

Part 2

Chapter 22

July 1697 On Board the *Caledonia*

The bright sun unencumbered by any clouds set the waters of the firth sparkling, as though scattered with coins of gold and silver. From the quay, they could see the five ships of the fleet waiting at anchor. John and about twenty other men stood near the descending stone steps, awaiting the boat that would ferry them out to their ship, *Caledonia*. Soon the craft approached, rowed by four oarsmen who steered it in against the quay. They clambered aboard the skiff, crowded shoulder to shoulder as the craft dipped and rose, water slapping over the bows, with the oarsmen first steadying it and then pulling out from the wharf.

‘Fare ye weel!’ called one of their number in the boat, as they looked back at the fast-retreating walls of the harbour and the small figures of those women who had gathered to wave their menfolk away. There was no talk among these men, each holding fast to his private thoughts, as some did to the rocking sides of the craft, lest any spoken word should disturb again the doubts and fears of what they were about to undertake. John only wished for the power to transform the misery of his thoughts into a new sense of purpose for the adventure ahead.

They drew near the *Caledonia*, a stately East Indiaman, bright with scarlet, gold, blue and green patterning on the bow and pennants flying proudly from its three masts. John and his companions, grappled with the swinging rope ladders to climb on board. The main deck where they arrived was busy with people, boys scrubbing the boards and a small crowd of men crouched in a circle, clattering dice, with occasional shouts of delight or dismay. Up above on the rigging, a man sat astride a yard arm, fastening the end of the sail with rope while another, a young boy, higher still clung like a squirrel in the branches of a tree. Near the top of the main mast another dangled, painting a small circular wooden platform below him, while a carpenter hammered below him, his shirt billowing in the breeze. A young man in the uniform of a naval officer watched as the new arrivals gazed around them. Two sailors pushed passed roughly cursing under their breaths.

‘Move along there, you men. Clear the decks. You’re quartered below. Down there,’ said the officer with a surprised glance at John.

‘Are you with the landsmen, the planters and diggers?’ he asked.

‘Aye,’ said John, knowing that his black coat and clerical appearance might distinguish him from his companions who were mainly labouring men, craftsmen and apprentices.

On a higher half-deck, the poop, John saw three or four officers of rank and some prosperous looking gentlemen surveying the scenes below while he and the others were herded towards the hatch and the ladderway to the lower decks.

The quarters below were stifling and crowded, already filled with the stench of bodies. John and his companions were to bed down in an open area of a lower deck, partly fitted with wooden box-like cot beds, for those coming early enough to claim them. There were crude rankings here below, as in society. John was content to be in the company of these of the lower kind, discharged soldiers from King William’s wars, artisans, cottars and farmers. Those of rank and importance, such as councillors of the company, officers and gentlemen were lodged in finer and more spacious cabins on the upper decks, while servants and landless labourers were condemned to meaner spaces still. Whatever their station in life however, they were bound together by their shared hope of a new life of wealth and prosperity.

‘Weel, what are you sir, a meenister o’ the Kirk?’ said one of the men, unburdening himself of a small trunk which he dumped on the floor beside John. His face was formed of rumpled features with a bonnet pulled down over his brow. He grinned. ‘I’m Davie McBride, wheelwright o’ the town of Forfar. Pleased to be acquainted, Meenister.’

‘I must disappoint you, Master McBride,’ said John, stating his name and offering his hand to the man who looked taken aback at such a gesture. ‘I’m no minister. I was once a schoolmaster.’

‘Well, ‘tis a pity, for we’ve need of a man o’ the Kirk tae pray for our safe passage,’ said Davie McBride, shaking John’s hand uncertainly, seeming unable to fathom his presence in this place.

‘Aye,’ said John, ‘But what need of a minister? God will listen to any Christian man who prays honestly and sincerely to him.’

‘Tis a comfort to hear it,’ said Davie McBride,

‘And what’ll ye pray for, Davie?’ said another of the company, a small ferret-faced man wearing a filthy plaid.

‘Tae cross the ocean that’s all, and feel the land o’ paradise under my feet.’

‘But ye’ll dae that come what may, deid or alive, unless you’re heading for the other place,’ said the ferret-faced man with a laugh.

John and his companions were pressed into the quarters, finding scarcely a space where each could lay his head. The deck was low ceilinged and murky, with only two lamps swinging forlornly to lend any light. That night John slept only in brief fitful bursts, amidst the snoring of his companions, the continual shifting and groaning of the ship's timbers and the discomfort of his miserable thoughts.

If only he could have slept, have sunk into oblivion and not have thought of Isobel. Was it anger that sickened his stomach when he thought of her marrying another man? Her love must have been a flimsy thing, blown away when a more eligible suitor presented himself. If she had truly loved him, she would have waited. But he should have gone to her, taken her, whatever stood in the way, not stayed in Scotland, weak as always, lily-livered. 'John, I love you,' she had written in black ink, 'I love you and have since first we met.' Was this a lie? Perhaps, though he could not believe it. Whatever she felt then or now was nothing, compared to her duty. Duty? Good luck to her then with her duty and her rich old husband. May they all revel in her new found prosperity. But this feeble effort to hate Isobel only made him more wretched. He could never think ill of her, nor believe her to be false. His only course was to quit the country, go as far from her as he could. Distance and time would cure him. He would be resolute and grateful for this opportunity. He was part of this great adventure which excited so many and promised so much.

Next day, they weighed anchor and all the passengers pressed on to the deck, on the sufferance of the growling mariners, to see the sight of the crowds of well-wishers at Leith, packed on the quay, waving and shouting, some kneeling and praying for their safe passage. John found himself stirred with excitement and a measure of pride at the courage of their undertaking and the adventure to come. Far beyond, on Castle Hill and Caltoun Craggs and on every cliff and promontory, they were wished God Speed by waving groups of people.

'Almighty God, bless us on our mission,' someone prayed near John, while another, a boy of scarce fourteen, whimpered as he watched the land retreating rapidly from them. One of the officers pointed and named the ships of the fleet which sailed ahead of them for the benefit of the ignorant on board. At the head, and now just visible as a speck from their own crowded deck, went the *Saint Andrew* which carried the commander of the fleet, Admiral Pennicuik. Three other ships followed: *Unicorn*, *Dolphin*, *Endeavour* and then their own *Caledonia*, commanded by Captain Robert Drummond. The ship dipped and rose as a strong wind filled the sails, tugging them northwards. John stayed on deck at the rail, with some others, until the last thin strip of land was lost to sight and daylight began to fade.

Once darkness had fallen, to the clang of the watch bell, John and the last of the landsmen went below to discover much merry making. In the cramped quarters, the grog flowed freely and a fiddler was playing a string of lively gigs and reels. Some even tried to dance in the small circle of space on the boards but they tripped over the bodies and legs of others as well as their own feet. Someone struck up a song, praising wise William Paterson, declaring Scotland the most glorious nation on earth and promising fame and riches for the great Company.

‘Come Meenister,’ said Davie McBride, whose face now shining with the flush of liquor, waved a bottle in front of John’s face.

‘Have a drink, will ye no, or are ye too prudent and pure for that?’

‘I’ll happily sing with you and toast our success with cold water, but I have no stomach for drink,’ said John. There were hoots of derision from the others sitting nearby who heard John’s confession.

‘What can we do tae get our bonny young meenister merry?’ said Davie McBride. John was pleased that no one rose to this challenge, for someone had suddenly burst into song through the noisy banter. It was a rough but tuneful voice and John recognized the old ballad of Sir Patrick Spens. The singer was a small, wiry man with astonishing bright green eyes, in a threadbare soldier’s tunic and a plaid.

*Be it wind or weat, be it snow or sleet,
Our ships must sail the morn.
O ever alack my master dear,
I fear a deadly storm.*

*I saw the new moon late yestreen,
With the old moon in her arm.
And if we go to sea master,
I fear we’ll come to harm*

The din of the company had subsided somewhat, many having drunk themselves to a stupor, some snoring, some half asleep, leaning on their comrades. John felt a new motion of the ship, a broader swoop, a lurching sideways, which swung the lanterns, making their lights dance across the prone shapes of bodies and causing dangling ropes to thwack against the timbers.

‘Colquhoun, ye son-o-a-whore, dinnae sing that one,’ shouted a slurred voice, ‘you’ll conjure ill luck upon us.’

But the singer persisted, intensifying the pace of the tale of the tragic drowning.

Half owre, half owre to Aberdour

‘Tis fifty fathoms deep.

And there lies good Sir Patrick Spens,

with the Scots lords at his feet.

There was little noise and no more talk as the singer’s voice fell silent. The fiddler slept and there was no more music, for other sounds now grew outside the ribs of the ship and John lay awake listening to a deepening roar as the wind rose. Then the crashing began; the whole vessel shuddering with the aftermath of a blow, then another, like an angry giant beating the sides with a great cudgel. Thrown painfully against the hard edge of the bunk, John gripped any fixed timber or, riveted post. Wooden casks fell over, tin cups leaped up and rolled clinking over the boards while all the time, the awful moaning of ship’s timbers increased. From every corner came the sounds of men groaning and retching in the rocking dungeon of their quarters.

The next day, the feetid stink of sick became almost unendurable. John and some others managed to argue their way up on the main deck for a short spell, though the sailors shouted for them to get below, herding them back towards the hatch and their nether quarters. Trapped in the lower deck, braced against anything unmovable, the men sat grim-faced. As the ship was battered by successive shocks to the bows, the odour from the putrid bilge choked their senses. John heard the scuttle of rats escaping the sludge of their den beneath. Someone yelled from above on deck and the hatch opened, with a flash of daylight and a crashing of water soaking those entering as well as the men cowering below.

For three whole days and nights the storm raged and the landsmen remained buried below in the darkness and misery of their sickness. Though John suffered far less than others, his body settling quite readily to the motion, he witnessed the daily Hell of his fellow passengers. There was no hardship on land which was not wished for, in exchange for this turbulent wretchedness and terror of death in the cold ocean. Some cringed in silence abed, wrapped in their plaids, others writhed and cursed aloud. John was exhorted to say prayers and recite psalms which he did gladly until his throat ached.

‘Lord God Almighty, deliver me. Take my soul,’ called one in the dark.

‘‘Tis the De’il himself on the ship. We’re all bound for Hell!’

‘Holy Mary Mother of God,’ muttered someone in a loud whisper.

‘Papist bastard. Idolator,’ squealed a voice. ‘Kill the Papist and make an end o’ it! It’s popery that’s tae blame.’

‘Wheesht, man,’ said another, Calum Colquhoun the ballad singer. ‘Heretic, Papist, Protestant or Jew, we’ll all gang the same way.’

Above them a bell clanged for the sounding of the watch.

On the fourth day John awoke to the sound of yet another watch bell, to find that the roll of the ship had lessened to a gentler movement. Others close to him stirred too, discovering the same miraculous change. Soon those who were capable clamoured for the doors of the hatches and burst forth on to the deck, determined to breathe the air at last and to fight the mariners for it, if need be. Released from the prison of their quarters, John and his companions hung over the rails on deck, staring at an empty ocean with no end, except where it met the sky. Two other ships of the fleet were dots on their starboard side.

‘Who let these wretches on deck?’ came a shout from the poop and John looked up to see the commander and two other officers staring down at them. A moment later, one of the officers was bellowing orders at them.

‘Clear the stinking hole, ye whey-faced devils! Master Campbell, see to it!’

‘Here,’ shouted a corporal of the dragoons, pointing to two or three wooden buckets and besoms on the deck, ‘tak’ these and get below.’

John watched as one of the sailors tossed a bucket on a rope over the side to slap on the surface of the sea. A few moments later the bucket was creeping up the side of the vessel, slopping sea water.

‘Clean up yer ain filth,’ said the sailor to John, handing him the bucket.

Back down in their stinking lower deck, John found himself on his knees scrubbing what he could of the filth from the boards on the lower deck, by the side of Calum Colquhoun.

‘What brings ye to this, Meenister?’ said the former soldier, glancing at John with his piercing green eyes and pausing to push aside the dangling legs of a sick man which hung from the bunk. ‘This is no life for such as yersel, I’m thinking.’

John no longer protested at this form of address which his companions preferred to his name, perhaps as a form a respect for his education, but more likely he thought as a joke at his expense, though this troubled him not at all.

‘The same ambition, I would guess as most others on board,’ replied John, not wishing to divulge too much. He would not expose his history yet to the ironical comment of

this quick-eyed, outspoken man. ‘But what of your motives, Master Colquhoun?’ he added quickly.

‘Well, what else for a man like me? I’m done with wars but I’ve no home to speak of.’

‘No more have I,’ said John.

‘Come, Meenister, an educated and well-looking man like yourself. I’ve a mind you’re bent on escaping something. What is it that set you to flight? You’re no rogue nor no criminal, to my mind.’

‘Master Colquhoun, you’re curious indeed, but you’re right. But let’s to our labours for the meantime for it’s a long story.’

‘Aye well, we’ll wait for the calm, for the wind’s dropping fast. Then there’ll be leisure more than we need for many a good long story.’

Calum Colquhoun was right about the weather. The air became still. The sea fell flat. For four days the ship hardly moved, its sails drooping, the sailors shouting angrily to each other, or hanging on the rigging, slack and useless. The heat was thick and cloaked them like a suffocating blanket, but at least the landsmen could lie on the deck, an escape from the malodorous hole which was their quarters below. Only those unfortunates with the flux languished there.

On one of these days of listless idleness, Matthew Simpson, a printer by trade, distracted an audience of anyone who would listen to readings from the journal of Master Lionel Wafer. This famous traveller and adventurer had first recorded the details of the new and marvellous land of Darien where they were to start their new lives. Matthew Simpson’s reading brought passengers of the better sort and even some of the officers within earshot too. His eyes shone with inspiration as he spoke.

‘The place is a paradise. It is a lush country, rich in natural bounties, an Eden. Here is the testimony of Master Wafer’s journal. Listen to this,’ he said. “Valleys watered with rivers, brooks and perennial springs”, and he says the soil is favourable and fruitful for all manner of crops. Trees cover large tracts of land, of exotic wood and huge in girth, and of such value, the sale of which would cover the cost of the whole expedition. Calabash trees and ash trees to make ropes and cloth and fruit and berry trees grow in abundance. There are root plants, white and purple which are eaten like potatoes, pineapples as big as a man’s head, wild hogs and deer. The seas around teem with fish of all varieties. It is truly a land of plenty.’

Matthew Simpson, like the writer himself, created a seductive vision of what life in such a place could be. His audience of poor landless labourers listened entranced. Knowing

only the hardship and privation of their lives in Scotland, what could they feel but delight and desire for such a place? John too conjured his own imaginings of his new life, a time when the colony, New Caledonia, it was to be named, would be established and women and children would come to join their husbands and fathers. There would be a school, built in the forest from logs and furnished with simple, solid desks and benches, with plenty of books and paper for all. Perhaps, under the government of their new colony, the children would not have to leave their schooling so soon to work, but would, those who wished it, be able to pursue their learning and their studies to the full. The new country would need educated people, engineers, doctors, merchants and scientists to lead it forward in the world. He would be part of this.

‘How many days till we land?’ said Davie McBride, his eyes wide.

No one had any idea and Calum Colquhoun was the first to voice his sceptic’s scorn.

‘Aye well, ye may spin these dreams if ye will, o’ this paradise, but there’s nae place on earth like paradise, and probably nane in heaven neither. But ask yoursels’ this: is grass that grows green and lush not fed by the rain? And is heat not a thing brings on flies and agues?’ said Calum Colquhoun. ‘And for why is there no other nation laying claim to this perfect land?’

‘Aye, indeed,’ said Simpson, consulting the volume, ‘he speaks of rain, but the bounties of this land far outweigh the presence of some showers, don’t you think? And a land with such bounties will surely have more than enough for all to share.’

‘Well,’ said Calum Colquhoun, nudging John who was still indulging his reverie. ‘There’s no harm in dreaming, I suppose, as long as ye can deal with the waking. Is that no a fact, Meenister?’

John coloured, for he had, in a half-doze, been thinking of Isobel, the inevitable consequence of imagining a future with a wife and family. He had failed utterly to curb his mind, to school himself into forgetting. Only one vision came to his mind of a woman to love and take as his wife, Isobel.

‘It’s a woman, Meenister. I know the signs,’ persisted Calum Colquhoun, leaning close and almost whispering in John’s ear.

John said nothing to the man, irked but amazed by his insight. He stared out to sea. For the rest of that day, his mind could dwell on nothing except Isobel, as though his earlier self-denial and the foul distractions of the voyage had suppressed his memories of her, like a dam holding back his feelings which now were let loose to flow freely and drown him again. She had told him in her letter, made it plain that she had severed all bonds between them and

told him to start anew. He had tried to blame her, dismiss her, condemn her, but to no avail. Her decision to follow the course of her duty simply made him admire her more for her courage and self-sacrifice. That night, sleepless and aware of the first signs of fever on his brow, he could he find no relief in prayer or any attempt to contemplate God. Instead he took up Isobel's book of verse again. By the light of a bright moon he wrote her a poem, on a back page of the small volume, one she would never read, but which soothed his mind a little.

To Isobel

*This ship, becalmed upon an ocean grey
floats moribund, while we with sickness waste,
our bodies fever-wracked. Each day we pray
the wind will blow, or we will breathe our last.
Then thunders crack and blast the torpid sky.
The tempest makes a mountain of each wave,
monstrous above this puny barque. We cry
on God. I pray, but only you can save.
Your presence in my mind is as a balm.
I see again the beauty of your smile,
hear your sweet voice, feel once again your calm,
soft eyes upon me. In this Hell awhile
my only force for life will ever be
my secret knowing that you once loved me.*

The wind arose suddenly again, after four more days and the fleet, they were told, was heading towards the island of Madeira where they were to put ashore for provisioning. Each day, eager eyes would scan the horizon for a sign, as rations were scanty and the landsmen's tempers frayed, their longing for dry land more urgent each day. The sun glared painfully when John took off his hat to wipe his brow and to squint at the darkened line of the horizon which looked like the end of the world. The sky was solid blue and the waves shone, a great cloth of crumpled silver with no end. Six bodies of men dead of the flux were slipped into the sea in their canvas shrouds and all lived in fear of the first signs of the sickness.

One night in the dark of their quarters, John was awakened by the violent retching of one of their number. The man's agony was loud, the smell of his body's excrescences putrid.

'Haud yer wheesht,' called someone.

But the man still raved, beseeching God's aid, then cursing His name, again and again. In the gloom of the lower deck John could only see shadows, lit by slits of moonlight through the hatch. He rose from his bunk, groping his way towards the source of the cries.

'God save me. Have pity,' cried the sick man, as John crept across the boards, feeling the roll of the ship beneath him. Calum Colquhoun lay close by and sat up at John's approach.

'Come, let's take him up on deck, for the air may relieve him,' said John out of no conviction of the efficacy of his suggestion, but thinking that something must be done to prevent the man dying with the curses of others upon him. Together John and Calum heaved up the sick man from his bunk and with difficulty hauled him towards the stairway.

'Have courage, man,' said John to him, 'Can you stand?'

The stricken man moaned but seemed to find some strength in his legs, the effort distracting him from his pain. A square of moonlit blue marked the open hatch at the top of the stairway and John saw the stars as bright specks in that small portion of sky. Some moments later, John and Calum pulled the man on to the main deck where the cool breeze offered some comfort, like a gentle stroking of a hand against the face. The ship moved only with a slight swell and the sails hung limply.

'Get ye below,' shouted a sailor as soon as they had emerged. Two lanterns glowed, dangling high on the poop deck and John saw the figure of a man moving towards them.

'Have pity in the name of God,' said John. 'This man needs air.'

'He's no need o' air,' growled the mariner standing over the prone man who lay quietly now. 'He'll be deid by the morning, if he's no already. Can ye no see he's got the bloody flux?'

'Let him lie for a while, to breathe the air,' said John fixing the man with a steady gaze, 'for pity's sake.'

The sailor hesitated for a moment. 'Aye, as ye wish,' he grumbled, retreating.

John knelt down by the sick man who opened his eyes slowly.

'Pray for me, Meenister,' he said in a dry whisper.

'Though I'm no man of the church, I'll gladly pray with you,' John replied, seeing the blank death in his eyes.

'Will the Lord forgive me a' the sins I've done?' he said, grabbing at John's sleeve.

'My friend,' said John, 'we cannot know God's will. 'Tis beyond us, but if we repent and pray for forgiveness, I believe there is hope of salvation for every man.'

John heard Calum snort with suppressed laughter.

‘Hah! ‘Tis a wonder to hear such falsehoods freely spoken,’ he muttered. ‘To hear such talk of God and salvation, here.’

John turned to Calum, shocked at his comment in the hearing of the stricken man. ‘Master Colquhoun, will you temper your opinions, please.’

Calum Colquhoun looked a little abashed. ‘Aye pardon me, Meenister,’ and he lowered his voice. ‘I forget myself and that ye are such a one as would put your faith in God. But how can ye peddle such stuff? There is no God and he that lies there about to die has no soul to save.’

‘It pains me to hear such thoughts spoken aloud,’ whispered John, turning to face his companion as though to bar his thoughts from reaching the dying man. ‘When a man lies sick, knowing only the fear and uncertainty of his fate, may he not gain strength from his faith?’ But as he spoke these words, they seemed weightless, without substance or conviction, no more efficacious than an ointment of butter to bring momentary comfort to a burning skin.

‘Aye, Meenister,’ said Colquhoun. ‘Ye mustnae mind me, for if there’s a God then surely I’m one of his damned.’

John knelt down by the dying man, still aware of the unsettling presence of Calum Colquhoun who had moved over to the rail and now stood looking out at the black expanse of the sea.

‘God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.’ He felt his mouth shape the words, heard his voice intoning the prayer, hoping that it might ease the man’s last hours, even though it failed to fill the void in his own soul. ‘Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea: though the waters thereof roar and be troubled...’

John’s words, though quietly spoken against the creak and groan of the ship’s timbers, drifted through the shadows cast by the light of the lanterns and seemed to rise far above to the speckled blue sky. The moon disappeared for a moment behind a wisp of cloud and the ship’s bell sounded the watch.

The sky was lightening by the time John noticed that the man was dead, seeing his waxy face and gaping mouth close to him where he lay on the deck. Calum had gone, but the ship’s mate was standing over them.

‘Awa’ wi’ ye, Meenister. Nae time for funerals here, for the likes o’ him,’ he said, nodding to two sailors who had approached them. ‘Pray if ye’ve a mind tae. Pray that ye’ll no end like him, as food for the fishes yersel.’

John saw the hard faces of the sailors as they hoisted the body from the dark patch of the poor man's filth on the boards. Taking a few steps sideways, they swung him in the air and tossed him over the side. The rags of his clothes fluttered for a moment before he disappeared from view. John heard the splash far below, a small distant sound. Here it seemed they were afloat on a godless sea and he recalled Calum Colquhoun's bitter words. 'There is no God. He has no soul to save.'

Chapter 23

Cambridge September 1697

‘My lovely wench,’ said Nicolas Payne. Isobel felt his hand brush her cheek. He grasped her by the shoulders and turned her from the bench where she worked, to face him. The candle guttered in the moving air he created, as the evening darkness drew in. The workshop was silent, save for the sound of his breathing. Isobel held her own breath tight. She did not wish to meet his eye, but knew that her reluctance might enrage him. So she endeavoured to smile at him, to satisfy him for the moment. He admired and desired her. Should she not feel flattered? But she saw only his grin of self gratification, the look of one who finds his wishes granted, his commands obeyed.

‘I long to be joined to you, my sweet girl,’ he whispered. ‘When can it be? You tease me with this delay.’

‘Master Payne,’ said Isobel, twisting round again to face the bench where she was completing a paste-down with marbled paper. ‘I think it is too soon. Your poor wife is but a month dead.’

‘No, it is a full five weeks since she passed, God rest her soul. We have had our time of mourning. And Isobel, she was not a wife to me, not in the way a wife should be, not for many years. She was a frail woman, a weak woman, old beyond her years.’

He was standing close behind her still and reached his arms around her waist, pulling her to him. She felt herself resist and tense her muscles against his hold. The bulk of his round belly pressed on her and she felt him, sharp and hard stabbing into her hips as he leaned upon her. His breath was heavy on her neck. Isobel felt the suffocation of him, like a thick smothering cloak which excluded all air and threatened to choke her. She writhed and wriggled herself from his grasp, pushing back against his weight. In the process she knocked the book from the bench, causing its leaves to splay out and the boards to tear free as it fell wrecked upon the floor. She broke away from him and ran to the other side of the workshop.

‘Take care,’ he said, his eyes following her, his lips tightening. ‘That is my property which you destroy. I would remind you too of our bargain, my dear. You cannot go back on your word. We have made a deal and sealed it, with the approval of your father.’ The small eyes in his fleshy face were still trained upon her. ‘Your modesty becomes you my lovely girl, but it grows tiresome. You will drive me mad.’

He knew, this man, how to wring compliance from her and Isobel hated him for it. For him she had rejected the man she loved, so deeply and tenderly, and who valued and honoured her. Her misery and resentment at this fact burned inside her, sometimes threatening to overwhelm her better sense and drive her to foolish, desperate refusals of his attentions. But a sudden remembrance of her duty blunted the force of these feelings. What point in rebelling against this course to which she was now foresworn?

‘Master Payne, Nicolas,’ she said, approaching him, ‘please forgive me. I am an innocent and a little fearful when I think of matrimony. Please give me but a little more time. I am willing, believe me. I will become your wife, as is your wish.’

She came to him and made herself touch the fabric of his sleeve though she could not bear to reach to his flesh beneath. He grabbed her in his arms and clamped his mouth over hers, his tongue probing deeply inside, his body tight against her chest. She did not resist and tried instead to loosen her body to numbness, knowing that this and worse she must learn to endure and to which she would, no doubt over time, become accustomed.

She thought he seemed satisfied for the moment when he paused to take a breath, but he fingered her neck and plunged his hand into the bodice of her gown, fingers pressing and crawling over her breast. She felt the bile rise to her throat and pulled away again.

‘Nicolas, we must wait until we are man and wife in the eyes of God.’

‘Yes, of course,’ he said, his full lips moist and glistening. ‘You Scotch are full of such pieties, I forget. I will set the date then for next week. What do you say to that? In less than seven days God will have blessed our union.’

‘As you wish,’ she said, not daring to look him in the face. She returned to her bench and bent to retrieve the fallen book, which still lay broken on the floor.

‘Leave it,’ he said, his voice touched with weary irritation. ‘You may deal with it tomorrow.’

Isobel reached for her shawl and bowing her head to her master, who made no move to come to her again, bid him goodnight and left the shop. She felt the rush of the evening air cool her flushed cheeks. She breathed in deeply, to calm herself and walked briskly and gratefully away from the workshop. From far away came the distant voices of revellers, but otherwise the night and the streets were quiet.

These solitary streets gave her the chance to indulge her miserable thoughts, to weep in the darkness without witness, to clear her head and strengthen her resolve, before returning home to face her parents. She was locked into this bargain from which there was no escape. She had made the decision and must live by it and endure it. When Nicolas Payne had first

made a proposal of marriage, she had recoiled at the thought. There was only one man she could think of as a husband. The idea of Nicolas Payne knowing her as a wife was truly repugnant to her. But when her father had been so afflicted, her employer's proposal, which seemed sincerely meant, was not one which her duty could allow her to ignore. Nicolas Payne promised security and comfort to her and her parents. It was a generous offer, provision well beyond any means she could ever command on her own. She had even contemplated that she might grow to respect, perhaps even to love Nicolas Payne for his magnanimity. This was before he had issued his final threat which pinned her as surely as an arrow which pierces a bird of the air.

What an innocent fool she had been to imagine that she and John could have a life together, so far apart and so blighted by hardships at every turn. Their love was a vain and fanciful dream against the hard truths of daily life, the need to survive, so she had cast him off in favour of another. This was agony enough, but to discover the true nature of Nicolas Payne made it ten times worse. How little she knew of the world and of men like Nicolas Payne, she thought bitterly now. He was a man who measured his honour in terms of power to command others to his will, not through his moral behaviour. She was indebted to him, employed by him and was now bound to him, though with every part of her body she recoiled from this truth. Now that he had secured her, there was little need for him to cover his vile nature.

She remembered with anguish the moment when she knew that there could be no retreat, only submission, when she had still thought that there was a chance of freedom, of refusal. One evening, shortly after Nicolas Payne had made his first proposal to her, when all of the others had left the workshop, Isobel remained, to complete her tasks for the day. She had waited to take a book out of the lying press, for Nicolas Payne drove them all hard to meet his demands and commissions were already behind. It seemed that he had not noticed that she still worked on there alone, or perhaps he had. Isobel became aware of noises in his office, grunting and groaning, and saw a girl slip out, the limp young servant who came to clean the workshop once a week. She was tying the lacing of her gown as she left. Nicolas Payne emerged shortly afterwards and noticing Isobel at her bench, looked at her for a moment with an expression of mild amusement and no hint of embarrassment at all.

'My dear,' he said. 'You are toiling here all on your own. Come, finish your labours. Let us talk together for a moment.'

Isobel was at first too shocked to respond, wishing herself anywhere else in the world but here with this man.

‘My dear, have you considered my proposal?’

‘Master Payne’ she said, her courage fuelled by anger, ‘I cannot marry a man who treats a woman no better than a brute beast and who fornicates and sins without guilt or conscience.’

‘Oh what piety! It makes my heart bleed,’ said Nicolas Payne, taking a step towards Isobel. She retreated from him knocking into a stool which lay unseen behind her. ‘The girl is a simple whore who is well rewarded. I told you my poor dear wife was not able—.’

‘Master Payne, I have not promised to marry you,’ she said finding her resolute voice return. ‘I will leave your employ as soon as you will release me. I thank you for your attentions, but I must refuse them.’

‘You lovely little fool, he said, stepping nearer again. ‘You cannot simply quit this place and spurn my offer. You are beholden to me. Do you think another bookbinder will employ you, if I as Master of the Guild forbid it? What will you do then? Your cripple of a father and your mother will end their days in the workhouse and you too, poor innocent. What pride you have in thinking that you could refuse my offer when all I promise you is love. Come, be kind to one who adores you, Isobel.’

In his grinning face and his stout confident figure Isobel saw her defeat, her disgrace but her only means of survival.

‘It is not honourable, Master Payne, to use such threats,’ said Isobel, feeling her strength leaking from her, hearing her voice weakened and expressionless.

‘I repent me of my sins,’ said Nicolas Payne. ‘When we are man and wife I will not have need to stray, my dear. Your purity will keep me from dalliance. I give you my word.’

Isobel would show no tears outwardly to this man. She would be hard, though inside her heart was steeped in sorrow. She would submit with her body but her heart and her mind would remain her own. That night, in her last letter to John she told him only of her duty. The rest was an agony to her which he should never know. She had to set him free of her, to seek his own course in life. She only prayed that he would find a happier one than that to which she was condemned. Now at last, she would have to forget him. She would blot out the memories until they faded forever.

She had hidden the truth from her father and mother as she told them of Nicolas Payne’s proposal and her acceptance. There was much to admire and respect in Nicolas Payne, for wasn’t he a fine bookbinder with a high reputation? He had also been her protector and friend. Did her mother hear the shake of her voice or the quiver of her lip that she struggled so hard to control? Her parents were concerned at first and questioned her

closely, pressed her about the certainty of her decision, but she held firm and laid their doubts to rest, protesting her wish for this union. She was hardening her core of innocence to a diamond, hard and unfeeling but strong. Perhaps her heart too would become impervious, for this was the surest way to protect herself from regret and longing. In her duty as a wife, she had resolved to suppress her revulsion for her husband and enjoy if she could the comfort that their circumstances would afford. And by these means her parents would be well provided for.

As she walked through the dark streets, Isobel strove to prepare her mind. By next week she would be joined to this man, would have to lie with him. Absorbed in her thoughts, her senses shut against anything beyond, she was surprised at the sudden sound of someone's footsteps close behind her. She looked around and saw to her surprise and alarm that it was Francis Payne her master's son, who must have been following her for some time. She saw the light silk stuff of his coat and the glint of his belt buckle in the evening light.

'Wait, Mistress Isobel,' he called after her, 'I wish to speak to you.' She said nothing in reply but paused, wondering what he could possibly want of her. She thought of trying to take flight, on the pretext of an emergency at home, but he caught up with her too quickly and before she knew it, had taken hold of her arm.

'What would you say to me?' Isobel said, attempting to hide her fear with a note of annoyance.

'Why, Isobel, what's wrong?' he replied, tightening his grip on her arm. 'Aren't you soon to be my step-mother? We must be friends, you and I.'

'And if I am to be your step mother,' she replied, 'I will command more respect from you than you show me now. Why do you creep up on me in the dark?' She pulled her arm free of his grasp.

He laughed. 'Yes, it's true you've a mind of your own, Isobel, though not for much longer, I think.'

To her horror, he grasped her suddenly by the back of the neck and pulled her to him again. Isobel saw his plump cheeks blown into a grin, her face near to his. She tried to pull away from him, pushing hard at his chest with one of her hands, as only a short while ago she had struggled to free herself from the hold of his father.

'Let go of me,' she cried. 'Your father will know of this. He will know how you use me in this shameful way. How dare you.' She wriggled free from his grasp and stepped back from him, glaring with impotence at his persistent grin.

He did not move to come after her, but instead let out a loud chuckling laugh. ‘Tell my father, indeed. Why he has always given me a share of his women. Why should he not be as generous with you?’

She turned and ran from him down Trinity Street, hoping that on this main thoroughfare she might find someone to come to her aid. In her haste, she twisted her ankle against a stone but hobbled on, not daring to stop or look back. She saw an approaching horseman ambling slowly along, the sound of hooves ringing out in the night and she thought briefly of calling out to him for aid. But a glance back along the deserted roadway showed her that she was not followed.

Feeling safer at last, Isobel slowed her pace. Her body was damp with sweat and she felt the rapid pounding of her heart, though it calmed a little as she drew near to home. Now another anxiety broke upon her consciousness. How could she conceal her state from her parents? She stopped dead for a moment, a hundred paces from their lodgings. With the end of her shawl, Isobel wiped her face and tried to take command of herself before approaching the dark shape of the house. At the foot of the steps she paused once again and slowly breathed in the cool air, murmuring a prayer for strength, rehearsing again her resolve to be strong.

Her father and mother were sitting side by side in the dim kitchen, the glimmer from one candle shedding the only light. Her father’s eyes were closed as he dozed and her mother peered at her sewing, holding one small hem of it near the candle flame. Jean Fletcher looked up as Isobel came in and immediately set aside her work. Her father awakened and greeted her with his twisted smile.

‘Isobel, my dear lassie, and so late home. It’s good to see you at last.’

‘Come, let me get you some supper,’ said her mother, going to the table and taking up a small cloth-wrapped parcel of cheese which lay beside half a loaf of bread.

Isobel’s throat tightened to a knot and she could not speak. Her body felt rigid, paralysed but she managed to take off her shawl. Her mother looked up, seemed to suspend her actions, her knife poised in the air and peered at her daughter closely. ‘Lassie?’ she questioned, ‘what ails you? You’re not ill, I hope.’

The iron band of her will suddenly snapped. She could no more hold back the tears than she could have stemmed the flow from a broken barrel. She sank to the floor weeping, remembering the other times she had given way to hopelessness and despair, at Thomas’s arrest and then at his hanging. Jean Fletcher came to her daughter and took her in her arms as she had done then, during those terrible times. She held Isobel for some moments and when

her weeping had ebbed a little, they rose together and sat at the table. Isobel found her father beside her too.

He spoke to her gently, 'Speak of what troubles you, lassie? Speak, for whatever it is, we can bear it together.'

The relief of her tears and her parents' embraces brought an exhausted calm. So Isobel told them all, or nearly all, of the nature of her agreement to marry Nicolas Payne, of the bargain she had struck with him. She mentioned only a little of what had occurred that night, though she could not confess that from the moment of their first meeting with her employer, she had felt nothing but repulsion for his person. She maintained the pretence of an admiration for him, fearing more harm from too much candour. She spoke guardedly too about her encounter with his son.

Jean Fletcher took Isobel's hand and looked hard at her. 'You were going to do this, to marry this man for our sake?'

'You meant to sacrifice yourself?' said her father, sitting down heavily in a chair and covering his eyes with his hand. 'No, Isobel.'

'Father, forgive me. Don't fret. I'm foolish and weak to weep like a bairn. But I'm strong, now that I've told you. It's for the best. You know it is. It's no worse for me than for most women. I'm only shaken by that silly wee whelp of a son.' She smiled weakly. 'I'm equal to him and his cheek. I'll speak to Master Payne tomorrow about him, and insist that he's soundly checked for his insolence,' Isobel said, feeling a lump growing in her throat and her mouth drying as she spoke. She took a deep breath before continuing, attempting a lighter tone. 'All will be well. The day is set for the marriage. Many brides, so I've heard, have doubts before —'

'Lassie, lassie,' said David Fletcher, shaking his head.

But her mother leapt up from her seat and paced the floor. 'David,' she said, her voice thin and strained. 'What can we do? It's all been arranged and agreed. You agreed to it. Can we break this bargain? Isobel, can you not leave his employ, seek work elsewhere?'

Isobel breathed deeply. 'He is Master of the Guild and will not permit it anywhere in Cambridge.'

David Fletcher rose to his feet again. His face was grim and he breathed heavily.

'Isobel, you will not marry this man. I've never had much liking for him, though God knows I should have reason to be grateful to him for offering work. But my daughter will not be that creature's whore no matter what gratitude is owed to him.'

‘David,’ said Jean Fletcher, her eyes wide with alarm, ‘You’d have us beggars in the street in a foreign country? You’d have us in the poor house?’

‘Aye, Jean and I’d rather fester there till the end of my days than know that I’d sold my daughter.’

‘Father, please,’ said Isobel, ‘There’s no need to break the bargain. This is only a moment of weakness. I’m strong now and I can learn to value my lot. And I’m not alone. You and mother will be there to help me, to protect me.’

‘Aye, lassie, but not for ever,’ said her father. ‘You deserve a husband who’ll love and respect you and one worthy of respect himself. A young and vigorous man.’ He paused for a moment and looking at his wife, chuckled. ‘Did you not find such a one yourself Jean, all those years ago?’

‘Aye, David I did,’ she said looking up at him, the tight frown of worry falling from her face for a moment.

‘And hear this, Isobel,’ the bookbinder continued, wagging his finger in mock admonition, a smile on his lips. ‘You would not go against the teachings of the Kirk, for does it not condemn the evils of marrying for money and gain?’

He came to Isobel and putting his arm around her shoulder, bent to kiss her cheek then stepped over the window with a vigour that she had not seen for some time.

‘Come, there is no time to waste. You know what we must do. Pack your belongings, for we’re leaving this place tonight.’

‘David, this is mad talk. How can we travel? You cannot walk far,’ said Isobel’s mother.

‘You mean, now I’m not wholly myself?’ he said with a touch of irritation. ‘I have strength enough when the need is great, believe me wife.’

Jean Fletcher stood for a moment and seemed on the point of speaking. But instead she turned, picked up a basket from the floor and started wrapping up the remains of the bread and cheese from their supper.

‘Daughter,’ said David Fletcher, taking Isobel by the hand in a gentle grasp. ‘You may have escaped the tyranny of a husband but not that of your father.’ He smiled. ‘While we’ve breath in our bodies we’ll not endure the cruelties that others would inflict upon us.’

‘But how will we live? Where will we go?’ said Isobel.

‘London is but fifty miles from here. We can be there in a few days on foot. Though I am slow, I still have the power of my legs.’

‘But should we not wait until daylight?’

‘No, lassie, let’s make our escape to be well gone and out of this place, before Master Payne should notice your absence. Go, collect those things you would take with you.’

Jean Fletcher busied herself, hastily picking up items of clothing, plaids and some food and drink for the journey. They left behind such belongings as they could not carry, as payment for their lodgings, with a note for their landlady and apologies, but no mention of their intended destination.

David Fletcher took up a small canvas bag which lay in the corner of the room and came to Isobel who was tying her own bundle together.

‘I have some tools which can be sold, for I will have no need of them again. I meant to bequeath them to you, Isobel, for the time when you were in independent work again. But no matter, for they will make a tidy sum, I think.’

Her mother too suddenly seemed charged with the energy of their resolve. ‘The weather is dry, at least. What better for vagabonds?’ she said, ‘and we’ll not be tramps for long. There’s always work in such a city as London.’

Isobel’s heart was too full of love and gratitude towards them to speak more and all three fell into the silence necessary to prepare for their escape. She wondered how she would ever be able to repay her mother and father for their rash but selfless act, as they crept like thieves down the stairway from their apartments into the street below.

Thus it was, that in the middle of the night the three headed out of the city of Cambridge, on the road south towards London. The silent blackness of the night engulfed them as they walked, holding on to each other, feeling their way over the rough roadway. Once outside the city, they slept a few hours in the Gog Magog hills, beneath the trees of Wandlebury Rings and resumed their trek as soon as the sky lightened to a hazy pink.

‘This is but a small adventure,’ said David Fletcher, as the three took a small track through the quiet wooded glade towards the main thoroughfare to London. ‘Think of all the other hardy souls who travel over vast oceans to places far more strange and foreign than this.’

At that moment Isobel agreed, feeling a sense of hope renewed and a removal of the dread and despair of the previous months. But as they came to the village of Linton and were met by the hostile stares of two women in their front yards, Isobel was filled with fear at the prospect of their vagrant life amidst strangers, to be chased away out of each parish as unwelcome and unwanted beggars perhaps. This was an uncertain and dangerous path they had taken. She watched her father limping ahead of them and felt the heavy burden, not of her meagre bundle of possessions, but of her parents’ suffering.

Chapter 24

August – September – Madeira and en route to Darien

The colours were so bright they made Susan's eyeballs ache in her head, though the sight was beautiful all the same. No lady's silk gown could shine as bright as that turquoise sea, no velvet cloak as deep green as that forest. All the folks on the *Unicorn* were clamouring at the rails, drinking in the sight of the island of Madeira and how they would soon be standing on dry land. Explosions burst from the guns. It was the commander's ship sounding a salute across the bay, one of the sailors said. The soldiers pushed most of the passengers back, to allow the richer folk to go first. The Missus had ordered Susan to be with her as she could not go ashore on her own in her weakened state. Susan and a sailor lowered her down into one of the longboat rocking below at the side of the ship, to be ferried to the shore. Susan was glad to see a little more colour about her face and a bit of her old spirit returned. Poor Missus had suffered sorely with sickness all those weeks at sea.

'Don't leave my side, Susan,' she said, as Susan took a place beside her on the boat, balancing and shifting the parasol over her head. Master Paterson was already talking away at another gentleman on the boat, pointing at the shore, telling him about every tree and plant they could see from the craft. A church spire rose up from the trees and a big white mansion stood surrounded by the dark green forest which seemed to cover all the island.

Groups of island folk stood on the beach watching the boat ride over the water. Four sailors jumped out, splashing into the water to haul the boat on to the sand. Walking slowly, supporting her mistress up the pathway to the harbour wall, Susan was stunned by the sights, the tall trees like none she'd ever seen, their huge curving leaves sprouting up from their tops. All along the edge of the sea was a white stretch of sand, with distant black rocks on the coast beyond. Small houses and shacks of pink, green and white lined the main roadway. The staring folk were dark-haired and olive-skinned, bare foot and dressed in white tattered clothing. Little children, pretty, blacked-eyed creatures chattered and smiled and ran alongside them. Then some of these island men ran up with baskets of strange shells and yellow fruits, holding them out to the bemused new arrivals.

'Oh my, how bright and wonderful this place is,' said the Missus. Master Paterson had gone ahead a little further up the roadway with some of the other gentlemen, leaving them surrounded by a group of islanders gabbling at them in their foreign tongue.

‘Beware o’ these Portugees,’ said a soldier behind them. ‘They’ll pick your pocket, if ye give them a chance.’

A man wearing an apron stood on the side of the road with a barrel of wine. A swarm of men from the ship ran straight to it and crowded around, clamouring to take a cup, jostling each other in their excitement to get at the grog.

‘Susan, please hold my parasol over me for the sun is mighty hot,’ said the Missus and in truth Susan wondered how long she’d hold out in this heat. She was just on the point of going to seek out Master Paterson about finding some shade for the Missus, when she saw a gentleman from the island greeting her master’s group up ahead. He was a plump man of middle years, who wore a straw hat and, in spite of the heat, a curled wig. A moment later, Master Paterson came back, flushed with the heat and his news.

‘Come, my dear,’ he said, looking pleased for a change. ‘This gentleman is an English merchant who owns that grand house over there. He has kindly offered us his hospitality. We may find you a shady place to rest in his garden.’

The garden of the gentleman’s house was very fine, with a flat stretch of grass in front of it and servants all around, some sprinkling water on bright coloured flowers, others carrying trays of fruit. Susan and the Missus were led to sit on chairs of cane in the shade of one of the trees, where they could still view the sea and the bay in the distance. The gentlemen and officers gathered in a roofed terrace at the front of the house, their laughing and talking spilling out into the garden. There didn’t seem to be a lady of the house, or at least none came to greet the Missus which cast her down for a while, but not for long.

Even in the shade it was stifling warm and Susan longed to tear off her hat and veil, but dared not, for fear of showing her mark to strangers and foreigners. But she took off her shawl and cooled the Missus’s face with a fan made of great shiny leaves. A servant brought them cool drinks, pinkish and cloudy and a dish of cut fruits, with sweet, wet yellow flesh so delicious it almost pained the mouth.

‘Missus,’ said Susan gazing around. ‘D’you reckon it’ll be like this, the place where we’re goin’?’

‘I don’t know, Susan, but let’s hope so, for this is heavenly. I feel nearly like myself again, I must say.’

They sat in silence for a while, still bemused by the beauty of this alien place, hearing the distant shouts of the men enjoying their drink down by the beach, the strange screech of birds, dots of yellow and green flitting in the trees around them.

‘Isn’t it curious,’ said the Missus, her voice all sluggish and slow, ‘that I can still feel the motion of the ship, though we are now on dry land? How I wish we could stay here for ever.’

Susan could only agree, as she recalled the bilge-stink and the rancid sweat of bodies crammed together on the ship, only a half a day ago. How strange and changeable this life could be, she thought. Her times of misery and loss had been mixed with spells of such bliss and joy as to make almost any suffering bearable. Her eyes started to close as the warmth and this unaccustomed rest made her drowsy, but a loud hallooing from the beach soon roused her again.

‘What’s that, Susan?’ said Mistress Paterson. ‘Go to the end of the garden and see. I hope there’s no trouble afoot.’

Susan rose and walked a hundred paces or so over the grassy square of the garden and on to the dusty scrub, to gain a better view of the beach and the harbour. In the bay, the two remaining ships of their fleet, those following the *Unicorn*, now lay at anchor. Several boats, loaded down with men from these ships were approaching the shallows.

‘Missus, there’s others arriving,’ said Susan, coming back.

‘Yes, but go further down, Susan and see who they are. See if there are any more ladies or other gentlefolk of our acquaintance. I’m sorely in need of company after so much confinement in that terrible cabin.’

Susan obeyed, though her legs were heavy and her step slow. She ventured further this time, a little along the roadway which led to the harbour. Groups of their men from the ships were milling about or taking their ease, some lying on the beach, some washing themselves in the sea and others, cups of drink in hand, were making merry with their companions. The boats newly beached on the shore, spewed their passengers, soldiers in uniform, a few jumping over the side and hollering, one twirling his sword aloft. The other craft carried labouring men and she watched them step out one-by-one on to the sand until her breath nearly stopped with the shock, as the last to descend was John Wyllie.

For a moment she couldn’t move, feeling only the pulsing of her heart. It couldn’t be. Some devil was conjuring visions before her eyes, or she was fevered in her brain from the heat. But she would know him anywhere, dead or alive, from near or afar. He wore no coat and his shirt hung loosely, his hair was longer and tethered behind. She could not see his face clearly, but his body was thin as he walked up the beach with two others at his side, a tall fair-haired man and a smaller, older one wrapped in a plaid in spite of the heat. If only she could have run to him, fallen before him, kissed his hand and told him how she had suffered

that day at the terrible Kirk Session, told him how it felt that her guts had been ripped from her belly, when he was accused and she could do nothing but blabber and curse. But she could not go to him, not with others there to see, not with the Missus waiting.

‘Susan?’ she heard her mistress call from the distance and turning quickly she ran back into the garden.

‘Well, did you see anyone?’

‘No Missus,’ said Susan, ‘only soldiers and sailors from the other ships.’

She would not tell what she’d seen, for the moment, for still she couldn’t believe it. She should tell her mistress that John Wyllie was here and that he was with them on the expedition to their new country. The Missus, she knew, had taken a fancy to John. Even when she was ailing, she had a spark about her in his company. She had spoken up for him too at the Kirk Session against those vicious slanders, just as she had removed herself and Susan to Edinburgh again to avoid her shaming on the stool of repentance. But even to the Missus Susan dared not utter what she’d witnessed aloud, not yet, for the saying might lead to hopes too wonderful and terrible to be dashed, if John were to be taken from her again. Perhaps she might tell the Missus later and beg some time to seek him and bring him to her while they were on the island.

However, as Susan knew it might, the heat took its toll on the Missus, and she was carried to the merchant’s house for the week of their stay on the island. Though aching to seek out John, Susan was tied to her care of the Missus. She could only gaze out of the window, scouring the beach for a sight of him, but found none. She felt no bitterness in her heart, for she thought she had lost him forever and now like a miracle, he was here with her again or so she fondly hoped. Whatever befell, she would nurse her secret sighting of him, this moment in paradise, to savour and soothe her soul when she had most need.

Two weeks out from Madeira, Susan tried to cheer herself with dreams of what might come to pass, if they were ever to reach their new country. It was hard to hold on to hope, as more folks perished each day, taken by fever and flux. Most died in an agony of filth and pain. More than thirty poor souls, wrapped in their canvas shrouds were dropped into the ocean. It filled her with such sadness to think of those poor souls, dying so far from home, with all their hopes dead too.

Susan felt lucky, being still hale, though with a hunger that pained her, that gnawed at her guts, like rats at a bone. Their rations would hardly have fed a flea, but at least she had no time to be idle and dwell on it. The Missus needed much tending and care and had

scarcely been able to rise from her bed or take much sustenance, since Madeira. It was more than sea sickness that plagued her now, but a more serious distemper of the body.

Susan climbed up on to the main deck to wash the linen one bright day, as the Missus had soiled all her nightgowns again. There she met Janet a young servant girl about the same business. She was maid to an apothecary and his wife. The girl was as thin as a stick with the strength of a mouse and Susan helped her with her work when she could.

‘Ere let me carry it for you, me ducks,’ said Susan, seeing Janet’s face twist with the effort of lifting the bucket only half full of sea water. ‘Got yer linen there, ‘ave ye?’

‘Thank ye, Susan,’ said the girl, her little arms hardly thicker than pieces of rope.

‘Aye,’ she said, picking up a bundle of greying shirts and shifts.

Susan lowered her own bucket over the side, then hauled it brimming to the deck. She filled Janet’s up too and then set them both down in a space where they could complete the chore without too much abuse from the sailors. Even after these months at sea, Janet still shrank from the leering of the men.

Susan dunked a chemise into her bucket.

‘Got any soap?’ said Janet, wearily.

‘Only a scrap, me dearie. ‘ave a bit of this,’ and she broke a wedge off her rough hard cake for the girl. ‘It don’t get ‘em clean, sea water,’ said Susan, rubbing her soap hard into a yellow stain on her mistress’s chemise. ‘And salt water makes you itch like the blazes too, worse than the fleas.’

‘Aye,’ said Janet, ‘but I’d gladly share my bed wi’ the lice, if I could just be at home again.’ She slowly rubbed the soap against the cloth in her hand.

Susan and plunged her arms into the cold brine in her bucket. ‘Won’t be long now, me dearie, till we lands, I’m sure.’

‘Will it be like home, Susan?’ she said, her small red hands poised above the bucket.

‘Well, we can make it like home, can’t we. Might be better too, warm and sunny like on that lovely island. Come on now, let’s get these done. If you hurry I’ll wring ‘em out for you. What d’you say?’

The girl fixed Susan with her hollow eyes and nodded, plunging her hands into the water.

‘Ere now,’ said Susan pulling out a dripping piece of linen, ‘I’ll choke yer dry,’ and the muscles of her arms tightened as she twisted the cloth, squeezing first a stream, then a trickle then nothing, till the linen fell stiff on to the boards of the deck.

‘Give us one o’ yours,’ she said to Janet. ‘Then we’ll see who’s got the muckiest water, eh?’

Together they went to the rail with Susan wielding a bucket in each arm, grunting with the effort. She hoisted them up on the rail and tipped them over, watching the dirty waterfalls descend to the waves. Susan was pleased to hear the girl giggling beside her. Then the two fought to hang their washing on a line from the rigging, the wind-tugged cloth slapping their faces until they collapsed on the deck together with the effort of the work and their laughter.

Susan watched Janet totter down the ladderway. What she needed, poor lamb, was a few good hot dinners and a rest which was as likely as flying to the moon. Even after the loading of provisions at Madeira, only two weeks out, they were back on half rations of mouldy ship’s biscuits, water, a handful or two of oats and a measure of rum each day, though the Master and Mistress had some salt beef and fish from time to time. Sometimes Susan’s head swam and moving her legs was like shifting blocks of stone, but in these bad times her secret sustained her, her dream of meeting John Wyllie again. Perhaps when they reached Darien, that far away place, away from their old lives, in a warm land of sun and hope of a new beginning, they might talk together again as they had in the past, but without risk of suspicion or blame.

Susan had little time to indulge such thoughts, however, there being so many tasks to attend to. Each day the Missus sank further in health and spirits. Susan was gripped with the fear that the sick woman would never set foot on the land which was to be their new home. Master Paterson said they were near the island of Jamaica and might put in there for some time, which Susan heartily hoped for her mistress’s sake. She bathed the Missus’s body with the salt water, to cool her, and dabbed her face with the fresh, although neither gave her much ease. Sometimes she rallied a little and talked in a dull voice about reaching Darien and about the vexation of waiting for a solid house to be built. Her husband offered little comfort for he brought his own fretting worries with him, when he came to her each day. He was much taken up with all manner of troubles and vexed the Missus with his complaining. In truth, what he said was mighty alarming and Susan would rather have stayed ignorant of his fears.

‘These men,’ he said, his voice cracked and dry with his anger, as he sat at the Missus’s bedside in the cabin. ‘They fight and bicker, like children, these who are supposed to be our leaders.’

He sat with his face as long as misery itself, talking as the Missus lay, eyes flickering open and closed, her hand moving over the counterpane as if searching for some invisible object upon it.

‘Theirs is a vital duty, to found a new country no less. God knows what kind of government there will be with petty tyrants such as these in charge.’

Susan saw the Missus’s eyes open and look at her husband.

‘William,’ she said weakly, ‘will they take no counsel from you?’

‘No, my dear, they will barely let me speak. The Admiral has permitted me only to be present at a few of the meetings of the Council. When I begged for better rations for those who suffer on board, I was manhandled in a most unseemly manner out of the place. I see our noble plan doomed to failure because of these proud and puffed up men. How can we found a colony with labouring men so weakened by lack of sustenance that they cannot work? And we’ve lost forty souls already.’

The Master shook his head and pulling a kerchief from his pocket, dabbed at his brow. He looked none too hearty either, for his skin was waxy white and sweating. The Missus reached for her husband’s arm.

‘My dear, will you not take a cup of wine? I have need of a tonic too. Susan, please get us some wine?’

‘Dear wife,’ he replied, frowning at her, ‘forgive me. I forget myself. How is your head today?’

‘Oh, well enough, William,’ she whispered. ‘Have no worry for me, my dear. I am in God’s hands.’

‘Aye aren’t we all. Only He knows what our destiny will be.’

‘William,’ she said, ‘do not vex yourself. You can only make your best efforts and trust in God’s will. What else is there left for us to do?’

‘Aye my dear,’ said her husband, patting her hand and then taking his leave.

One day the Missus seemed to rally a little, though she was restless in her mind and thrashed around in her bed. Susan helped her to sit up, leaning over her and smelling the warm sourness of her body, feeling the slack flesh of her upper arms as she placed a bolster behind her head.

‘Susan, I know I will never set foot on dry land again. I have something I want you to do for me.’

‘Oh Missus,’ said Susan. ‘You looks more lively today. Don’t be a-thinkin’ those things. You’ll be better by and by, you’ll see. Here, let’s do yer pillers again.’

‘Susan, get me my jewel case.’ Her voice was scarce a whisper but stern and commanding.

‘What Missus?’ said Susan, surprised to feel her mistress’s hand close with a strong grip on her wrist.

‘Susan, just do as I say. I must do it now, in case I am not capable later. In the chest, the trunk, over there. Get it for me.’

The Missus relaxed her hold and Susan went to the wooden trunk in the corner of the cabin. She brought out a carved ebony box which she laid on the bed. The Missus opened the box and dipped her hand inside, groping down deep at the bottom for a moment before pulling out two long strings of pearls and holding them up to Susan.

‘Here, Susan, you must take these,’ she said.

‘No Missus,’ said Susan flustered, thinking the Missus was not right in her mind. ‘No Missus, I can’t take none of yer pearls.’

‘Take them, Susan. I command you as your mistress. When I am gone, you may have no position. God knows what will happen in this new country, if there are no houses, no civilized places for a woman to shelter. I fear for you. You will have need of something and these are valuable. Please take them, as a mark of my gratitude.’

Susan took the two strings of pearls which coiled in cool ropes in her hands. They glowed with a yellowish tint, in a shining mound. For all the Missus’s feebleness, demands and complaints, she would come out strong for those beaten down by mischance. She had protected Susan when she was most in need and when others would have cast her off. Now this same strength drove her to provide for Susan, even after her death. Susan’s eyes filled and she could say nothing.

‘Keep them safe, Susan,’ said her mistress, ‘put them in that little purse there.’

‘Thank ye, Missus for your kindness. I won’t never forget,’ said Susan pouring the pearls into the small velvet pouch which she pushed inside her bodice.

Susan then carefully lowered her mistress down in the bed and replaced the jewel case in the chest. The sick woman sighed deeply and closed her eyes. At least now she was more at ease. Susan hoped that the Missus was mistaken in her mind, to see her own death approaching. But there was a new certainty about her as though she was leaving, bidding farewell and shutting out life. Susan busied herself for a while before leaving the Missus, bundling up soiled linen and clearing the cups and plates from an earlier meal. She wolfed a small piece of cheese left over from the Missus’s meal and half a stale piece of ship’s biscuit.

Leaving the Missus dozing, Susan climbed down to the lower deck where she slept with the other women servants, in a corner screened off by a curtain. Climbing down the ladderway, she met a new and sickening stench and found Janet in her bunk lying in her own filth.

‘Oh me dearie,’ Susan cried, coming to her side.

‘I’m sorry,’ said the girl, ‘I cannae help myself. It’s my belly. She retched, bringing up a vile smelling slime.

‘Don’t fret. Let’s get these things off of yer,’ said Susan, undoing the laces on Janet’s gown and gently peeling off the filthy clothes. The girl weighed almost nothing, her frame delicate as a dead bird.

‘I’m going to die, like a’ the others. Help me, Susan.’

‘Sh..sh, me dearie,...’ said Susan intent on her task of ridding the girl of the filthy witness of the sickness. She pulled a blanket over her, trying not to think or feel, but she knew that this was the flux. Taking the girl’s bony hand in hers and clasping it strongly, she stroked her forehead, remembering one of the psalms John Wyllie had the children recite in school. She whispered it now for there was nothing else in the world she could do. ‘Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for though art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.....’