow, Adam supposed, but, if he recalled correctly, there were no means of straying from the path. By the same token, they must meet Seku Baber’s men returning from shore, unless there was another route — and he did not relish meeting twenty armed Moors in this tangled blackness, or anywhere. He swore as a thorned tendril clawed at his face, and flung out his hands. The slush in which he stumbled dragged at his boots, and the stifling air was filled with the whine of insects. A yard away Haitch was also cursing softly, but Adam could not see him. ‘Where are ye, Haitch?’ he asked anxiously. It would be disastrous if they were separated.

‘I don’t festerin’ know,’ Haitch snorted, then, ‘What did I say I’d sign on a rot-guttin’ blackbird for? A hundred pounds? An’ I thought a stinkin’ King’s ship were bad! The next time someone reads me a handbill I’ll push ’is teeth down ’is gullet, ’swelp me!’

There was no means of measuring time or distance. Every inch of Adam’s body sweated and itched. He could feel crawling insects under his clothes, on his lips, in his hair. His mouth was slimed and foul, his feet soaked. Goddam,

if this was Africa, then Roxtro could keep his Solomon's mines. Adam would rather have an acre of Cambridgeshire than a mountain of gold six times higher than St Paul's, that was certain — and if he ever got his feet on an English jetty again he'd not set them on another ship for all the slaves that had ever left Timbuctoo.

They paused to listen, several times. There were no sounds of approaching Moors on the track ahead, but the spongy ground absorbed footsteps, and the croaking of bullfrogs and the constant noise of mosquitoes and crickets would drown any distant commotion. Then, with an involuntary shout, Adam found himself thigh-deep in water, his arms flailing to maintain balance and his hat gone, his feet sinking into quaggy mud. He flung himself back, full length, scrabbling at the firmer ground he had just fallen from. His desperate fingers found the legs of Haitch, and the two of them sprawled, panting.

Haitch sat up. 'Mastery Margery — d'ye see that? Them's stars! I don't recall no open spaces — nor wading through water.' He paused. 'Aye — there's Orion, plain enough. That means we're off course — steering south'ard.' Adam could hear him scratching viciously in the darkness.

'Off course? 'Sblood — I don't see — ' But Haitch was right, and there were the stars to prove it. How, in all frustration, had they missed the track? And how far had they blundered southward? Adam moaned.

Haitch was leaning over him, reaching for the water's edge. 'There's a current,' he said, 'roughly westward — and that'd be right.' He sniffed thoughtfully. 'Master Margery, there ain't no profit in trying to find the track again. I reckon we'd best lie snug here till daylight, then follow this stream. It'll be a lot surer.'

'Aye,' Adam agreed. The realization that a dozen miles of impenetrable forest might lie between them and the safety of the *Paladin* had drained the last of his strength from him. Tomorrow? If they regained the seashore,

would the ship still be there? And if it were not? —

‘One thing,’ he muttered, ‘by leaving the track, we avoided the Moors.’

‘Rot-gutting blackbird,’ Haitch said.

Adam had a pocket tinder-box, but its contents were hopelessly soaked. He also had a kerchief and a few small coins, while Haitch had a clasp knife on a lanyard and nothing else. Reluctant to lie prone in the decaying vegetation that thickly carpeted the ground, they sat with their heads on their chests, dozing occasionally, waiting for the endless night to pass. They were uncomfortable hours, with the weird noises of the forest seeming to creep continually closer. The sweat turned cold on their bodies, and Adam, wet almost to the waist, began to shiver, his teeth chattering. In the early hours a white ground mist added to their discomfort, with wetness dripping from the trees and soaking them anew, and both men climbed to their feet to ease the stiffening cramp in their limbs. At last — at long last — the sky was greying.

Toby Haitch, massaging warmth into his arms, suddenly stared at Adam. ‘Master Margery! Bleedin’ hell-fire — ye’ face! — ’

Adam glanced up, then roared with laughter. ‘And ye’ own, Haitch!’ The features of both were swollen beyond recognition, their eyes mere slits in cheeks puffed and bloated, bitten a hundred times by the night’s insects. With their muscles aching, their clothes sodden and bellies hungry, the misery of their situation was instantly comic, and they stood laughing until the tears trickled from their tired eyes. ‘Nobody’ll believe it,’ Adam mourned. ‘Nobody’ll believe it.’

The stream was wider than they had supposed — thirty yards or more — and Adam was relieved that they were not required to cross to the far side. It was mud-coloured, slow-flowing and glutinous, and he had heard descriptions of crocodiles and similar creatures that could dispose of a man as easily as a mutton chop. The banks were choked with rushes, hanging tendrils

thick as a ship's mooring rope, and the twisting roots of mangrove. They scrambled westwards along it, in which direction, Haitch said, must be the sea and, hopefully, the *Paladin*. It made sense. They had come ashore on the West coast of Africa, and had gone inland. The river returned to the westward and, anyway, rivers always flowed to the sea.

But the river began to twist, first gradually, then abruptly, towards the south — and it was widening. This was disturbing for, if they continued to follow it, they were being taken still farther away from the *Paladin*'s position — yet to abandon the river for the gloom of the jungle was an alternative not to be relished.

As the sun rose higher, it grew hotter, and soon the clothes of both men were steaming. Haitch, less fastidious than Adam, had drunk from the river, but Adam had resisted the temptation, except to wet his cracking lips with his kerchief. He had seen the devastating effects of unclean drinking water in Flanders, and for the moment thirst was a lesser evil. An hour later they found a tiny tributary rivulet from which, although warm and flat-tasting, they both refreshed themselves. Each was increasingly feeling the strain of their exertions, the torrid heat and maddening insects, and growing hunger. With faces and necks raw and peeling, mouths parching, and hand and forearms scratched and bleeding, they clung to the river bank determinedly. If his own appearance, Adam decided, was as grotesque as Haitch's, his own wife would not acknowledge him.

Yet it was Haitch, the leather-skinned seaman, who had felled three Moors with his hammer lists and whose roiling gait seemed exhaustless, who faltered first. Several times he had passed a hand across puzzled eyes and once fell to his knees, to rise unsteadily, shaking his head. 'It's the sun, Haitch,' Adam said. 'It's galling hot — '

'The sun?' Haitch croaked. 'The sun ain't plagued me before — an' I've

seed plenty, Master Margery — ‘ He swayed, staggered a further few paces, then fell on his face among the rushes.

Adam hauled him clear of the water, and Haitch opened his eyes, grinning weakly. ‘Sorry, Master Margery. I ain’t run aground only once before — when I took eighty lashes on the *Hannibal*, an’ I were only a lad then.’ He rubbed his eyes again. ‘Fester it — I feel weaker’n a workhouse skilly — ‘ His head fell back.

Adam had seen flux, fevers and dysentery reduce a squadron of four hundred lusty dragoons to twenty-seven scarecrows and a cornet tied in the saddle — but not as quickly as this. Haitch had drunk from the scum-floating river three or four hours ago, and it must have been as venomous as hemlock.

‘Sblood — what now? If this were a performance of ‘Ben the Boatswain’ there’d be no problem. He’d simply stride up and down singing a patriotic doggerel to an orange-sucking audience, until handsome Captain Roxtro and a chorus of honest English tars emerged from the pasteboard trees to rescue him. Trouble was, this wasn’t Drury Lane, nor Haitch a tinselled Libyan princess. Roxtro, if he were still offshore, would be desperately anxious to get under way, and would likely consider Adam and Haitch of less importance than his cargo — and the possible intervention of the frigate *Winchester*.

He looked down at Haitch. The seaman was still breathing, but there was no knowing how long he would last, particularly under these conditions. The chances were that he would die, and there was little that Adam could do about it. To remain with him could only destroy Adam’s own diminishing likelihood of survival. Adam, at least, might still reach the seashore and, if there were no *Paladin*, he might strike northwards in the hope of reaching Gambia Colony, two days’ sail away. He wished, now, that he had given more attention to Roxtro’s charts, but he hadn’t anticipated being lost in a

stinking African jungle.

Adam rose to his feet, but the movement caused Haitch to open his eyes again. ‘Westward, Master Margery — it’s ye’ best chance.’ His voice was hoarse, and there was a crust on his broken lips. ‘Ye might find friendly blacks, or the military. An’ ye’d best take my knife. Ye’ve got a flint an’ steel, an’ ye can light a fire on the beach. It’s just possible that Roxtro’ll tack offshore for a day, and’ll sight ye’ signal — ’

‘Damn ye, Haitch,’ Adam spat, ‘I’ll not leave ye here.’ It was incredible that he had ever considered doing so. Haitch might not be dying. He probably had the constitution of a horse, and in an hour would be on his feet, rolling along with that ridiculous gait as if the ground were a perpetually heaving maindeck. No, he couldn’t leave Haitch.

Haitch turned his head away and began to vomit. ‘Ye’ll have to, Master Margery. I’m a shot-through hulk, an’ ye’re on a lee shore yeself. If ye take me in tow I’ll drag ye under. I know what I’m saying. I can’t walk an’ I can’t crawl — an’ no man’s carried me since I were a brat.’

‘The sun’s addled ye’ brain, Haitch,’ Adam said. ‘All ye need is one of Roxtro’s purging pills, and likely a gallon o’ ale to wash the sourness from ye’ belly. Besides, ye contracted to come to Charles Town, an’ there’s a hundred pounds owing ye if I recover my niece. Ye’ll not get a penny by spewing and moaning here.’ He dragged the seaman to his knees, then compelled him upright. Haitch sagged, then vomited again, his face ashen beneath his tan. ‘Christ,’ he whispered, ‘it don’t make no difference if I’m a corpse here or a mile farther, do it?’

He was heavy, and, two hundred yards on, Adam was forced to rest. ‘I told ye — ’ Haitch began, then held his peace. The sun’s heat was agonizing, and Adam regretted the loss of his Monmouth Cock. His hose and breeches were shredded by thorns and his London-made boots splitting. It seemed

impossible that he could continue, but he must. He could smell his own sweat, and Haitch's, mingled with the putrescence of the river, his breath was coming in pants and his eyes burning in their sockets. It was impossible. The river mocked them, brown-green and slimy, floating with weeds and debris and, above them, coloured birds and monkeys jeered, following from tree to tree. Haitch was vomiting yet again, over Adam's shoulder.

He sank down a second time, too exhausted to brush the flies from his face. Haitch had lost a shoe, and there were several swollen black leeches welded to his bared foot. Adam prised them free with the clasp knife.

Ten or twelve years ago, Adam recalled, there had been a man — a Scot — who had been marooned on a tropical island for four years, surviving on crayfish, turtles and wild goats. Four years! If Selkirk's island had been anything like this wretched African wilderness, those must have been four years of constant misery. Adam gazed about him. There were no goats or turtles here — no sign of life except a few chattering parakeets, some tree-clinging monkeys and, beyond the westward trees, several seabirds wheeling in the hot sky.

Seabirds? Aye, they were seabirds. Did they mean that the sea was just beyond those trees? He'd seen gulls over his own fields, sixty miles from the nearest sea, but only because bad coastal weather had driven them inland to seek food. These, surely, were they that the *Paladin's* gun had scattered two days ago, like white feather-down in a wind. He could hear their faint mewling through the prattle of the parakeets.

To drag Haitch over his shoulder again demanded an exertion that taxed every ounce of his remaining strength. It took him several minutes, with once his exhausted legs failing under him and both sprawling helplessly on the ground. Haitch shook his head, unable now to speak, unable to contribute any effort to Adam's task. Like a drunken man, Adam floundered forward,

sometime splashing through the shallows of the river, his eyes clenched against the sun and every tottering pace threatening to be his last.

Ahead of him the river was cleaving a channel through a wide, grey expanse of mud and gravel. The trees had given way to clumps of sedge and spear-shaped reeds, scattered rocks festooned with sand-clogged seaweed, and green-scummed pebbles. There was a salt tang in the air and, a hundred yards away, a colony of strange, stilt-legged birds, pink-hued, eyed him, motionless. A small crab scuttled from his unsteady feet, and, in the distance, beyond the mud flats, the sea flashed silver. Adam choked.

‘Haitch! — ’ His voice was an animal croak that he did not recognize. ‘Haitch — it’s the sea, d’ye hear?’ He eased the seaman to the sand and immediately fell to his own knees, crushed but ecstatic. ‘The sea! The rotten, festerin’ sea!’ Alarmed, the group of pink wading birds began to move away, their slender necks curling. ‘Haitch? — ’

But the seaman’s head had fallen back on the sand, insensible. His eyes were hollows in a skull-like face, his mouth loose. Adam dragged him into the shade, then felt for his pulse. Haitch was still alive, but his breathing so shallow that it was hardly detectable. With his wet kerchief Adam bathed the man’s face and chest. He could not guess Haitch’s condition. There were tropical fevers that Europeans had never heard of, and Roxtro had said that the Gambia garrison died like flies. The foul river water might have been responsible, or Haitch could have harboured infection for days. There was no knowing, and pitifully little that Adam could do.

There was no point in hauling Haitch across the mud flats — even if Adam were any longer capable of doing so. If the *Paladin* were offshore, the seaman could be returned for. Adam lurched into the mud and the pink birds took wing.

The mud sucked at his boots, but there were occasional strands of firm sand

that grew more frequent as he neared the shore. It was easier without Haitch, but he knew himself close to final collapse, and the frustrating glitter of the sea seemed to recede each time he raised his sun-tortured eyes. The bleached sand ahead shimmered, and he fell full length, but not feeling the shock in his numbed frame.

For a long time he lay prone, unable and unwilling to rise. He could feel the searing heat of the sun on his back and the calves of his legs. There was sand in his mouth, gritty against his teeth. This was the end of it. He'd not see cool, green fields again, nor Wednesday market, nor feel the clean trickle of corn through his fingers. His corpse would rot, swarmed by flies, on this stinking beach, when he had always supposed he'd join the other Margerys, the Hewars, Poles and Milners in the little churchyard of St Mary the Virgin. Someday, perhaps a century hence, someone would stumble on his whitened bones, and wonder —

'Od's blood — but it was hot. In England the first brimstone butterflies would be flickering among the hazel catkins, clogged leaves underfoot, and the rooks screaming among the elms. He could hear the rustle of wind-blown trees distinctly, and clenched his eyes to create a mental picture of his farmhouse, with Five-acre Meadow beyond, the stream to the Grants on whose bank he had first kissed Mary. And night — cool, quiet night — with moonlight, and rain cold on the skin —

But the rustle of trees was louder, much louder. It was drowning the noise of the rooks and shattering his vision of green fields and stately elms., and Mary's upturned lips. Trees in the wind didn't pound and hiss like this. Was this something to do with death?

He pushed out an arm tentatively, the sand scalding under his fingers. He was, then, not yet dead. Goddam — could he hear distant shouting?

The next moment the incoming sea deluged over him. He yelped at the

shock of its coldness, then gasped as acrid brine choked his throat, struggling to all fours as a second breaker followed the first. He sprawled again but, clawing fingerholds among the churning pebbles, he dragged himself beyond reach of the surf. Then slowly, nauseated, he lifted himself to his knees.

The incoming tide still seethed towards him, sinking into the sand only feet away, and the ocean, scintillating silver, reached to a horizon of turquoise. Two hundred yards offshore was the *Paladin*, motionless at a single anchor and under oars, crawling towards him, was the long-boat. He could see Roxtro standing in the stern-sheets with one hand on the tiller and the other raised high as he shouted.

CHARLES TOWN, chief town and seaport of His Majesty's Colony of South Carolina, was a bustling, thriving centre of trade between the New England and Middle Colonies northwards, the Caribbean southwards, and England across the Atlantic. Situated between the rivers Kiawah and Wando, it boasted a fine harbour bounded by islands, allowing safe anchorage for hundreds of ships. The two rivers, with a dozen other navigable creeks and waterways, provided cheap and convenient communication with the interior, progressively tamed by the colonists and already, for many miles inland, ploughed and planted. Furs and hides, tobacco and cotton were exported in exchange for sugar and spices from the Caribbean, silk from China, indigo from Bengal, clothing and hardwares from England, slaves from Africa.

The colonists were from everywhere — tradesmen, impoverished gentlemen and felons from Britain, Huguenots from France, Negroes from the Cape Coast, Quakers, Spaniards, Santee Indians. There were, in addition, the 'buskins' — the native-born whites and crossbreeds, who trapped and hunted, tanned hides and, with their rough-sewn buckskin clothes and uncouth habits, had as little liking for the houses and farmsteads of the new-coming settlers as the latter had for the half-savage buskins.

There was yet a third estate — the buccaneers — ranging -from petty smugglers and crimps who hardly justified the title to men like Edward Teach and Stede Bonnet, with ships of forty guns capable of challenging a naval frigate. Preferring to base their activities among the Bahama Islands and the Florida Strait, yet they ranged the entire Atlantic seaboard of the Americas and, in the absence of strong naval or military action, could be unwelcome

guests in any harbour.

The recreational activities of Charles Town were limited. A social elite, grouped around the Lords Proprietors and the wealthier merchants, had their carriages on Broad Street and occasional balls at Government House. There was hunting, a horse or a foot, for wild hogs, deer, turkeys and ducks. The outlying planters and buskins seldom came into town except for supplies or marketing — which left the common people, bondservants, and a floating population of seamen. For these there were taverns in plenty, cheap rum and doxies, and the inevitable hangers-on — pimps, hawkers, thieves, freebooters, beggars, drunks and fugitives from justice. A common legend over a tavern door was: ‘Drunk for a penny, Dead drunk for Two Pence, Clean Straw for Nothing.’

The women of Charles Town were as varied as their menfolk — settlers’ wives as hard-labouring as the bondservants they could not afford to purchase, tavern whores of every nationality, hard-drinking, abandoned and foul-mouthed, but with morals scarcely lower than those of the petticoated and feathered ladies of Mount Pleasant with their carriages and Negro outriders. There were mulattos and quadroons, the squaw-wives of buskins, Negress slaves and the ship-board wenches of sea captains. The Watchhouse, the town jail, could accommodate forty prisoners in chains, and there was a stout gibbet on White Point with a fine view of the harbour.

The defence of South Carolina, and Charles Town in particular, was in the hands of Colonel William Rhett, whose three companies of English redcoats were stiffened by a sprinkling of veterans from the Marlborough campaigns, and enjoyed the doubtful support of a local militia — the validity of whose muster roll varied with the demands of planting and harvesting, fishing, drinking and whoring. There were gun batteries on each of James, Morris and Sullivan’s Islands, at the harbour entrance, but only one — on Sullivan’s —

could cover the main ship channel.

An hour after anchoring, the *Elizabeth*'s mate had descended into the holds. 'It's a fine country ye've come to,' he informed his charges, 'too festerin' good for the likes o' ye misbegotten dregs — an' that's the fault o' milksop magistrates.' He spat. 'Nov/ listen careful. When ye go ashore there'll be buyers for ye, and ye'll be required to attest for seven years. If ye can't sign ye can make ye' mark. Ye' owners are required by law to feed ye, an' cover ye in accordance wi' Christian decency — that's all. If ye give good employment, it's possible ye'll be given two years o' ye' time, but in any case — at the end of it — ye'll be given a musket, a pick an' a mattock, an' a suit o' clothes, after which ye'll be free to go as ye please — 'cepting England, d'ye understand? An' remember ye can be hanged here as easy as Tyburn, an' they flog worse. Bonded felons don't have citizens' rights, an' ye' owner's entitled to punish ye as he thinks fit.'

The mate's speech told the felons nothing they did not already now. Several of them were undergoing their second term of transportation, having in the interim returned to England — an illegal act but not difficult — and with this experience had already acquainted their fellows with the vagaries of colonial servitude. The next seven years might be occupied anywhere in South Carolina, in a town house, or on an upriver plantation, in a brothel, a tavern or a coastal boat. The least desirable masters, particularly for women, were the buskins, who lived crudely in the interior, often sharing their females with partners, and sometimes even trading them to Indians. Town life was preferred, and there had been cases, whispered the wiseacres, of benevolent colonists buying a felon's bond and freeing him immediately, but benevolence was as rare and unprofitable in Charles Town as it was in England.

It had been a voyage of ten weeks, of which almost two had been spent

becalmed somewhere westward of the Azores. The crowded, stifling hold had become intolerable, but no relief was offered until two women died during the same morning. Then the captain, fearful that his profits were diminishing before his eyes, ordered that the felons, in small groups, be allowed a daily exercise period on deck.

It was a heaven-sent mercy. Big Jenny, who dominated the women's hold with fists, feet and nails, ensured that she and Sara were among the first half-dozen to clamber up the ladder into the clean sunlight to stand, grimy and gasping, on deck. A number of seamen were seated on a hatch cover to watch the amusement and to jeer obscenely. The women were scratching at armpits and legs as they had been for weeks, and the mate sneered. 'Aye, ye're a lousy lot o' sewer bitches, an' I'll hazard lice are the only creatures as'll tolerate ye' stench. But there's one thing we've plenty of, an' don't cost the owner naught — that's cold brine.' He turned to the nearest seamen. 'Break out a pump!' The men scattered gleefully. 'And ye' — he glared at the women, — 'strip ye' clothes!'

Following the weeks in the hold, and now with the sun pushing hot fingers through their rags, Sara's fellows made no pretence at modesty. In a few seconds all stood brazenly naked. To resist was only to invite unwelcome attention, and Sara followed suit. Three months earlier the situation would have horrified her, but those three months had taught her that resistance was futile and fine feelings expensive. Since departing Wapping she had purchased the valuable patronage of Big Jenny with acquiescence towards the brawny sensualist's lewd caresses, initially with abhorrence, gradually with resignation. It was a worthwhile exchange. Without Big Jenny's championship she might have joined the two women who died yesterday — flung unceremoniously over the side. As it was, she'd had a full share of victuals — poor though they were — and enjoyed a space in which to lie full

length and a latrine pail of her own. Small things — but small things could balance the difference between tolerance and intolerance, between life and death. There had been taunts and gibes from the other women, but none argued with Big Jenny. Yes, it was a worthwhile exchange.

The watch below were tumbling from the fo’c’sle to share the entertainment, and Big Jenny hooted. ‘Ye sniggerin’ bastards! Ain’t ye never seen a woman nak’d before, eh? Three weeks away from the brothels an’ ye’ve all got twistin’ bellies!’ She postured suggestively. ‘An’ there ain’t a man among ye as’d live alongside Big Jenny, I can tell you!’

She was silenced by a jet of salt water full in the face, and the seamen howled as, spluttering, Big Jenny roared defiant oaths. The big woman, for the moment, had drawn attention away from the others, and Sara, crouching, allowed the cool water to cascade over her sweaty body as the pump clanked. Above her the sails hung limply, and the flat sea was disturbed by the smallest breath of air. Under her feet the deck was warm. There was salt on her tongue and the sweet smell of the sea, and of hemp and tar, in her nostrils. Was it possible that such simple things could be so exquisite? Even the raucous laughter of the seamen was a welcome contrast to the whining and contention of the women’s hold.

‘Live alongside ye?’ the mate mocked. ‘That’d be worse punishment than the pillory. An’ that goes for the plaguey lot o’ ye — ’ Sara, her eyes on the deck, heard his voice pause, then felt his hand on her bare shoulder. She flinched.

‘Wi’ the dirt off ye,’ the mate speculated, ‘ye’re a neat little baggage, ain’t ye? I ain’t seen a jauntier pair o’ bow-chasers — an’ a paunch tighter’n a new tops’l.’ He hummed softly for a few seconds. ‘When ye’re covered, wench, ye can go aft to my cabin, d’ye hear?’

If ye can get a ship’s officer, they’d said in the hold, ye’ll be in high feather

— a dry bunk to share, crew's food, and likely a measure of rum if he's in a good humour — an' naught to do but the usual. The captain or the mate, them were best, wi' their own cabins. The fo'c'sle were a mite crowded, an' ye worked harder. Still, even the fo'c'sle were better than the hold —

They were right. It was just another exchange. In five or six weeks the ship would reach Charles Town, and there would be magistrates and authorities and surely, Adam must be doing something. The important thing, now, was to survive, and if she must buy survival with her sole remaining currency, it would be worthwhile. There would be time, later, for these weeks of disgust and nausea to be forgotten. She would pretend they had never happened. The mate's embraces could not be worse than Big Jenny's. She drew herself to her feet, steeling herself as his appraising gaze enveloped her nakedness. 'Aye,' he nodded, 'ye'll do, buxom. Get ye aft, an' dried, an' I'll be showing ye a thing or two ye London whores ain't learned yet — '

'Ye'll bloodywell not! Ye stinkin' lecherous tyke!' It was Big Jenny, her massive, wet-streaked torso quivering with rage, her rat-tailed hair plastered to her cheeks. 'Ye lay a finger on her, ye filthy kern, an' I'll tear ye' privates off an' push 'em down ye' gullet!' Her snarling face was only inches from the mate's. 'Any o' the crew ruttin' wi' felons, ye said, 'd be flogged at the gratings. I'll flog ye, cully, wi' me bare fists — an' ye wouldn't be the first man I've stretched senseless! — '

The mate, momentarily startled, stumbled backwards, and the watching seamen, delighted at his discomfiture, bellowed with laughter. Incensed, he whirled. 'It's comical, is it? Likely ye'll still laugh wi' a cat-o'-nine-tails across ye' hinds, eh?' The sniggers died. 'And ye!' — he turned to Big Jenny, — 'ye fat slut! D'ye suppose I don't know ye' pigsty games? Big Jenny, the protector o' innocent maids an' rosy-cheeked apprentices — so long as they behave quiet under a blanket! I've heard tales o' ye that'd wring

tar out of a hawser! But we'll see' — he nodded grimly, — 'if twenty lashes'll knock some o' the lustin' out o' ye!'

The big woman backed away towards the hatch. 'Aye, ye'll do it, but first ye'll have to take me, ye whelp — an' the first man to come wi'in an arm's reach'll curse the day he set eyes on the *Elizabeth* prison-ship, I'll tell ye!'

But it was not to be. Sara shivered as her flesh suddenly chilled. Above her the sagging mainsail was filling, swelling, and the stays hummed. The *Elizabeth* heeled gently and her bows dipped. Guiltily the mate glanced aloft, but already there was an ill-humoured hail from the quarterdeck.

'Master Mate! Are ye damn' blind? Clap a stopper on that bloody gossip an' get all hands to the yards! Shake out that fore-tops'l an' trim smartly! I'll wager ye couldn't see a hole in a festerin' ladder! An' get them women covered an' below. This is a ship, not the Venetian Ambassador's tart-ridden masquerade!'

The hands dispersed, disappointed that they were not to see Big Jenny at the wrong end of a nine-tail lash. It would have been interesting to see if she remained as truculent when they'd cut her down from the grating. The cat was a potent humbler, and there were few men, far less women, who had an oath's breath after a flogging. The felons, clutching their clothes, climbed into the darkness of the hold, where the others — hearing the commotion above but seeing nothing — clamoured for enlightenment, and Big Jenny gave her colourful account, swearing that she'd throttle the mate with his own guts if he tried the same again. Her position in the hold was stronger than ever, and her possession of Sara confirmed. Nobody jeered as she pulled the girl to her. Sara yielded, passively. It was a worthwhile exchange.

And now Charles Town. Thank God they'd reached Charles Town. They had crossed the bar soon after dawn, and now swung at anchor less than a cable's length off the jetty. The hatch covers had been removed completely

and, with them, much of the stench had flown. Extra victuals had been issued at noon, and the women could shout at the seamen sometimes silhouetted against the sky above them. There was almost a holiday mood, of relief, expectation, bravado. No matter what labours there were ahead, the Colony could not be worse than the *Elizabeth*. England, with its poverty, dirty and disease, its vicious justice, offered them little to yearn for. In South Carolina, it was said, there was fruit and game for the taking, land without limit, warm sunshine — and what was seven years? It couldn't be worse than a similar period in London's rat-infested slums, the stink of the Fleet, the fog and damp, the malnutrition that showed in the hollowed eyes of every street urchin. And it couldn't be worse than Newgate, or the tumbril ride to Tyburn.

The passage had taken ten weeks and a day and, Sara knew, there were ships that could achieve it in less — in seven or eight. This meant, if Adam had acted quickly, it was possible — just possible — that at this moment he was standing on the jetty waiting for the *Elizabeth* to discharge. The more she thought of it, the more it seemed likely. Adam, for certain, would not have abandoned her, despite her misconduct. If he had learned of her transportation — and he must, through Thomas, have apprehended Jeremiah Rann — he would have followed. She stared up at the blue sky above the open hatch. The *Elizabeth's* captain, a seaman had confided, had gone ashore with handbills announcing a sale of indentures, and even now he might be confronted by Adam and his law officers. If, by some mischance — and it was almost unthinkable — Adam had not yet reached Charles Town, she would go to a magistrate and demand release, the arraignment of the captain and mate, and an inquiry into the management of the *Elizabeth*. And there was a matter to settle with Big Jenny. There'd be a pillory in Charles Town, for certain.

'Up on deck, ye scabby bitches! Ye' barge is alongside awaiting ye'

ladyships' pleasure — an' the last one up'll get a festerin' rope's end!' For the first time, the mate's voice was greeted with a genuine cheer. Big Jenny tore two women away from the ladder. 'Take ye' time, ye drabs. Ye've got seven years.' She hauled Sara in her wake.

The Charles Town jetties lay to larboard, spread between the junction of the Wando and Kiawah rivers and backed by an untidy tangle of warehouses, waterfront taverns and houses of both timber and stone — tiled, thatched and elm shingled. Beyond, on rising ground, was a further confusion of rooftops interspaced by narrow', rutted streets. Over the bows, almost a mile away, Sara could see a small island crowned by a fort from which fluttered a Union Jack, while still distant was the far shore-line of the harbour, dotted with fine white residences and cultivated fields rising to the sky. To starboard — eastward by three miles — was the anchorage entrance and the open sea.

There were several other ships anchored, but for the moment Sara had eyes only for the nearest jetty. Tied alongside were a number of small boats — cobs, hoys and square-ended scows, and in the street above the jetty she could see carriages and waggon, people afoot, labourers piling bales and sacks, and a few red coats of soldiers, but the *Elizabeth* was just too far off for Sara to distinguish one person from another. Which was Adam? The plum-coloured coat with white hose? The braid-trimmed tricorne and peruke? No, Adam had never favoured a peruke. That might be him — with the calf-length brandenburg and knee-boots, staring hard at the *Elizabeth* —

From the forward hatch the male felons were climbing, with dirty beards framing pale faces, squinting against the sun. The mate, with a pair of pistols thrust into his waistband, and several seamen with cudgels, were supervising disembarkation into the ship's two small boats — the officer as much concerned with preventing desertions among the crew as with getting the felons ashore. There were no naval vessels in harbour, or he might have had a

press gang to contend with also, but there would be no shore leave. When the unloading was completed, a dozen waterfront women would be brought aboard, to remain until the captain had concluded his sale, and purchased and loaded a new cargo. The women, and a keg or two of rum, were poor substitutes for the shore delights of Charles Town, but lessened the risk of losing half the crew before the return voyage.

Crammed to capacity, Sara's boat laboured towards the jetty. Curious townspeople were gathering, and two soldiers in shabby scarlet lounged at the head of the landing steps. She could see faces now, white, Indian and Negro, calculating eyes and grins, a woman pointing and a clergyman in a shovel hat. Men were emerging from a tavern door, tankards in hands, and two boys wrestled in the dust. A large Negress balanced a tall basket on her head while the grave eyes of her infant peered over her shoulder.

Sara scanned the jetty desperately. There was no Adam.

IT WAS not until the following day that the confusion dispersed and he became aware that he was prone on his bunk, his head aching abominably and his mouth sour. Over him the anxious face of Thomas melted into a smile, then vanished from view. ‘Father — I’m glad — ’ The boy’s voice was shaking with emotion. He wrung out a wet towel and, shyly, laid its coolness against Adam’s burning forehead. ‘I’d best tell Captain Roxtro. He said I was to bring him below as soon as — ’

‘A moment, lad.’ His own voice was hoarse. ‘What happened?’

‘Captain Roxtro had a man at the main-top with a glass. He — Captain Roxtro — said he’d search the shore southwards until noon, then go about and do the same northwards till dusk, when he’d have to consider ye dead, and abandon the search. Ye’see, we’d just loaded the last of the slaves when there was a commotion among the Moors on the beach. They fired their muskets at the ship, then vanished in the direction of the compound. We waited all night, with the look-outs doubled. Then Captain Roxtro said if Seku Baber hadn’t killed ye, it was likely the jungle would.’

‘And it damn’ near did,’ Adam croaked. ‘But ye sighted me.’

‘Aye, and just in time. In another few minutes we’d have gone about. I never heard a sweeter sound than that shout from the main-top.’ He flushed, then added, ‘I gave the man a shilling.’

Adam chuckled. ‘A shilling? I’m scarce flattered wi’ the price ye set on me, lad — ’ He stopped abruptly, then swung his legs to the deck, wincing. ‘Toby Haitch. What happened to Toby Haitch?’

Thomas shook his head. ‘Before ye reached the beach, ye tramped across

the estuary mud flats. Ye' footprints were plain for a mile.' He paused. 'Did ye know there were crocodiles on the mud? Ye must have walked over a dozen of 'em.'

'I didn't see anything saving a few birds an' monkeys. But Toby Haitch?'

'Captain Roxtro sent ye back to the ship in the long-boat, then took a few seamen and followed ye' footprints across the mud. They found Toby Haitch, dead.'

Adam was silent for several moments, then, 'I'm damn' sorry,' he muttered, 'damn' sorry.' He sipped from a small cup offered to him by Thomas and grimaced. 'What? — '

'It's from the captain's box of medicines. Cinchona, he said, for African fevers.'

'Aye.' Anxious for relief from the stuffy cabin, Adam climbed to the upper deck. Above him the alabaster sails bellied handsomely, and he could see white spray exploding over the plunging jib-boom. Aft, under the mizzen, both captain and mate were eyeing the yards speculatively. Roxtro turned as Adam approached.

'Ah, Master Margery — ye've surfaced, eh? An' ye can thank whatever ye believe in that ye've got ye' feet on a firm deck. It were a close-run thing, I can tell ye.' There was a hint of censure in his voice, and Adam nodded.

'Aye, and I'm thankful to ye. Ye were right in the first place. I'm sorry about Haitch.'

Roxtro shrugged, mollified by Adam's concession. 'By rights ye should both be dead. We'll auction his gunny tomorrow, an' he's six week's pay owing, which we'll convey to his next o' kin — if we can find any.' He sniffed. 'But ye've a story to tell us, eh?' When Adam spoke of the exploding musket that had killed Seku Baber, the captain walked to the side and spat. 'Then it was plaguey good fortune we'd got the cattle aboard as we did —

but it means that, wi' Seku Baber gone, de Courcy'll have to pay his ten per cent to the Royal Africa in future. Well' — he shrugged again, — 'wi' them gimcrack muskets, it were poetic justice, an' with this passage over he'll be able to afford it.'

To change the subject, Adam glanced aloft at the incomprehensible rigging and straining sails. 'Ye've got a good wind, Captain?'

'Aye. We've lost a day, an' can do wi' it. It's likely we're a mite over-canvased, but she's got sound poles. If she begins to labour we'll stow royals and ga'n's'ls' — he was speaking as much to the mate as to Adam, — 'an' then the upper tops.' It was gibberish to Adam. 'But we'll work her while she's willing.'

'At this rate,' he told Adam, 'we'll sight the Cape Verdes — Portugee — in three days. Then it's clear to Charles Town.'

And that, Adam decided, would be a damned relief. The *Elizabeth* had departed London nine weeks ago. Unless delayed, she must be at Charles Town by now — and the *Paladin* was six, perhaps seven, weeks behind. What would be Sara's lot during that time? It was impossible to speculate, but at least the ship on which he stood was now heading directly for Charles Town, and the wind was fair. Outward with the northeast trades and home with the Gulf and westerlies, Roxtro said, with a cargo of sugar, tobacco and rum. They'd regain London in early June, all being well.

June? What would have happened on his Cambridgeshire farm during his six-month absence? Would Mary and Betty have managed, and would Dickon, and Hayes, and old Price with his rupture have ploughed and sown his acres — or would they be choked with grass and weeds? And which of the stock had they killed for the winter? Was the plough team well stabled and fed, the barn free of leaks and enough logs cut?

On deck there was sufficient wind for the temperature to be tolerable, but

below, where the wind did not penetrate, it seemed more suffocating than ever. The carpenter had rigged canvas screens on the lee of each hatch to channel clean air through the gratings, but the contribution was small. The hatches could not be opened because, Roxtro said, there was a constant hazard of blacks climbing from the holds and throwing themselves over the side. ‘They don’t understand the size o’ the sea,’ he explained, ‘an’ before ye can heave to an’ lower a boat, the sharks take ’em.’ And that, he added, was a mortal waste o’ owner’s money.

During the cool of the dog watches a limited number were driven from below for exercise, with the mate’s whip compelling them to walk the deck, and seamen stationed at the gunwale to prevent escapees. The blacks shuffled in a circle, their eyes on the planks under their feet, sometimes swaying in time to a plaintive chant that the wind snatched and flung away. Ahead, north-westwards, the horizon was lost in massive banks of cloud, and Roxtro, his head cocked, listened for the hum of the rigging to change to a moaning howl — the warning that he must take in sail or tear them to rags.

Four days out, with the Cape Verde Islands distant and purple astern, the mate reported several of the male blacks having refused to eat since embarkation. Roxtro seemed unconcerned. ‘Give ’em another two days. Then we’ll persuade ’em.’

Adam and Thomas had accompanied the mate into the holds on several occasions — usually holding camphor bags in their teeth against the hideous stench — the mate dispensing rough treatment to sores and boils and slowly establishing a semblance of understanding among the blacks that they must conform to a discipline, that they must use the midden-buckets and not foul the decks, share their rations equally, and pack tightly at night. If signs did not clarify his words, his whip did.

The slaves consumed their corn dabbadabb with resignation, although

hardly enthusiasm, and a thrice-weekly portion of boiled horse beans. As the smell of the bubbling mess reached the holds, the blacks moaned, some palming their chests and wailing, 'Pram! Pram!' This, the mate affirmed, signified the blacks' appreciation — which Adam found difficult to credit. From curiosity he had pushed a finger into a kettle of dabbadabb and tasted it, then decided that the bran mash he fed to his hogs was considerably better.

The refusal of slaves to eat, Roxtro said, was a not unusual hazard during the first few days of passage. Some were sickened by the motion of the ship, or their confinement — for they were children of the sun, knowing no enclosure except that of a flimsy shelter of mud or straw. Usually hunger overcame their reluctance, but persistence must be defeated.

'They're too simple to be cunning,' Roxtro went on. 'After six or seven days we'll bring 'em on deck and tempt 'em wi' a few dainties — salt hog, fruit, biscuit. If that don't work, we flog 'em. Finally' — he grinned, — 'there's the *speculum oris*.' He held up an iron instrument shaped like a chisel, but with a shaft running through its length. 'There's some use a bolus knife, but this is more certain.'

The following day only one slave was reported as still refusing food, and Roxtro ordered him to be brought up. He proved to be a young man, well-proportioned and ebony-black of skin, but with lack-lustre eyes and mien that told of a week or more without food. He stood for a moment, filling his lungs with air and eyeing the spume-capped sea. Then, like a frenzied stag, he sprang for the side.

Roxtro's seamen, however, were ready, and two of them flung him to the deck. The Negro rose to his knees, panting, but his effort was expended. Roxtro frowned. 'He's not feigning. We'll be wasting our time wi' dainties, or the cat. He'll need to be forced.'

'Dammit — ' Adam protested, then held his peace. He had differed with

Roxtro before, and been wrong — and Toby Haitch was dead. Roxtro glanced at him questioningly, but Adam shrugged.

The mate lifted a kettle of dabbadabb, and the young Negro recoiled, his teeth clenched, but two seamen held his shoulders while a third crooked an arm about his neck. Roxtro pressed the *speculum oris* between his lips, and with his free hand swung a mallet. There was a strangled cry as the Negro reared, blood streaming from his broken mouth. The mate was spooning boiled corn into the shaft of the instrument as the captain rammed with the mallet handle. The black strained, writhing, the lower half of his face crimson and his heaving chest spattered, but he was no match for three seamen. Defeated at last, he sagged, his throat pulsating helplessly as Roxtro forced food into it. Finally satisfied, the captain nodded. ‘That’ll do. He’s lost some teeth, but I’ll wager he’ll not refuse tomorrow.’

Blacks, Adam told himself again, weren’t the same as whites. Blacks were nearer to animals, with the same lack of feeling — although, i’faith, he didn’t stave in the teeth of a bullock if it were eating poorly. The mutilated Negro was being lowered again into the hold. Roxtro was right, of course. The blacks must eat, or die — and what were a few smashed teeth?

‘Mind ye,’ Roxtro conceded, ‘we’ll lose some o’ the cattle before we reach the Carolinas. There’s not been a slave-ship yet that’s come home wi’ a full muster. To look at ’em, ye’d think these blacks would tolerate anything, wouldn’t ye? But they’ve not got the stamina of a white. Give ’em a few weeks o’ dark and they begin to sicken.’

The *Paladin* plunged on although the mate was clearly uneasy, Roxtro carrying all the canvas he dare. Speed was important. The gaining of a single day might mean the saving of hundreds of pounds of the cargo they carried. It would be during the final week of the passage, when the water was short and rancid, food stocks falling, and the slaves at their weakest, that most would

die, and it was not unusual for a hundred corpses to be consigned to the sea between dawn and dusk. Despite repeated swilling of the decks with watered vinegar, and every effort to ventilate the holds, the stench increased steadily, until it permeated the fo'c'sle and the cabins, and clung to clothing. Thomas took more often to the shrouds, where he could now clamber as nimbly as any of the seamen, and Adam sought refuge on the quarterdeck, beneath the big stern lantern, where the wind was sweeter.

Two weeks out, in latitude 25, a sail was sighted to northward, and proved to be that of the *Mary Edward*, thirty three days out of Kingston with sugar and peppers. If speed was important, news was equally so. During months at sea, wars could be declared, erstwhile allies became enemies, friendly harbours became prisons. News was worth an hour. Both vessels hove to, rising and falling on the lengthening swell as the exchange was made.

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A great deal had happened on the American seaboard during the previous eighteen months, the *Mary Edward's* captain said — in particular the progressive destruction of the buccaneers that had plagued the Caribbean and Southern Colonies for half a century. For many years they had been partially tolerated for their attacks on Spanish and French ships, but in 1718 there was peace, albeit a tenuous one, and the buccaneers had become an expensive nuisance. The King's amnesty had sent many into retirement, and the persistent remainder were being systematically hunted down by Admiral Sir William Whetstone's squadron. The notorious Edward Teach had been boarded and killed by Lieutenant Maynard with the *Pearl* and *Lime*. Stede Bonnet had been hanged on Charles Town's White Point, and nine others in New Providence, including John Auger and Denis Macarty. Hornigold and Cockram had turned King's men, and now pursued their recent brethren.

For honest seafarers the situation was promising, but there were still

buccaneers at large — Charlie Vane, Seth Dorman, the brazen female Anne Bonny, and Calico Jack Rackham with his fast, black-painted sloop that had terrorized the coast from Barbados to Albemarle. Watch for Rackham, the home running captain warned. Ships' masters were becoming complacent, and Rackham could outsail any merchantman that floated. As the *Paladin's* new-trimmed canvas took the wind and the *Mary Edward* turned away, Roxtro snorted.

‘These damn’ lubberly sugar-merchants think every other ship’s the same as their own! Did ye ever see a clumsier scow? Watch for Rackham, did he say?’ He snorted again. ‘No festerin’ buccaneer’ll come wi’ the *Paladin* while I’ve got a stick left to hang a rag on!’

As if to give evidence for his words he ordered the royals set, although the stays were already protesting and the sea plainly rising. The mate, shrugged into his grogram sea-cloak, sent the men aloft, reluctant, but not daring to argue. The sky was turning leaden, the sea an ominous olive, with long rollers breaking into crests of white. The *Paladin's* bows dipped, the spume cascading over the forepeak in a solid sheet to drench the foresail, and from below came the noise of tumbling furniture and shattered crocks. The wind in the ratlines was shrieking now, and Adam could hear a continuous, moaning howl from the terrified slaves in the holds. The scuppers were streaming with brine.

‘The wind’s rising fast, Captain,’ the mate urged finally, ‘an’ she’ll not carry this canvas much longer. If ye’ll give me the word? — ’

‘I’ll not — an’ ye’ll keep this course, two points free, until I say so. There’s clear water between here and Charles Town Bar, and the fastest passage from the Gambia thirty-seven days. I want to see Morris Island in thirty-five.’

Supper in the stern cabin was an uncomfortable experience, with the lantern over the table swinging violently, dishes sliding, and the timbers creaking

with every movement. The ship's rhythmic heeling was predictable, but every few minutes the *Paladin* seemed to fall like a dead-weight in space, crashing into the sea with such force that Adam feared that her back would be broken, then labouring to rise again. If Roxtro was concerned, however, his face did not betray him, and when the mate, on watch, reported that the slave-holds were taking a great deal of water from the seas washing the deck, the captain pursed his lips thoughtfully.

'Batten 'em!' he ordered. The mate made as if to protest, and Roxtro swore. 'Batten 'em, blast ye!' The mate retreated.

Roxtro looked across the lurching table at Adam. 'Ye want to ask if a day or two more or less is worth battening down the slaves and likely choking half of 'em, eh?' He chuckled. 'No, it's not. It's a question o' balancing possibilities, Master Margery. A shorter passage means fewer deaths. That's for one. But to achieve a shorter voyage in this weather I have to deprive 'em of air. That's for two. And the mate's inclined to be an old woman. That's for three.' He shook his head. 'No. If the wind gets a whisper higher, I'll have to reduce sail an' take an' easier course until she blows out, but we'll hold on till noon tomorrow. By that time we'll be well into the north-east trades an' can breathe easy.'

Relieved, Adam and Thomas sought their bunks, only to find the deck of their tiny cabin space awash with water and floating with loose items of clothing, and the rack of muskets fallen from the bulkhead. It took them almost a half-hour to make the space habitable, and even then sleep was difficult. With the small door closed against the elements, the cabin was not only sealed against ventilation but in blind darkness, and the rolling and pitching of the ship seemed more boisterous than ever, the creak and shudder of timbers more threatening. Adam would have sworn that he never slept, and could not guess the feelings of young Thomas. Both were heartily glad when

a tired cry of ‘Starb’dmen below! Seven bells, there, d’ye hear?’ brought them stiffly to their feet.

The wind had not abated, with the sea running as high as on the previous evening. During the night the cock-boat had been wrenched from its lashings and whirled away, and the waist was scattered with other debris left unsecured — tangled ropes, some sodden sea-boots, an empty water-cask that trundled sullenly from side to side as the ship rolled. The watch on deck were trying to coax the cold furnace into life so that the slave’s dabbadabb could be boiled. Roxtro and a surly mate stood on the quarterdeck, feet braced on the damp planks.

‘Noon, Master Mate — ’less any canvas goes — an’ not a minute before, ye understand? Then the forenoon-men can take in royals, ga’n’s’ls an’ upper tops’ls. But if the wind slackens — not a stitch — ’

Both men staggered as a giant sea heeled the *Paladin* so that her gunwale was awash. ‘S’blood, Captain!’ — the mate pleaded, — ‘she’ll not live! An’ the cattle are bein’ rattled like peas in a barrel — ’

There was a noise like a cannon-shot. The *Paladin* shivered from stem to stern, then rolled drunkenly. The retching sound of splitting canvas came from above, and the mate scrambled to the side to stare forward. ‘The main lower tops’ls gone!’ he shouted, then, ‘Festerin’ Christ — an’ the yard!’ The *Paladin*, heeling to starboard, had only partially righted, and Adam clutched desperately at a stanchion to prevent himself sprawling. Aloft, the fractured topsail yard was hanging only by its bolt-ropes and, with the torn sail streaming like a great bannerol in the wind, was threatening to wrench the opposing yard from the main-mast.

‘Get that yard cut free!’ Roxtro roared. A handful of seamen sprang for the lee ratlines, now perpendicular with the heel of the ship. They were quickly lost to view behind the great, fluttering tangle of torn canvas, but in a

moment the sail was free, plucked away by the wind and whirled forward to wrap itself around the foremast. Then there was a cry of 'Ware below!'

Roxtro snatched up a speaking trumpet. 'Belay! — ' But he was too late. The splintered yard-arm, hacked away, plummeted deckwards, but with its jagged stump shearing into the belly of the mainsail, tearing a breach that the wind immediately seized upon. In seconds the mainsail was wrenched apart like paper while, above, the disengaged leech of the upper topsail curled and slatted with a noise like thunder.

'Ye ignorant swabs!' Roxtro raged. The *Paladin*, although still listing to starboard, rode more easily, but the mainmast was a tangled shambles and there was every danger of further canvas being carried away by the rising gale. 'All hands up, Master Mate. Clear that wreck from the foremast, furl fores'l, tops'ls, an' unbend the main.' Roxtro was as angry that the mate's earlier qualms had proved valid as with the damage to his ship. The carpenter had already secured the severed yardarm with a view to preparing a splice, but there was little hope that it could be hoisted until the weather eased. The *Paladin*, with poles shorn, turned her stern to the sea and limped northwards, pitching still, but happier with her lightened burden of canvas.

Roxtro was bad-tempered, but he had further cause for irritation when the slaves were fed at midday. The mate reported two women dead and a broken leg in the men's hold. Brought up, the corpses were quickly disposed of, and Adam, sometime apprentice surgeon, set and bound the fracture. The black, crouched on the deck and shivering in the wind, bared his teeth as the leg was stretched and fixed, but made no sound other than a long hiss. Adam was afraid that a return to the crowded hold might mean a further dislocation with gangrene or some other complication to follow, but there was no alternative. The hands would not tolerate a black in the fo'c'sle, and there was no other available space.

The *Paladin* ploughed northwards for the rest of the day and for the whole of the next. It was not until the third that Roxtro gradually hauled to westerly, with every man anxiously watching the behaviour of the straining sails as the head wore slowly around, the after yards shaking ominously, but holding. On her new course, once again set for Charles Town, the *Paladin* thrust her bows into the flying scut, but the sun's warmth could be felt now, and the wind was perceptibly easing. The men were drying wet clothing on deck, and scuttles could be opened — for which Adam and Thomas were grateful. During the previous night the lantern in their confined quarters had burned with a blue flame, and both had risen with thick heads. Two more dead were brought up from the slave-holds.

Roxtro's most urgent task was the refurbishing of the mainmast. In the waist the great rent in the mainsail was being overlaid with a strip of new canvas, the mate hovering over the sewing seamen to ensure that stitching was small and tight. The shredded main lower topsail would have to be renewed completely. More difficult, however, was the jury rigging of the broken yard-arm. The carpenter had trimmed the jagged ends of both the stump aloft and the fallen yard, then roughly chiselled a mortice tongue and groove in the butts. The broken arm was hoisted and fitted, splinted with two lengths of timber, and the whole firmly lashed. The result was a clumsy, foreshortened yard-arm, but it would have to do. The upper topsail could now be set and a new main lower topsail bent and reefed, ready for a further decrease of wind, for the repaired yard-arm would not be trusted to hold in the present conditions.

The captain's desire to make Charles Town in thirty-five days — or even thirty-seven — was now forgotten. The ship had lost two hundred miles, and must be handled gingerly in anything approaching a good blow. For a brief moment Roxtro had been tempted to put back to Porto Grande, in the Cape

Verdes, for more substantial repairs — but only for a moment. It would mean a further delay of perhaps ten days, and his cargo would not survive it. No, better now to press on and hope to make a landfall in six weeks.

Day followed day in monotonous succession, measured not by the helmsman's hour-glass but by such trivialities as the silver glitter of a shoal of flying fish, a shower of rain, the small brown bird that fluttered from the sky, exhausted, to the deck, the night heavens scattered with diamonds and the phosphorous shimmer of the wake. Then there was the infant born in the after hold — born, that is, and dead in minutes, with Roxtro swearing that Seku Baber had bilked him with a woman pregnant more than six months. The ocean was endless and empty. There was little work for the seamen, who drank their daily issue of beer, cursed their food, their watches, the boiling dabbadabb, the sails, the wind, and sang obscene ditties about insatiable bawds and obliging duchesses.

But the morning arrived when Roxtro flung a hand towards the southern horizon. 'Three hundred miles over there,' he said, 'are the Bahamas. And there' — his finger moved, — 'the coast o' Florida. Six days, an' we'll be tied up in Charles Town.' The bodies of twenty-six slaves had so far been thrown over the side, and the next six days would likely double that figure. 'Still, fifty from six hundred's not bad, considering. As I said, we treat 'em better than most. There's some ships — like the *Phoenix* and the *Litchfield* — as allow 'em only twenty-two inches o' deck height — '

There was a shout from aloft. 'Sail ho! Starboard bow!'

All on deck walked to the starboard side. They had not seen a sail since the London-bound *Mary Edward*, weeks ago. Roxtro swung into the ratlines with his glass. 'She's hull down,' he commented, 'steering sou-east'ard.' There was a long pause. 'No — dammit, she's turning southerly — ' He was silent for a long time, then he dropped to the deck, his face thoughtful. 'Master

Mate! Set all heads'ls, an' the main lower tops'l — smartly!' The mate hesitated, but the captain's grim features quelled any protest he might have made, and he ran for the fo'c'sle. The watch on deck were already going aloft, and Roxtro mounted the quarterdeck ladder, only to lift his glass again and stare northwards. 'I thought she might've been on a long tack, but she's not. She's altered course to cross our bows.' He paused. 'An' she will, if we don't make more speed.'

'Faith, why shouldn't she?' Adam inquired. 'She might be out of Charles Town and wanting a'change of news.' Perhaps news of the *Elizabeth* and the disposal of her cargo of felons.

'She might,' Roxtro agreed, 'but we'll not wait to find out. She's a sloop, black-painted, an' plaguey fast.' He stared up at the mainmast. "'Od fester that damn' gimcrack yard!'

'A black-painted sloop? Are ye suggesting it's Rackham?'

'We'll soon know, Master Margery. If it's Rackham — or any damn' pirate — he'll chase. But he's to lee'ard, and in a minute or two he'll have to wear, an' that's when he'll find that the *Paladin*'s not the shambling old hooker he thought.' His eyes had not left the distant sail. 'Because I'll sail him into the bottomless pit — if' — he turned savagely to the mainmast, — 'that bloody yard-arm holds!'

A buccaneer? It was impossible. Roxtro, to be sure, was starting at shadows. The first black-hulled ship he'd encountered — indeed, the first ship — had recalled to him the *Mary Edward*'s warning, and he'd panicked. Did the gritty Roxtro have clay feet? Adam was disappointed. Northward, the strange sail was closing. Mind ye — if it was a buccaneer —

Roxtro, at the helmsman's elbow, was snarling further orders to the mate. The *Paladin*, carrying every inch of available canvas, leapt forward like a roebuck, and the strange vessel — on a converging course that would have

brought her to beam in a few minutes — swung desperately with emptied sails flapping as she strove to come about. Adam could see her clearly now, as she heeled — a low, black freeboard with a line of gun-ports. Goddam — the gunports were open — and no friendly exchange of gossip justified open gun-ports. Adam found his mouth suddenly dry, and he looked about for Thomas. Could Roxtro be right? A buccaneer?

‘Pick the bones out o’ that, ye bastard!’ Roxtro was addressing the mile-distant pursuer. He grinned at Adam. ‘I told ye before, Master Margery. No festerin’ buccaneer’ll come up wi’ the *Paladin* while I’ve a stick to hang a rag on.’ He nodded at the black sloop. ‘Ah, he’ll chase awhile but if he hangs on till noon he’ll see naught but royals.’

Adam breathed with relief. He had not felt the same since the grand charge at Blenheim. His three months on the *Paladin* had not endeared him to the sea, or the ways of sailors, and he had no relish for an affray with pirates with a thousand fathoms of green water under his feet — especially with young Thomas.

But it didn’t matter. The black sloop was already falling astern. ‘What would a buccaneer want,’ he asked, ‘with a cargo of slaves?’

‘Nothing,’ Roxtro answered. He was watching the rigging carefully. ‘He didn’t know, but what buccaneers can’t take they usually spoil. If that swab had boarded us, he’d have driven every festerin’ black over the side, then probably fired the ship. Likely he’d have killed the officers — especially if we’d shown fight.’ He sniffed. ‘An’ that’s why we ran. The *Paladin* carried six four-pounder minions, four officers an’ eighteen hands including a cook an’ carpenter. That bastard’ — he indicated the distant sloop, — ‘likely carries thirty sakers, wi’ demi-culverins fore an’ aft, a crew of fifty.’

Then it happened. From above and beyond the mizzen canvas there came a splintering explosion, and Adam, Roxtro and the helmsman involuntarily

crouched. The mate, in the act of climbing the foremast shrouds, jumped to the deck and ran aft, shouting, but the wind tore his words away. The next moment in the waist, a seaman screeched as the massive topsail yard, hurtling from above, smashed him to the planks. The main lower topsail erupted, like a great, broken wing, and the mainsail, its weather head released, was convulsing and slatting uselessly. The *Paladin* lurched to the starboard as the helmsman fought to control the tugging wheel. ‘Hold her on, blast ye!’ Roxtro roared. He snatched up his speaking trumpet. ‘Get that dross over the side, Mas’ Mate — an’ secure the main! I don’t care how ye festerin’ do it, but get it secured!’

Two thousand yards dead astern the black sloop’s approach had suddenly become ominous again, and there was no time for conventional repairs if the *Paladin* was to retain any hope of escape. The mate hesitated, uncertain, and the captain roared again. ‘Damn ye’ eyes! Take a line from the mains’l head over the upper yard — an’ for Chris’sake stir yeself!’ He turned on the helmsman. ‘Bring her ten to starboard, man. That black ’un will be abeam in fifteen minutes, an’ we’ll need to jig on a sixpence if he’s not to rake us before we’re fit to run again.’

The *Paladin* laboured about and, almost immediately, a mile away, the sloop followed suit. Watching tensely, Adam saw a tiny mushroom of black smoke appear magically over the buccaneer’s bows — to be instantly scattered by the wind. Seconds later he heard the dull boom of the bow-chaser. Roxtro grunted. ‘He’s tellin’ us to heave to or take the consequences.’ He glanced at Adam grimly. ‘Which do ye prefer, Master Margery — a hempen collar or a trystin’ wi’ a shark?’

IN THE yard of a livery stable, in drizzling rain, the *Elizabeth*'s complement of felons had signed their attestations on a dirty table-top. Bidding had been only moderately brisk. There were many who asserted that Negro slaves were better investments for agricultural labour; they were property for life instead of just seven years, they were more cheaply housed and maintained and they could be inter-bred — which was an excellent long-term economy. There would surely be a slave cargo from the Gambia or the Cape Coast within the next two or three months, and there were slave agents in Jamaica.

In rebuttal, the *Elizabeth*'s captain pointed out that heathen blacks took months to adequately train, would seldom adapt to household work, and half of them died during their first two years anyway. Besides, since they were only animals, they could not be trusted with white children or young women. Finally, he swore, there was no possibility of a slave-ship calling at Charles Town for at least a year. This he knew because he had just come from London.

Despite the rain, curious townspeople thronged the yard, some with upturned noses and superior expressions, others openly derisive, a small few civil and sympathetic. A half-platoon of redcoats with muskets slung, sweat-soiled neckcloths and mud-smeared gaiters, watched wearily, and a tall gentleman in a heavy French wig — whom someone said was the Provost Marshal — eyed the proceedings, from a stable door so that the drizzle would not mar his biscuit-coloured coat.

Twenty-two of the younger men were conscripted into the ranks of Colonel Rhett's infantry, and the indentures of a further twenty purchased by an

upriver plantation owner. The remainder went in twos and threes, to chandlers, rope-makers, taverners, maltsters and skinners. A hulky, unshaven buskin, hung with musket, powder-horn, hunting knife, and spitting tobacco juice, paid Spanish silver for Big Jenny and two other of the brawnier females. Women, he said, with a grin displaying brown-stained teeth, had to be thick-ribbed for the Alleghany Mountains — and they had a long walk. Big Jenny swore, and the buskin grinned again.

Sara had been eyed speculatively by several men before one made a firm bid. He was a short, thickset man of middle age, with greased hair and red face. There were stains on his waistcoat, and his eyes darted carefully among the rainsoaked women before returning to Sara.

‘How old are ye, lass?’

‘Near seventeen. But I’m not a felon. If there’s a magistrate — ’

‘Aye, aye,’ he nodded, then lowered his voice to a whisper. ‘Are ye virgin?’ She made no answer, and he chuckled. ‘It don’t make no matter — no matter.’

The *Elizabeth*’s captain placed an indenture paper on the wet table. ‘A well-shaped wench, sir, an’ she’ll give ye a good seven years o’ labour.’ He winked. ‘Though I’ll hazard it’s not floor-scrubbing ye’ve in mind, eh?’ He put his own signature on the attestation, then, ‘An’ seeing she’s no writing, she can make her mark — there.’ He penned a cross at the bottom of the paper, folded it, and presented it to the buyer. ‘There, sir — all legal an’ binding, an’ not a court o’ law can dispute it.’

‘I’ll not!’ Sara stammered. ‘I’m not a felon — and you know it! Please! — ’ She turned to the thronging townspeople. ‘Is there a magistrate? I’m not a felon — I’m Sara Hewar — and taken by force in London. This man has no right — ’

The faces around her were grinning, and a woman in a feathered bonnet

giggled. The *Elizabeth*'s captain glanced at his audience knowingly. 'A magistrate, m'dear? We'd have thought ye had enough o' magistrates where ye came from. But if ye've a complaint, there's the Provost Marshal himself to see all's fair — ' In the shelter of the stable, the tall gentleman in the biscuit-coloured coat yawned, patted his mouth, then strolled slowly from the yard to a waiting carriage. The captain laughed. 'D'ye see?'

The thickset man's fingers were biting into her arm as he ushered her away. 'Make no trouble, lass, an' ye'll get none. Ye're damn' lucky, I can tell ye. Ye might ha' been taken by a buskin, an' been livin' like a savage — or a plantation up-Wando, boilin' sugar-juice from four i' the morning to midnight. An' what have ye got? Lubber Jackson — ye'll call me Master Jackson — owner o' the Paradise. Aye, like I said, ye're lucky — an' I'll expect ye to show gratitude. Fifteen pounds I paid — an' ye get food, bed an' clothes — an' there's many a wench that's made a neat little pile o' guineas, I can tell ye — but not by bein' defiant. I treats my wenches well, an' I expect 'em to do as they're bid — otherwise it's a whipping — '

The Paradise? What was that? Another ship? Jackson's breath smelled of rum. They were on the waterfront again, and she could see the anchored *Elizabeth* with several small boats alongside, four other ships and, to seaward, a naval frigate picking its way towards the harbour entrance. Whatever the Paradise was, thank God she was free of the *Elizabeth*. The air was fresh and sweet, and she had at least glimpsed the Provost Marshal. As soon as an opportunity presented itself —

'It's up to yeself to keep free of pox — ' He halted suddenly and turned, his red face inches from hers. 'Ye ain't poxed already, are ye?' His nails bit fiercely into her upper arm, and she gasped. 'No,' he grunted, 'I'd say ye're not. But watch for it. There's plenty in Charles Town, an' not just from seamen. There's many a showy buck from Mount Pleasant wi' rotten-

breeches.’ He dragged her on. ‘An’ don’t give credit, ye understand? They pays in advance, or ye don’t oblige. Likewise, I’ll not have ye turn away good money because ye don’t like his manner or his smell. These buskins, now. They get raddled quick, an’ they’re a mite unpolished wi’ wenchies, but they part wi’ their silver easy — ’

‘An’ there’s some gentry ye have to treat special — wi’ no charges. Any o’ the Lords Proprietors, f’ instance, Governor Johnson or Judge Trott, John Kendal the planter, or Chidley Bayard when he comes in from Port Royal. If one of ’em sends a closed coach for ye, just go quiet and keep ye’ mouth shut after, ye understand?’

Sara was beginning to understand. She tore herself free of his grasp. ‘You’re a pimp. A mangy brothel pimp!’

The flat of his hand struck her full in the face, and she staggered. ‘Ye’ll learn a bit o’ respect, wench, or ye’ll have raw buttocks, I promise ye. An’ I don’t take kindly to bein’ named a pimp by any tavern whore — ’

‘Tavern whore? You think I was a tavern whore? — ’

‘I don’t care what ye was, mistress — but that’s what ye are now, an’ ye can get it fixed in ye’ mind.’ He bundled her roughly down a series of shallow, broken steps, into the gloom of a doorway. ‘This is ye’ roost, m’doxie — the Paradise. An’ if ye ever step out o’ this door wi’out my permission, I’ll have ye flogged.’

The Paradise was a tavern. It had perhaps once been a small warehouse — half timbered, low of ceiling, with a sanded, rough-planked floor. There were two window apertures in the wall, unglazed, but with canvas blinds cut from old sails that could be rolled up during daylight. In midfloor was a long trestle table surrounded by several smaller ones, and a miscellany of forms and stools. Against the wall farthest from the door was a counter built of planks and barrels, and a narrow staircase to the upper floor. Four brass oil-

lamps hung from the tobacco-coloured ceiling — low enough to strike the head of anyone of more than moderate height — while a number of pewter spittoons were strategically placed among the tables.

Despite the open windows, the tavern reeked of stale tobacco smoke, ale, rum, and lamp oil, with an acridness that caught at Sara's throat. Four men and two women stood or sat, drinking and talking boisterously. One lay with his head to a table-top as a large blonde woman strove to rouse him, demanding a shilling, while a second woman, dark and middle-aged but possessing still the remnants of a beauty long past, sat with bodice unlaced, impassively drinking as a half-drunken seaman fumbled with her breasts. They were watched amusedly by a powerful man at the counter, leather-breeched, with a skin and crinkled hair that suggested a generous Negro element in his parentage. The fourth, a slim, wiry man in a creased coat and down-at-heel shoes, was filling a cup from an ale barrel as Jackson and Sara entered.

‘O’Neill — ye hog-belly!’ Jackson howled. ‘Have ye money to pay?’

The slim man cringed. ‘Ah — aye, Master Jackson — that is — not exactly, but — ’

Jackson glared about him angrily. ‘I’m gone for less’n hour, an’ the place is filled wi’ penniless toss-pots guttlin’ themselves wi’ free ale like it was the Pope’s birthday!’ The blonde woman rose, grinning. ‘Stow ye’ gab, Lubber. From the profit ye make wi’ this gutter-swill ye call ale, ye can afford a quart or two. If ye were in London ye’d be pilloried for adulterin’.’ She peered at Sara. ‘So that’s what ye were away for, eh — ye crafty bastard? A felon wench?’

For the second time Sara wrenched free of Jackson’s grasp. She felt sick with weariness and hunger. Her legs ached with the walking after her long weeks of confinement, and her cheek burned from the blow she had just

received. Choked with despair, she wanted to cry.

‘I’m not a felon — can’t you listen? I’m Sara Hewar, of Sawston in Cambridgeshire, carried off by a man named Jerry Rann,’ she sobbed. ‘If you’ll take me to a magistrate I’ll see you rewarded — ’

The blonde woman laughed. ‘Fester it, lass — there ain’t no profit in croaking. This likely ain’t Vauxhall, but there’s worse, an’ ye’ll settle. Just ride easy — ’

Beyond Jackson was the open door, and freedom. If she could reach the street, she could run — run anywhere. If she could find a magistrate, a law officer, or the Provost Marshal — or simply some honest citizen who would listen to her —

She could not guess that Jackson might be anticipating her attempt. Even as she whirled, his arm was around her throat, crushing the breath from her. She reached up, frantically, her nails gouging at his cheeks, and she swore viciously. Then, with all his strength, he flung her to her knees, where she remained, weeping.

‘Ye savage bitch,’ he spat. ‘Well — I warned ye — ’

‘Lubber,’ the blonde woman pleaded, ‘can’t ye show a little charity? It ain’t easy for a wench to be crimped into a brothel — not first off. Give her a chance to show willin’ — ’

‘Sawney — ’ Jackson, fingering his torn jowl, spoke to the big man. ‘Take her up to the loft — ’

‘Lubber!’ the blonde woman bawled. ‘Christ — it ain’t right! Ye don’t know what Sawney’s like — he’s a filthy animal! An’ the little slut ain’t done naught to earn it. What’s a scratched face, Lubber? It don’t merit Sawney basting her. Ye’ve never seen him break a wench! — ’

Jackson dabbed his cheek with a grubby kerchief. ‘The scratch don’t matter, Meg — but ye can shut ye’ face. She ain’t going to earn her keep

until she's been bridled — an' Sawney can do it better'n anyone in Charles Town.' He turned again to the big man. 'Sawney? — '

The tall Sawney wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and smiled. 'A bottle o' gin, Lubber?' His voice was grating, guttural. 'It's thirsty labour.'

'Gin?' Jackson grunted. 'Ye've payment enough, blast ye, wi' the breaking of a wench, ain't ye? An' I leaves ye alone, don't I?'

Sawney shrugged. 'She'll be as lovin' as a kitten when I've finished, Lubber. It's worth a bottle.'

'A quart o' rum.'

'Two quarts?'

Jackson nodded. 'Damn ye.'

'Wait!' The stout Meg put an arm around Sara's shoulder. 'Listen, lass. Weepin' an' pukin' ain't going to do ye no good. Why don't ye lower ye' flag an' make it easy? Tell Lubber ye're willin', wash it down wi' a cup o' gin — an' I'll see ye don't get done bad to, eh? In the Paradise there ain't no shame in bein' a whore, nor a felon.' She glanced spitefully at Sawney. 'There's festerin' worse things — '

Sara shook her head miserably. 'I can't. I'm not a felon — ' She gasped as Sawney hauled her to her feet. Meg swore. 'Sawney, don't!' — She swung on Jackson. 'Lubber, ye bastard! — '

In Sawney's powerful hands Sara was helpless. He lifted her as easily as a doll and made for the stairs. 'Lubber,' Meg spat, 'ye're a white-livered mongrel. Ye ain't got the spunk to do ye' own dirty work — '

'Shut ye' face, I said,' Jackson gritted. At the head of the stairs a door slammed. They heard Sawney's footsteps above their heads, and Sara's muffled sobbing. Then Sara screamed, and Meg shuddered. 'Ye bastard! — ' The small man, O'Neill, was staring at the ceiling, white-faced, and the dark woman had pushed away the pawing hands of her companion and was lacing

her bodice silently.

From beyond the flimsy ceiling came the unmistakable slap of a hand against flesh, then a second and a third. Sara was crying bitterly, pleadingly, and a lamp was swaying gently on its chain. In the tavern-room nobody moved or spoke, and only the distant noises of the street disturbed the silence. Sara's cries had become a continuous whine, and the blows had not paused. Meg drew in her breath with a hiss. 'Lubber? — ' The minutes passed.

Meg flung down her cup with a clatter, angrily. 'It ain't right! — ' But above them the noise had suddenly ceased. They heard the threatening murmur of Sawney's voice, and then his laugh. There was a creak of furniture, Sawney's voice again, and the lamp over their heads began to dance rhythmically. Jackson cleared his throat and reached for a cup. 'Rum,' he said. He looked at O'Neill. 'Aye, ye can have one, ye scabby whelp — an' ye can be spreadin' it around there's a new doxie at the Paradise, d'ye hear?' The rum trickled down his chin, and he coughed. 'A young'un.'

O'Neill nodded, chuckling. 'Master Jackson — do ye reckon? — '

Jackson sneered. 'Ye ought to sample what ye're sellin'?' He shrugged. 'We'll see what Sawney says — '

It was two hours before Sawney came down the stairs, pulling on his coat. He was sweating. 'I'll have them two quarts, Lubber.' He grinned. 'I told ye, didn't I? Lovin' as a kitten, she is — '

O'Neill drained his cup hurriedly. 'Sawney — I was askin' Master Jackson — '

Sawney took a long draught, then wiped his mouth. He surveyed O'Neill thoughtfully. 'Aye, ye might as well, sot. She's got t' get used to all kinds.'

O'Neill scuttled for the stairs.

THOMAS CAME from below with the pistols that John de Courcy had purchased from Coutts of Houndsditch, and Adam crouching with his back to the wind, loaded and primed them. Thomas watched him. ‘Do ye think there’ll be a battle, Father?’

It was Roxtro who answered. ‘Not while we can still run, lad.’ He put a hand on the boy’s shoulder. ‘Ye’d best stay below. It’s not a fifteen-gun salute he’ll be firing in a few minutes, but a festerin’ broadside, an’ there’s likely to be blood spilt if we can’t keep our distance.’ He glanced astern. The sloop had completed her turn and was now on an identical course to that of the *Paladin*. ‘Now we shall see.’

Aloft, the mate and several seamen were trying desperately to secure the rebellious head of the mainsail. ‘If he overhauls us,’ Adam said, ‘ye’ll suppose he’ll sink us?’

‘No,’ Roxtro shook his head. ‘Ships take a deal o’ sinking by shot and, anyway, it’s a cargo he wants — anything he can market in Cuba or Hispaniola. He’ll fire on the upward roll, seeking to maim our rigging, so’s he can board — an’ he’ll be a mite annoyed to discover we’re a slaver, especially if we’ve given him damage. As I said, he’ll turn the slaves over the side an’ likely kill the officers. The hands’ll likely be given the choice o’ joining the buccaneers or being hanged-which ain’t no choice at all. If he’s in a good humour, he might give ’em the long-boat wi’ three hundred miles to row.’

‘Dammit — and ye’re not going to fire back? If he’s going to kill us, he can pay something for the privilege, can’t he?’ Roxtro’s eyes, intent on the

following sloop, rose to the mainmast and then returned to Adam. ‘Master Margery, I ha’ant always been a slave-captain. Eighteen years ago I served before the mast in Benbow’s *Bredah*, when we fought the French for six days — so I know something about sea-fightin’. There’s times when ye can accept odds but this is one o’ the times when ye can’t. That black bastard astern can outrange us, out-gun us and — if that oaf of a mate don’t do something quick — out-sail us. Our festerin’ little pop-guns — even if they reached him, an’ even if we had gun-crews to man ’em — would only make him more savage when he grappled, d’ye understand?’ He stared aloft again, then grunted. The head of the topsail had been roped to the upper topsail yard and to the weather shrouds, while a third line was being taken aft to the mizzen. The result was a clumsy, distorted mainsail, but it was taking the wind and bellying.

‘She’ll sail like a thatched barn,’ Roxtro snorted, ‘but she’ll do.’ Astern the sloop had drawn within a half-mile, and her bowchaser vomited again. This time Adam saw a white splash as the shot struck the water, bounced high, then fell from sight.

‘He’ll need to be closer than that,’ Roxtro observed, ‘but not festerin’ much.’ He looked at the sky. ‘There’s a good seven hours o’ daylight left — but I’ll hazard he’ll not chase that long. It’ll be finished wi’, one way or t’other, before then.’ He lifted his glass. ‘Aye, he’s not gained more’n a few yards since we reset the main.’ The *Paladin*, with her warped mainsail, was running gamely, her bows knifing into the swell as she clawed to keep her distance from the pursuing sloop. Adam and Thomas, under the stern lantern, watched the buccaneer, mesmerized, as Roxtro waiting for the wind to change a point or two, shouted orders at his harassed seamen — to trim canvas and sheets, to free a tangled halyard, then whirling to roar at the helmsman: ‘Keep her full, blast ye, keep her full!’

The sloop was gaining, Adam decided — only foot by foot, but gaining. He could see her clearly now — a pale-coloured patch on a headsail, black paint peeling from her bows and, as she heeled, multi-coloured shirts of seamen grouped about the guns that pierced the sides. He could see the glitter of steel and, with arms braced against the quarterdeck rail, the figure of a man with a plumed hat. Was that Jack Rackham? Adam stared. Aye, but the sloop was gaining. Thomas, too, had observed the narrowing distance. ‘Father — ’

Roxtro joined them on the stern. ‘Ye don’t have to say it, lad. The black devil’s overhauling us, an’ he knows it.’ His face was thoughtful. ‘Wi’ that crippled mains’l, I’m wringing everything I can from the *Paladin*, but at this rate he’ll be abeam within the hour. We can go about, o’ course, but it’ll not make any difference in the end.’ He had hardly finished speaking when the buccaneer’s bow-chaser flashed for the third time, the sloop’s prow bursting through the pall of cannon-smoke before the shot fell forty yards off the *Paladin*’s stern-post.

‘If we fired a few shots back,’ Adam persisted, ‘even if we couldn’t reach him, it might take the edge off his appetite.’

‘It might,’ Roxtro agreed, ‘but it’d take us more than an hour, wi’ lifting tackle, to get one of our guns aft, by which time his nine-pound shot might have smashed our stern.’ He rubbed his chin. ‘But since ye’re intent on fire-eatin’, Master Margery, there might be something we can do. Do ye know aught about cannon?’

Adam considered. ‘I’ve watched artillerymen, in the war.’

‘All right — then ye can load the starboard guns, ye an’ the mate. There’s no chain or grape, only ball — but don’t run ’em out till I say. Have ye’ men ready wi’ linstocks, and wi’ their heads down. When the moment’s right I’m going to turn across his bows — an’ ye’ll have just one chance — our four minions against his nine-pounder. After that, God help us.’ Adam, followed

by Thomas, ran for the waist. The mate was sceptical, protesting that the guns had never been fired in his knowledge, save for signalling purposes and, anyway, four-pound shot would only sting the buccaneer into being more vicious, and he — the mate — had a wife and children in Southwark. Powder and ball, however, were scurried from below. Adam loaded each gun carefully, primed the vents, and stationed a seaman alongside each with a smouldering slow-match. Then he peered astern.

During the previous twenty minutes, Roxtro had been wearing gradually to northwards, compelling the pursuing sloop to his lee side, and the buccaneer, seizing on the shorter line, veered accordingly, content that, in the process, neither his bow gun nor his broadside ordnance could bear on the *Paladin*. The sloop, was almost within hailing distance, with her crew thronging the larboard gunwale and the plume-hatted captain staring at the slaver with arms akimbo. At any moment now the two ships would be beam to beam —

Roxtro shouted from the quarterdeck. ‘Are ye ready?’

‘Aye, ready,’ Adam answered. There were ashes in his mouth. When the *Paladin* turned, there’d be time for only one puny broadside at the narrow target of the head-on sloop. There’d be no reloading, and he could expect an immediate response from the buccaneer’s heavy bow-chaser, followed in seconds — unless the *Paladin* could suddenly sprout wings — by a point-blank volley from a dozen or more sakers. S’blood, what was a middle-aged Cambridgeshire farmer doing? —

‘Stand by — ’ Roxtro warned, then, ‘Hard t’ starb’d! Fire as ye bear!’

The *Paladin* came around, heeling wildly, with a thunder of slatting sails and cordage. The gun-chains taunted, and somewhere amidships a tumbling bucket crashed into a bulkhead with a noise like a musket shot. Adam, crouched by the foremost gun-port, watched the horizon climb and the white-flecked sea streaming below. He saw the outflung bowsprit of the

black sloop, then her bows, turning towards him and ominously near, the muzzle of the seven-foot demi-culverin, and even the surprised faces of seamen staring from the foredeck. He waited, tensed, until the sloop's three masts were in line, her weathered cutwater bisecting the notch-sight of his minion.

'Fire!' The gun convulsed, rearing back against its chains. Stinging black smoke rolled over the deck, and from Adam's right came the triple roar of the remaining cannon. The sloop had vanished from view.

'Larb'd a little!' Roxtro was roaring. 'Steer little, blast ye!' Then he laughed. 'Ye hit her where she lives, Master Margery!' The gun-smoke was clearing, and through it Adam glimpsed, to his amazement, the starboard side of the buccaneer slipping past, the gun-ports open but silent. What i'faith was happening? The *Paladin* and the sloop were now almost stern to stern, with the sloop seeming to be gyrating in her own length, wallowing, her masts a turmoil of empty, flapping canvas. The distance between the two ships widened.

'Her helm!' It was the mate, pointing. 'We smashed her wheel!' He shook his fist. 'That'll teach ye — ye bleedin' cutthroat scum!' He seemed suddenly very pugnacious. 'That'll teach ye! — '

'Mas' Mate! Man the braces, an' smart! We're going about!'

Adam scrambled aft. Roxtro was chuckling, his eyes on the sloop. 'I never ha' thought it possible, Master Margery. I don't know what happened to three o' ye' shot — Jamaica likely — but one of 'em ran the length o' the sloop an' shattered her wheel, an' the helmsman wi' it — an' she were so damn' confident o' running us down, she'd not loaded her starboard guns, nor her stem-chaser.'

'And ye're going about to finish her off?'

'Finish her off?' Roxtro threw back his head and guffawed. 'S'death, ye're

a plaguey fire-eater, an' no mistake. We've just escaped massacre by a festerin' miracle, an' we're going to run. She's not hurt much, an' she'll still steer by tiller, but I doubt if she'll chase for a while. Trouble is, nobody'll believe us when we tell the story.'

But the sloop was not completely finished. Swinging, her port guns came to bear, and suddenly her black hull rippled from end to end with flame. The *Paladin's* crew threw themselves on their faces, around them the noise of splintering timber. In the waist the iron boiler, struck by a ball, reeled from its stone slab, spewing corn mash and cold ashes. Cordage spilled from above, and a severed halyard struck Adam's cheek like a whiplash.

He pulled himself to his feet. The long-boat, athwart the stern, hung in shredded planks from its davits, and the quarterdeck ladder-way had gone. Several sails were holed, without serious damage, but the ball that had toppled the boiler had spun away to strike the mate, tearing off arm and shoulder and smashing ribs and collarbone. His blood-drenched corpse sprawled among the ashes from the upturned stove.

'Did ye say finish her off, Master Margery?' Roxtro asked grimly. He glanced at the sloop, now on the larboard quarter and falling away. 'We'll be into the wind again in a few moments, an' out of range before he can reload.' He rubbed a bruised knee. 'An' now, Master Margery, let's get to Charles Town, shall we?'

The mate was dispatched in company with four dead slaves, but with the added privilege of a canvas shroud and a stitch through the nose, leaving a stain on the deck that watered vinegar and sandstone could not remove. The *Paladin* ploughed on, into the endless, blue bowl of the ocean, northwestwards, the patched rigging holding well, the dabbadabb steaming in the battered boiler, and a daily quota of limp, black bodies, flung from the waist. Over there, pointed Roxtro, was Spanish Florida, and there had been

rumours of approaching war with Spain before leaving London. Still, in a few days they'd see King's territory — South Carolina — then the swamps of Folly and Morris Islands and the mile-wide common estuary of the Kiawah and Wando rivers, on which Charles Town stood. The ale was poor stuff, but rum was cheap —

‘Sail ho!’

Roxtro whirled. ‘Where away, blast ye?’

‘Od’s blood, Adam speculated — not another festerin’ buccaneer?’

But the newcomer was the forty-gun frigate *Delicia*, beating southwards under a mountain of immaculate canvas, her black and yellow sides showing two decks of iron teeth, polished brasswork gleaming in the sunshine.

A cynical naval lieutenant climbed from the warship’s pinnace, wary of his hose on the *Paladin*’s ladder and wrinkling his nose as he walked aft. Captain Woodes Rogers’ *Delicia*, he informed Roxtro, was recently out of Charles Town in search of the corsair known as Calico Jack Rackham. The gun-brigs *Shark*, *Rose* and *Buck* were similarly engaged. Only three weeks earlier, in these very waters, Rackham had boarded and looted the English ship *Elizabeth*. Had Roxtro sighted anything unusual?

Roxtro certainly had, and his brief account of the *Paladin*’s exchange with the black sloop brought a measure of respect into the officer’s demeanour. He shot a glance at the minions in the waist, then at the shot-scarred canvas above him. Rackham — if it were him — with a smashed wheel? He bent over Roxtro’s chart, sucking his teeth. Was the captain sure of the position? And the wind was sou-easterly? —

He was anxious to return to the frigate, but Adam detained him. If the looted *Elizabeth* had left Charles Town, then she must have disembarked her cargo of felons. Could the lieutenant give any news of their disposal?

Felons? The lieutenant sniffed, fingering the dildo curls of his wig. What

would he know about felons? He supposed they had been suitably disposed of, in the manner prescribed by law, which was too damn' lenient by half. Incidentally — he turned back to Roxtro — if the captain had any likely lads who fancied service in a King's ship? — Roxtro's face gave sufficient answer, and the lieutenant, with a thoughtful stare at the fo'c'sle to indicate that, if he so determined, he could take any men he wanted, made for the pinnace.

'Uncivil puppy!' Roxtro growled. 'All spit an' pipe-clay — an' likely don't know the difference between a hand-spike an' a headsail. A couple o' inches o' gold lace, an' they think they're God Almighty.'

Fourteen corpses were hauled from the stinking holds that evening — one of them the Negro whose leg Adam splintered. 'We'll be off Charles Town Bar tomorrow,' Roxtro predicted. 'If there's any lame cattle below we'd best have 'em over the side tonight.' He called for a lantern and, accompanied by four seamen, climbed into each hold in turn. It was dusk when he emerged, and on the deck squatted fourteen blacks, emaciated and dejected, too weak to pull themselves to their feet. Smeared with filth, grey-faced and skeleton thin, they crouched with eyes half closed against the westerly sun.

'Flux,' Roxtro grunted. 'We're lucky there's not more.'

'Sdeath,' Adam blurted, 'ye're not going to throw them into the sea — still living — because they've got flux? If ye'll allow me access to ye' surgeon's chest, there's likely something that'll mend 'em. There's no substance in this corn mash — and anyway, there's likely someone in Charles Town will buy 'em cheap?'

'They'd need to be carried ashore.' Roxtro shook his head. 'A sick slave ain't worth ten shillings, Master Margery, an' they're best rid of. At this stage o' the passage all the cattle are weakly, an' a distemper can spread like quicksilver. By tomorrow we could have four times this number, an' more.'

He nodded at the prostrate slaves. 'Ye can take my word for it — if we don't turn 'em off now, they'll not survive more'n a few hours ashore.'

'Festerin' hell — but they're alive *now*, aren't they? Can't ye let the poor kerns die first?'

'Master Margery,' Roxtro shrugged, 'ye're a farmer. When ye got swine plague, or gut-worm in ye' sheep, what do ye do eh? Ye slaughter 'em, and quick, before the infection runs wild, don't ye? There's not much to choose between a throatcutting an' a drowning.' He turned to his seamen. 'Get 'em over!'

'Then I'll be damned if I can stand here and watch.' Adam walked aft. Thomas, he knew, would be in his favourite perch — the main-topmast head. Behind him was a commotion and an animal howl, and he lengthened his stride. There was a splash, then a second, and the seamen's curses mingled with the blacks' desperate whining. A patter of bare feet followed him, and he whirled, nauseated, to see a terrified Negro scrambling on failing legs towards him, mouth agape, until a seaman felled him with a crushing blow with a cudgel. He fell on all fours, his face to the deck, and weeping, until the seamen lifted him by arms and legs and bundled him over the gunwale.

'Devil take ye, Roxtro!' Adam raged, 'ye're no better than that bloody pirate!' He ran to the side. The jettisoned blacks were threshing, convulsing, as they rose and fell in the sea's swell, their arms frantically outstretched, fingers clawing, to regain the *Paladin's* side as it slipped past them, but already several were lost astern, and a man with a boathook stood on the mizzen chainwale to fend off any who came too near. 'Dammit, if they must be culled, couldn't ye pole-axe 'em first?'

'Pole-axe 'em?' Roxtro shook his head. 'Fester it, Master Margery, that'd be more like murder. There's limits — '

Adam choked. 'Limits! My oath — if I saw anyone treating cattle like ye

treat these blacks, I'd take a horsewhip to him! They're flesh an' blood, same as we are! — '

'Aye, flesh an' blood — but just because they've got two arms an' legs don't signify they're the same as we are, Master Margery. Apes ha' got the same, an' dancing bears. They're blacks.' He surveyed the *Paladin's* wake, in which, a hundred yards astern, a few of the discarded Negroes could still be seen struggling to remain afloat. 'An' I've told ye before, we treat 'em a sight better than most. There's some captains allow the crew to take their pick o' the black wenches — and I've seen many a woman choose to be ripped by a shark after a week o' brutality in the fo'c'sle. I've seen blacks flogged to ribbons 'cause they didn't understand English, ears torn off for amusement, an' pregnant women giving birth while still chained to a rottin' corpse that nobody's cared to take up.' Roxtro shrugged. 'That's the slave trade, Master Margery — an' ye ain't going to change it. It gives a festerin' good return for investment, an' there's plenty more blacks in Africa. Ye might as well argue against harnessing horses to carts or the breeding o' bulldogs for baitin' — '

Adam stood under the stern lantern, his eyes helplessly riveted on the *Paladin's* wake until there remained nothing but empty sea. He'd seen enough of the slave trade, i'faith. It was a degrading business, and he was damned glad he'd not put his money to it. Did de Courcy know how his profits were earned? He probably did and, like all other speculating Englishmen, he did not care. The stench of the slave holds and the crash of whip against flesh did not reach Halstead Hall.

At dawn the following day, within seconds of opening his eyes, Adam sprang from his bunk and pulled on his clothes. This morning, Roxtro had said, they would be within sight of the coast of South Carolina — and that meant Charles Town and Sara. The wind was cold to his skin as he climbed on deck, and he shivered, wishing he had brought his cloak. To larboard,

distant by several miles, was a long coastline, flat and grey, shrouded in thin sea mist. There were gulls overhead, shrieking as they weaved and hovered above the mast-tops, and the stove was streaming amidships. Seamen were swilling the deck with the last of the vinegar, while others were already aloft, shortening sail.

‘Aye, that’s it.’ The well-wrapped Roxtro joined Adam. ‘His Majesty’s Colony o’ South Carolina. Charles Town Bar’s fifteen miles or so north’ard — around the curve o’ Morris Island there.’ He pointed. ‘There’s the Stono River, an’ Folly Island near abeam. Naught much but swamp an’ mud creeks, a few Indians an’ buskins — ’ There were three or four small sails to shoreward — fishing boats or smugglers, Roxtro said — which was saying the same thing. French and Spanish settlements were within easy sail, and the English revenue laws were fair game for the colonists, rich or poor. Farther north were the triple masts of a larger vessel, feeling for the main channel into Charles Town — from the Bermudas perhaps, or even England. She turned on a long track, the tiny dots of seamen among the spidery of her rigging and showing her glinting stern windows before vanishing from view behind the out-jutting headlands of Morris Island.

‘Likely ye’ll be wanting to go ashore first thing,’ Roxtro suggested. ‘Ye’ best person is the Provost Marshal. By rights he should’ve supervised the transfer o’ indentures, and recorded ’em. If he hasn’t, ye’ve cause for complaint — although who ye can festerin’ complain to, I’ve no opinion. As for me, I’ve got to publicize the slave sale. Tomorrow’ll be soon enough — by scramble — at twelve pounds apiece.’ He considered. ‘Four hundred an’ fifty — that’s five and a half thousand pounds. We’ll load tobacco an’ furs — an’ sugar an’ rum if the prices are right. If not, then cotton. Either way, Sir John de Courcy’ll have a useful day on Change Alley when we tie up at Deptford.’

An hour later the wide mouth of Charles Town harbour opened before them. On both sides of the sound were shores eroded by creeks and inlets, thrusting inland into thick forestlands among which, here and there, were vast spaces cleared by axe and still scattered by felled timber. Three miles of harbour waters stretched ahead to the jetty piles and, beyond, the cluttered roofs of the town. Off the starboard bow was a small island supporting a brick-built fortification, and Adam could see the comforting flutter of a Union Jack over the battery that commanded the anchorage. Charles Town was larger than he had imagined — perhaps as large as Cambridge — and, i'faith, he'd not anticipated being confronted with a town of such size. Above, the hands were furling sail and the *Paladin* had slowed to a walking pace. Adam held Roxtro's glass to his eye. He could see people, wagons, a line of tethered pack-horses, and could even read the lettering of several waterfront signs — the Custom House, the Devils Inn, the Paradise, Tom's Coffee House, and the Flower de Luce.

On the *Paladin*'s fo'c'sle a seaman's mallet rose and fell, and the anchor cable poured, roaring, into the harbour depths.

THERE WERE periods of painful clarity — usually during the first hour after rising — when she vomited, and sometimes wept on the shoulder of an ample person named Meg. There were long periods of semi-obscurity, in the reeking atmosphere of the tavern-room, with rum-laden breath in her throat and the eager hands of a drunken seaman under her shift. There were periods, also, of near oblivion, when the tavern was filled with swearing, jeering men, when she and Meg, and the expressionless dark woman, reeled drunkenly from embrace to embrace, lacing wrenched from sweating breasts and petticoats rolled to thighs. What invariably followed was numbness, and she seldom recognized or was sensible of the succession of men whose heated, impatient bodies covered hers, nor when they crawled from her, sated.

And there were brief moments, between sleeping and waking, when she thought herself in her white-painted bedroom in Sawston, and she lay listening for the morning music of the birds, opened her eyes to see the sun's etching of the latticed window on the opposite wall — and then, like a stunning hammer blow, realization would return, nausea would flood her throat, and she would retch, sobbing, until Meg came.

Meg's unvarying remedy was a generous cup of rum or gin — 'a hair o' the dog,' she'd claim, 'to sweeten ye' sour guts.' If her manners were rough and her speech heavily laced with oaths, she was at least a woman, and her grudging sympathy a haven in Sara's sea of misery. 'There's no profit in pipin' ye' eye, lass,' Meg insisted. 'Lubber's got ye cribbed, good an' proper. Ye might as well settle to it. There's plenty o' liquor, an' the men no different to London — that I can tell ye.' Sara's plea of innocence fell on deaf ears.

Meg shrugged. 'What's the difference? Ye're a felon, an' ye've got seven years. That's better'n seventeen, an' a bleedin' sight better'n three miles to Tyburn.'

The first mouthful of gin set Sara spluttering and retching again. A second cup was tolerable, and a third initiated the somnolence, the drowsy apathy, that was to deepen as the day advanced, and behind which her loathing was stifled.

Sometimes, during those lucid periods, she thought again of escape, and each time thrust the notion aside. Not today. Perhaps tomorrow. The memory of the crushing humiliation she had suffered at the hands of the man Sawney was still with her. His inhuman viciousness, his bruising lust, and his endless, punishing salacity long after all feeling had drained from her — these she remembered, and could still shudder. There was a limit to resistance, and the edge of her despair could be dulled by alcohol. Escape? Perhaps tomorrow, or the next day. Sawney was seldom absent from the tavern, and she could not endure another paralysing thrashing from Sawney. Not today.

'It ain't bleedin' worth it, lass,' Meg assured her, and Meg should know — Meg, who sympathized, and fed her gin. The fumbling hands of besotted sailors and coarse-mannered buskins were a lesser evil than Sawney, and the equally besotted wench with unlaced bodice and brazen thighs wasn't Sara Hewar, but someone else. Sara Hewar lived in the village of Sawston, embroidered testers and chair-covers, helped Betty Cowper with cakes and jams, and attended Sunday church. This dishevelled doxie who stumbled up the stairs with a floundering, flush-faced man at her heels was someone else.

But Sawston was fast becoming a distant myth, a figment of an old dream. Adam and Mary, Thomas and Betty Cowper, had never really existed. Life was whoring, the burning taste of gin, the reek of lamp oil, a crumpled, dirty mattress, and sweating men. Her mirror showed her a face beginning to puff,

dull eyes and neglected hair. She was seventeen years old, but in a few weeks she had aged ten. How long had she been at the Paradise? It was becoming more and more difficult to calculate. Day followed day with a monotonous sameness, and she often could not tell if it were noon or evening.

And this thing called Pox, that Lubber Jackson repeatedly warned her of, and for which Meg's panacea involved liberal insinuations of salt water — aimed also, Meg claimed, at discouraging pregnancy. 'Brats an' pox — the two things ye don't want, lass. Mind ye, brats are easy enough rid of, but pox is different. There's pills, an' boluses, an' electuaries, but they don't mean naught once ye're cankered.' Of course, Meg added philosophically, it came to them all in time, 'An' not just whores, lass. Kings, bishops an' duchesses gets pox, so ye'll be in good company.'

It was through a gin-fuddled haze, with Meg crooning a bawdy song over the shouts and oaths of the tavern-room, that Sara heard Jackson announce the arrival of the *Paladin*. 'From London an' the Gambia,' he said. 'Fourteen weeks at sea, so they'll be ravenin' for rum and' their breeches ready open. O'Neill's on the jetty, waitin''em. Ye'll see the colour o' their festerin' money before they tumble ye, an' no twice around the buoy for the price o' one. If there's trouble, Sawney'll see to it.'

Another ship. It made no difference. Ships and their crews came and went, and one name meant no more than another. It made no difference.

MAJOR JAMES PLOMER BELLINGHAM, sometime of Fairlie's Horse and now Deputy Provost Marshal of the County of Charles Town, hid his annoyance behind a pinch of snuff, and then shrugged.

'Master Margery, ye have come a long way, and I sympathize with ye, damme — but I am not in the habit of forming acquaintanceships with transported felons, nor am I interested in their whereabouts while they maintain the law. And there's forty thousand people in the Colony, including Negroes, wi' half that number concentrated in Charles Town County. Ye can hardly expect me to know the names of every plaguey one.'

'Ye are required, sir,' Adam protested, 'to record the disposal of all felons landed — '

Bellingham surveyed Adam blandly. 'There are gentlemen in London, Master Margery — who have never travelled farther than from Westminster to Windsor — who *require* me to do a number of things. As Deputy Provost Marshal I am *required* to enforce law and order, to support the magistrates and the Excise, to quell riots, to hunt and confine criminals, to carry out hangings and floggings, and be wet-nurse to every damn' citizen who complains of short weight, watered milk and blighted flour. I have four constables, Master Margery, and two mounted men. Ye'll perhaps appreciate why my interest in your problem is a little lacking.'

Whilst Roxtro landed his cargo from the *Paladin*, Adam had come directly to the Provost Marshal's house in Broad Street, but the Marshal, Colonel Rhett, was absent on the Savannah with two companies of troops, in response to persistent rumours of Spanish conspiracies, and his deputy, Bellingham,

had neither time nor patience with an involved and dubious story of miscarried justice. If there had been a miscarriage, it had begun in London, and when London sent him a directive he would stir himself to deal with it. Such a contingency, however, would thankfully take many months to materialize.

‘The *Elizabeth* left here weeks ago,’ Bellingham explained, ‘and the captain dead — killed by Rackham. So far as I am aware, the indentures he sold were genuine, but only the London magistracy can confirm that. I cannot release a bonded felon on ye’ word, Master Margery, even if I knew where this’ — he raised his eyebrows, — ‘this Sara Hewar — is now.’ He smiled at Adam. ‘Ye’d have been wise, sir, to have brought some evidence with ye, instead of this half-cock story — ’

Adam choked back his rising anger. ‘I’ll allow I was hasty, Major, but — that being so — perhaps ye’ll allow me the benefit o’ ye’ advice. At least I can locate my niece and, felon or no, likely come to terms with the holder of her indenture. Perhaps ye’ll recall some o’ the buyers?’

Bellingham scratched his head beneath his wig. ‘The *Elizabeth* landed a hundred and ninety felons — and seventy of them women. Ye can try the Kendal plantation beyond Goose Creek, and the Buraekin mill three miles up Wando. Each of them will have taken ten or a dozen. Captain Stroud’s lady took a wench for house chores, I recall — and there was an oaf of a buskin took two.’ He frowned. ‘If ye’ girl was one of those, Master Margery, she’s likely out of ye’ reach. I can’t give ye an escort and, anyway, ye’d never find a buskin in Indian country. The rest? — ’ He shrugged. ‘They’ll probably be bonded locally — houses, taverns, merchants, farms. Ye’ll just have to make inquiries.’ He wagged a finger. ‘But ye’ll bear in mind, Master Margery, that as far as the Provost’s concerned, ye’ wench is a felon, and she’s not to be taken out of the Colony until her innocence is proven — and that means an

acquittal from the Crown Solicitor in London.'

Regaining Broad Street, Adam paused to consider. If Charles Town and its surrounding county embraced twenty thousand people — perhaps scattered over a hundred square miles of unhewn territory — he could have a formidable task. And, even when Sara had been found, he might not return her to England without the blessing of the Crown Solicitor. He grunted. Well, he'd see about that. Apart from the return passage to London, the petition could be ignored for months, even years, in some dusty pigeon-hole before being given attention. 'Sblood — if he once got Sara aboard the *Paladin*, neither Rhett nor Bellingham, nor anyone else, would lay a finger on her, and he'd answer for it in London.

Broad Street, flanked by Charles Town's most impressive buildings, was thronged with people. There were carriages with matched pairs, house Negroes in livery, strolling gentlemen, hawkers, a pair of rough-clad buskins, and a solitary Indian in a high-feathered tricorn hat and a trade blanket, drunkenly snoring against a wall. The road was pot-holed and rutted, but no worse than many in Cambridge. Adam walked into Dock Street, where Roxtro's seamen and several hired local men were herding the slaves ashore. There were whips cracking, and the blacks milled in an untidy column, their eyes showing white with fright and mistrust. Some boys were throwing stones and jeering at a Negro fallen to his knees in weakness, while other slaves — irrevocably provoked by their exertions — were crouching in the dust to relieve themselves. Roxtro was in conversation with a small group of townsmen, and Adam waited, occupied with his own thoughts. Roxtro might have some suggestion —

He did not observe the small, lean man who had sidled up to him. 'Good day to ye, sir — an' a fine day'tis — ' Adam turned.

'If it's rum, gin, or strong ale ye've a thirst for, sir, the Paradise yonder'll

provide ye better an' cheaper than anywhere in Charles Town.' He cocked his head grinning confidingly. 'An' there's three o' the hottest wenches i' the Colony, if ye're so minded, just waitin' to show their paces for a London gentleman — '

'Take ye pimping elsewhere,' Adam muttered irritably, turning away. The man shrugged. 'As ye say, sir, but ye'll remember, eh? The Paradise — ' He was gone.

'Ye've seen the handbills, gentlemen,' Roxtro was saying. 'All at twelve pounds apiece, to be sold by scramble.' Intrigued, Adam watched the slaves driven into a high-fenced stable-yard and the gate closed in the faces of the potential buyers, who had now increased to a sizeable crowd. The head and shoulders of Roxtro, with watch in his upraised hand, appeared above the fence. 'Three o'clock, gentlemen? Are ye ready?'

The gate swung open with a crash, and Adam found himself thrust aside as the waiting buyers jostled impatiently to reach the close-crowded slaves in the yard. The blacks, in turn, scrambled backwards from the advancing mob, falling over their shackles, but the colonists were quickly among them, grasping slaves by arms and shoulders and hurling them aside. Several had brought lengths of rope, or series of tied kerchiefs, with which to segregate their captures from others', and already canes and fists were flailing as buyers disputed a prime specimen. The Negroes, terrified by the incomprehensible confusion, fought to extricate themselves, and blacks and swearing buyers sprawled, entangled.

'Faith! — ' Adam breathed. 'Is this what ye call a sale by scramble?'

Roxtro laughed. 'Aye. It's damn' odd. Four hundred an' fifty blacks could take days to dispose of wi' an ordinary market. Buyers hum an' haggle, they go away an' come back, and pinch an' push the cattle as if they were buying Godolphin blood stock.' He nodded at the melee a few yards from them. 'But

give 'em a scramble and ye'll clear a cargo in an hour. They'll squabble over the last black brat.'

Still brawling and swearing, the townsmen were gradually reducing the disordered mass of frightened slaves into separated groups of varying size. Some of the blacks, torn apart from spouse or child, were bleating like animals, and two, terror-stricken, had managed to clamber over the fence, but they were in no condition to run far, and Roxtro's men quickly dragged them back with cuffs and oaths. A flushed buyer pounced on them with a determined 'They're mine, they're mine!'

'If ye're settled, gentlemen,' Roxtro shouted, 'I'll take note of ye' claims, and then those who want to brand can do so. Twelve pounds apiece, remember — or I'll take the same in tobacco or furs delivered to my hand on the jetty by noon tomorrow. Prime cured leaf only, an' fox, lynx, musk-rat an' raccoon, subject to examination — '

It was obvious that Roxtro would be involved with his slave-trading for longer than Adam cared to wait. He walked back to the jetty, where the *Paladin's* long-boat was tied, with Thomas, left in charge of it and eyeing the waterfront wistfully. Adam beckoned him ashore. 'We'll be going to the Burdekin mill, lad, up yon river — '

'Up river? Will we see Indians?'

Adam chuckled. 'It's likely — but the only Indian I've seen yet has been as sotted as an old woman in Gin Lane.'

With hired horses, they paid sixpence to be ferried to the far bank of the Wando. 'Follow the north side o' Wappoo Creek,' the ferry man directed them, 'till ye see the weir. Burdekin's beyond — an' watch for moccasin snakes, or I'll be ferryin' ye back in a shroud.'

It was a good track, meandering through congested timber — birch, redwood, maple and sequoia. They encountered no snakes nor, to Thomas's

disappointment, Indians or anyone else, but they found the weir easily enough, and the mill that used its leashed waters to both saw timbers and grind corn.

Burdekin was a Bavarian, portly, double-chinned and genial, his apron and breeches chalky with flour and sawdust. Without hesitation he produced a sheaf of indenture papers and thumbed through them slowly.

‘Jane Stilwell, Anne Harris, Susannah Folds, Mary Stone — ’ There was no Sara Hewar.

They rode back to the ferry in silence, the ferryman cheerfully regretful that they had not fallen foul of snakes, but charging a shilling for conveying them to the Charles Town side of the river. The return passage, he insisted, always cost double. People who crossed one way had to get back, didn’t they?

It was early evening when they had returned the horses and reached the jetty, and on regaining the *Paladin* they found Roxtro already aboard. He was in an unusually high humour. ‘Every damn’ black sold, Master Margery, an’ I want to be quit o’ Charles Town before they begin dying. These festerin’ planters have an unreasonable habit o’ wanting their money back. I’ll be loading tobacco and furs tomorrow. With luck we can slip the following forenoon for Norfolk, in Virginia Colony, where we’ll get better leaf. Then’ — he grinned, — ‘London.’

‘Faith,’ Adam observed, ‘ye’re not allowing us much time to find Sara.’ Mind ye, when he did find Sara, an early departure from Charles Town might be healthy.

He and Thomas were ashore early the following morning in anticipation of a ride of several hours. They reached the Kendal plantation long before sighting the house — unfenced fields of green tobacco plants, tipped with yellow flowers. Between the regimented rows, ragged white workers and Negroes were hoeing and manuring, or breaking new ground with mattocks.

Four men with a horse were prising treestumps from a tract recently cleared of timber, and a dozen women roamed indiscriminately, plucking grass, presumably for fodder.

Riding farther, they passed between two lines of wattle huts, crudely thatched, some ramshackle and neglected, others showing evidence of attention, with threadbare curtains and cultivated patches of garden. They could hear an infant wailing, and the scolding, weary voice of a woman.

The Kendal house stood on a small eminence, its brickwork cleanly whitewashed and with young fruit trees planted on each side of a gravelled approach. There was a line expanse of lawn and a paddock housing several good-looking horses.

John Kendal, a lean, sun-tanned man in his fifties, received them civilly, insisting that they take refreshment after their ride, and asking for news of England. He was a Yeovil man, he explained, and thirty-five years earlier had himself been transported following Jeffreys' Bloody Assizes. In Taunton Castle he had been sentenced to hanging, but had escaped the rope to be sold to the plantations. He had found a good master and had achieved his freedom. Now he was one of the wealthiest planters in the Colony.

Aye, he maintained bonded felons as well as Negro slaves. He had to have labour. He listened to Adam's request carefully. No, there was no female felon named Sara Hewar on the Kendal plantation, but he had been present at the last sale of indentures in Charles Town, and he recalled a wench protesting her innocence, but had given little attention to it. Aye, her name might have been Sara Hewar.

'I recall the man who took her,' he said, 'and I've a mind I've seen him before. A townsman, that's for certain. Short o' height an' stout, middle-aged, wi' his hair beargreased. A taverner or a cookshop-keeper, I'd say, or a brothel — ' He hesitated, then shrugged. 'Ye can never tell. If I were ye,

Master Margery, I'd try the taverns first — there's plenty — the Flower de Luce, the Nonsuch, the Paradise, the Eagle an' Child — '

The Paradise? The name was oddly familiar, Adam mused. Aye, there had been a waterfront pimp yesterday who had mentioned it — and 'three o' the hottest wenches i' the Colony.' Thanking Kendal, he took his leave, but the planter begged that they delay whilst he penned a letter to a younger brother in Yeovil — who had escaped the butchery following Sedge-moor only by lying in the muck of a henhouse for six days and nights, and Kendal had not seen him since. He'd not been much older than young Thomas in 1685 —

It was a nuisance, but Adam could scarcely refuse. He sat impatiently as Kendal cut himself a fresh quill, searched for paper, then laboriously scratched a lengthy missive, pausing periodically to reminisce, and twice rising to talk with overseers from the fields. But the letter was finished and sealed at last, and Adam and Thomas climbed gratefully into their saddles.

As on the previous evening, it was dusk as their tired horses clattered onto the Charles Town jetty, and candlelight was flickering in several windows. They dismounted under the sign of the Paradise — a crudely-shaped Eve pouring an undefinable liquid from a cornucopia. Worn steps descended to a door through which, in addition to two opened windows, they could see a lamplit interior and hear the drone of voices, laughter and snatches of ribald song. As they entered, a man walked to meet them.

'Gentlemen — good evening! Ah — ye'll be off the *Paladin*, I'll wager, eh?' He was short and stout, his hair greased. 'What will ye drink? Fine Jamaica spirit, five years old, best corn gin, an' ale. If ye're discernin', there's French brandy an' Madeira wine — '

Sara stood at the plank counter, a pewter cup slopping in one hand as she swayed, eyes glassy. Her untied hair hung, tangled, to her shoulders, and the lacings of her soiled bodice were loosened to the waist. She lurched into a

seated seaman, who reached for her, laughing, and she swore obscenely, then gulped at her cup. At Adam's side, Thomas gasped, but Adam gripped his shoulder. Sara's gaze fell blankly on them, then passed away. The seaman had pulled her to his knee, but she twisted to her feet. 'When ye want it, ye can ha' it,' she retorted thickly, 'when ye pay, cully.'

'That wench,' Adam said to the taverner, 'is Sara Hewar.' The man leered — 'Ah, as I reckoned, ye're discernin' all right. Ye'll get naught but the best at the Paradise. She tickles ye' appetite, do she?' He turned, his finger beckoning. 'Sara! Step here lively, lass! — '

'The girl,' Adam went on slowly, 'is my niece. If we can agree terms, I'll take her away — '

The taverner chuckled. 'Ye' niece? Aye, sir, if ye will. Is it for the night ye want her! A guinea, now, wouldn't be asking too much — an' I'll see she's well cloaked, wi' a clean shift to bed wi', eh? But likely first ye'll take brandy. I've a quarter-cask o' choice French ~ the same as they serve at Government House — '

Sara, reeling towards them, had suddenly halted. The cup fell to the floor with a clatter, drenching the planks. She choked. 'Adam! Festerin'! — It's Adam!' Her face had drained of colour and the glaze gone from her eyes. The taverner, Jackson, glanced perplexedly from Adam to Sara, then back to Adam, finally mustering an uncertain grin. Sara had cupped her face in her hands, her mouth sagging.

'This girl,' Adam repeated, his voice ominous, 'is my niece, Sara Hewar. I'll not question the treatment ye've given her, but I'm taking her from ye. The *Paladin* leaves tomorrow, and she'll be aboard — '

Jackson was recovering from his uncertainty. 'Takin' her from me? Ye'll not, sir. She's a bonded felon — an' I've a paper to prove it, wi' the Provost Marshal's authority. Ye' niece, did ye say?' He snorted. 'A likely tale!

There's laws in this colony, an' she's seven years' labour to serve.' He stopped, sensing a hoax, and grinned again. 'Ah — ye'll be having ye' joke, eh? A cup or two o' brandy, gentlemen, an' then likely Sara'll take ye for a tumble up the stairs — '

'I'll tell ye for the last time,' Adam said. 'Sara Hewar is my niece, and I'm not leaving without her. If ye've purchased her indenture, I'll compensate ye. As for the Provost Marshal, I'll answer to him.' He fumbled for his purse. 'What's ye' figure? If I haven't sufficient, I'll give ye a note ye can redeem wi' Captain Roxtro on the *Paladin* tomorrow before she sails.' Jackson studied Adam silently for several moments, then, 'If ye're serious, I'm not sellin'. Firstly, it's against the law, second, I ain't willing. I bought her indenture, an' I'm festerin' keeping it.'

Adam shook his head. 'Ye don't understand, sirrah. I'm not giving ye a choice. Willing or no, or paid for, she's coming with me, so ye may as well settle a price.'

Finally convinced that Adam was in earnest, Jackson with drew a pace, his eyes darting about the tavern-room. 'I don't know who ye are, sir, but this ain't London — where the bucks do what they festerin' please. It's Charles Town — an' ye'll need more than a Drury Lane voice an' a purseful o' guineas to satisfy every plaguey whim ye have. I told ye before — the wench is attested for seven years, an' seven years she'll festerin' stay, unless I says so — an' I don't. An' I don't need the Provost Marshal. There's plenty o' bully-boys as'll come running if I whistle — '

It was Sara who interrupted — Sara with bleared eyes and unkempt hair, her face twisted, so that Adam could scarcely believe that this was the same bewitching, laughing girl who had played bob-apple in the light of a Hallowe'en bonfire — 'While the pair of ye are spitting and arguing as if I were a bag o' barley-flour, ye might consider what *my* pleasure is. And it's

not going back to England in the *Paladin*!’ Adam stared in disbelief, but Sara tossed her head. ‘Ye don’t believe me? Still the same, virtuous Adam, the ten commandments an’ God save the Queen!’ She hiccupped, then laughed. ‘Do ye suppose I’d come back to that scrubby little Sawston, to tend chickens and drink buttermilk?’ She laughed again. ‘Take ye’ stupid *Paladin* back to England, Adam — stick to ye’ pigs and cows, an’ enjoy ye’ intrigues with that middle-aged housewench o’ yours. She’s a big enough handful for a home-spun amorist — ’

Adam did not credit his ears, and Jackson, equally astounded, stared with jaw dropping. Then Adam drew a deep breath. ‘Ye’re still not too old to have a strap across ye’ buttocks, Sara — but we’ll say ye’re too raddled wi’ gin to know what ye’re saying. If ye’ve got a cloak? — ’

‘I told ye, I’m not coming.’ She swayed. ‘Ye’re a fool — stupid — ’

‘Ye heard, cully,’ Jackson added. ‘If the indenture ain’t enough, she don’t want ye anyway. I ain’t sellin’, and she ain’t goin’, an’ that’s the end of it. If ye’ve sense, ye’ll get aboard ye’ *Paladin* an’ go home, cully, while ye still can — ’

Adam had never enjoyed an aptitude for fist-fighting, but he had watched prize fights and he remembered Toby Haitch. He struck Jackson in the mouth as if he were pole-axing a bullock, jarring his arm to the elbow. Jackson pitched backwards, smashing down a table and scattering tankards and bottles. Adam grasped Sara’s shoulder, and she recoiled. ‘Damn ye, Adam! — ’

Jackson, on all fours, his greased locks falling over his eyes, was shouting hoarsely. ‘Sawney! Sawney! — ’ In the tavern-room a slatternly blonde woman was screeching, and several men were climbing groggily to their feet. Adam saw the glitter of a knife, and he wrenched Sara towards the door. Thomas stumbled after him, and the next moment the night air was cool on

their faces. Sara sobbed. ‘Adam — please — Adam!’

‘The horses, Father?’ Thomas panted.

‘Damn the horses!’ Adam needed all his strength to prevent Sara from fading to her knees. ‘Leave ’em! It’s only yards to the jetty — an’ God willing, Roxtro’ll have the long-boat waiting — ’

But the long-boat was not waiting. The black waters of the harbour lapped against empty jetty steps and weed-crusted piles. The windows of the Custom House were dark cavities, lifeless, and only a pale, yellow glimmer came from the door of the distant Flower de Luce. Adam swore.

‘Adam! — ’ Sara’s fingers bit into his forearm. ‘Adam — I can’t go back! Will you listen? There are things you don’t know! — ’

‘I can guess,’ Adam gritted, ‘but ye can have my oath that nobody outside o’ Charles Town will ever know of it.’ He could just see the vague outline of the *Paladin*, her bare masts and yards, and the speck of light that must be her anchor lantern. He cupped his hands around his mouth. ‘*Paladin*! Ho there! *Paladin*!’

‘Dear Adam — ’ Sara was half crying, half laughing. Then all three turned. Forty yards away — from the direction of the Paradise — there was a clatter of footsteps that echoed among the waterfront houses. ‘Sblood,’ Adam muttered. Behind them there was only the murkiness of the harbour. There was no retreat and he had no weapon, and even if the *Paladin* had heard his hail, it would be several minutes before a boat could crawl the distance that separated the ship from the jetty.

‘It’s Sawney!’ Sara’s voice was choked with terror. Towards them, with a pistol in each hand, was walking a tall, hulking man, peering about him in the gloom. Behind him was Jackson, a kerchief clapped to his mouth. The two men halted, uncertain, and then Jackson emitted a muffled yelp. ‘There — Sawney! D’ye see? The three of ’em!’

Sawney whirled, crouching, then raised a pistol. Adam stood, his feet rooted to the jetty, but Sara had leapt forward with arms outstretched. ‘No! In God’s name — Sawney! — ’ The pistol flashed and roared, and for a fleeting second Adam’s eyes were blinded. He heard Jackson’s screech: ‘Curse ye, Sawney — ye’ve hit the wench!’ There was powder smoke in his throat and, as his vision cleared, he saw Sara, crumpled and motionless, at his feet. Shocked and enraged, he sprang at Sawney. ‘Ye murderin’ bastard! — ’

‘Sawney! — ’ It was Jackson’s screech again. Sawney’s second pistol rose, its muzzle aimed at Adam’s chest. It was impossible that Adam could cover six or seven paces before the trigger was pulled. He saw Sawney’s face, twisted in concentration, and then, incredibly, there came another shot — from behind him. Sawney’s expression changed to one of incredulity. He stared at his own pistol, suspended from his failing fingers, then turned, appealingly, towards Jackson. His knees buckled, and he fell on his face.

Jackson, with his kerchief still clutched to his mouth and his eyes wide, backed away. Adam ignored him. He dropped to his knees beside Sara and lifted her head gently. Her eyes stared back at him, pain-filled and apprehensive. ‘Adam — I’m frightened — ’

Adam felt the bile rising in his throat. He shot a glance at Thomas, standing with a smoking pistol in his hand. ‘How did ye? — ’

Thomas was white-faced. ‘I thought we’d see Indians,’ he choked, ‘an’ I hid one of ye’ pistols under my coat — ’

Adam returned his attention to Sara, smoothing the hair from her cold face. She reached up to grip his hand, her nails biting into his flesh. ‘Adam — don’t let me die, Adam — please — ’

‘I’ll not,’ he gritted. ‘Ye’re coming home, Sara — to Sawston. There’s the ship — d’ye see it? London first, Sara — an’ then the Cambridge coach to Sawston — I promise ye — ’ Festerin’ Christ, he’d held her dying father,

Rupe Dolling, in his arms like this on Blenheim field. I'd like ye to see, Rupe had said, that the brat don't want for naught. And now Sara — Rebecca's brat —

‘Adam — ’ It was a whisper, and then she was dead.

It couldn't really be true. There was an icy sweat on his face and he wanted to retch. Thomas waited, disconsolate, and the empty sides of the Custom House stared at them. It couldn't be true.

There was a clatter of hooves as two horsemen spurred out of the darkness of Broad Street, the leader wrenching his mount to a halt and jumping to the ground. It was Major Bellingham, hatless, his neck-cloth trailing. ‘The watchman reported pistol shots — ’

Adam climbed slowly to his feet with Sara limply in his arms. ‘Ye're too festerin' late!’ he snarled. From the blackness of the harbour came a faint splash of oars as the Paladin's longboat approached the jetty. Adam turned and shouted at the sky. ‘Ye're all too festerin' late!’

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