The Final Folly of Captain Dancy

Lawrence Watt-Evans

1.

Iwas right there beside him when it happened, and I saw the whole thing. It wasn’t anything but pure bad luck, such as could happen to anyone—but it had never happened to the captain before, and I’d guess he wasn’t ready for it.

We had just come out of Old Joe’s Tavern, where the captain had beaten the snot out of three young troublemakers, and we’d left by way of the alley, since the troublemakers had shipmates of their own, and that alleyway wasn’t any too clean. I didn’t see exactly what it was the captain stepped in, but it was brown and greasy, and when his foot hit it that foot went straight out from under him and he fell, and his head fetched up hard against the brick wall, and there was a snap like kindling broken across your knee, and there he was on the ground, dead.

It was pure bad luck, and the damnedest thing, but that’s how it happened, and Captain Jack Dancy, who’d had three ships shot out from under him, who’d come through the battle of Cushgar Corners, where only three men survived, without a scratch, who’d sired bastards on half the wives in Collyport without ever a husband suspecting, who’d stolen the entire treasury from the Pundit of Oul and got away clean, who’d escaped from the Dungeon Pits of the Black Sorcerer on Little Hengist, who was the only man ever pardoned by Governor “Hangman“ Lee, who’d climbed Dawson’s Butte with only a bullwhip for tackle—that man, Jolly Jack Dancy, lay dead in the alley behind Old Joe’s Tavern of a simple fall and a broken neck.

And that meant that me and the rest of the crew of the good ship Bonny Anne were in deep trouble.

We didn’t know the half of it yet, of course, but even then, drunk as I was, I knew it wasn’t good.

I saw him fall, and I heard his neck break, but I was muddled by drink, and I didn’t really believe that the captain could die, like any other mortal, and most particularly not in such a stupid and easy fashion, so I judged that he was just hurt, and I picked him up and tried to get him to walk, but a corpse doesn’t do much walking without at least a bit of a charm put on it, so then I swung him up across my shoulders and I headed down that alley, swaying slightly, and in a hurry to get back to the Bonny Anne, where either Doc Brewer or the captain’s lady, Miss Melissa, could see about reviving him.

I think somewhere at the back of my mind I must have known he was dead, but sozzled as I was I probably thought even that wouldn’t necessarily have been entirely permanent. I’ve seen my share of zombies, and I know they aren’t of much use and don’t remember a damned bit of what they knew in life, but I’d heard tales of other ways of dealing with the dead, one sort of necromancy or the other, and I won’t call them lies as yet.

I had enough sense left to stay in the alleys as much as I could, and halfway to the docks I ran into Black Eddie driving a freight wagon, and I hailed him and threw the captain’s carcass in the back, and then climbed up beside him.

It took me two or three tries to get up to the driver’s bench, what with the liquor in me, but I made it eventually, and Black Eddie had us rolling before I had my ass on the plank.

“Head for the ship,” I told him, and he nodded, as he was already bound that way. He snapped the reins and sped the horses a mite.

Then he threw a look behind him, and turned to me.

“Billy,” he said, “what’s wrong wi’ the Captain?”

“Broke his fool neck,” said I.

He looked at me startled, then looked back at that corpse, and then asked, “You mean he’s dead?”

I started to nod, and then to shrug, and then I said, “Damned if I know, Eddie, but I’m afraid so.”

“Damme!” Eddie said, and he flicked the reins again for more speed.

That brought our situation to my attention. “Eddie,” said I, looking around in puzzlement, “What’re ye doing with this wagon?”

“Damned if I know, Billy,” he said. “’Twas the captain’s order that I get it, and have it at the docks by midnight, but he didn’t think to tell me why.”

“Oh,” I said, trying to remember if the captain had said anything about a wagon, and not managing to recall much of anything at all. The captain had mostly been on about the usual, whiskey and women and the woes of the world, and hadn’t spoken much of any special plans. A moment or two later we rolled out onto the dock where the Bonny Anne lay, and I hadn’t come up with a thing.

“Well,” I said, “Mr. Abernathy will know.”

We’d tied up right to the dock, as the harbor in Collyport is a good and deep one, with a drop-off as steep as a ship-chandler’s prices; no need to ride out at anchor and come in with the boats, as there would be in most of the ports we traded in. About a dozen ships were in port, at one place or another, and the Bonny Anne was one of them, right there at hand, and we could see the lads aboard her watching as we came riding up.

Looking up at them, the thought came to me that perhaps there were things we had best keep to ourselves, at least until we’d had a chance to talk matters over with our first mate, Lieutenant John Hastings Abernathy, who had the watch aboard and was Captain Dancy’s closest confidant. It seemed to me I recalled a few things I hadn’t before.

“Eddie,” said I, “Give me a hand with the captain, would you? And let on he’s just drunk, or been clouted, and let’s not say any more of it than we must, shall we?”

He gave me the fish-eye, but then he shrugged. “What the hell, then,” he said. “Let it be Mr. Abernathy what spreads the news, if you like.”

“It’d suit me,” I said. I was thinking of a deal the captain had made, six years before, with the Caliburn Witch.

So the two of us hauled that corpse out of the wagon with a bit more care than was honestly called for, and we got it upright between us, me with my hand at the back of the head so the crew would not be seeing it loll off to one side too badly, and we walked up the gangplank with the feet dragging between us, and we headed straight back to the captain’s cabin.

Old Wheeler, the captain’s man, was pottering about, and we shooed him away and dumped poor old Jack Dancy’s mortal remains on the bunk, and then Black Eddie sent me to fetch Mr. Abernathy.

I found Hasty Bernie on the quarterdeck, just where he should have been, and had little doubt in my mind that he’d watched us every inch from the wagon to the break in the poop, but he didn’t let on a bit, he just watched me walk up, and stood there silent as a taut sail until I said, “Permission to speak, sir?”

“Go ahead, Mr. Jones,” he said, and I knew we were being formal, as he didn’t call me Billy, but I didn’t quite see why, as yet.

“Mr. Abernathy,” I said, “I’d like a word with you in private, if I might, regardin’ the captain.”

He lifted up on his toes, with his hands behind his back, the way he always did when he was nervous about something, and he said, “And what is it that you can’t say right here, Mr. Jones? Who’s to hear you?”

I wasn’t happy to hear that, at all. He must have thought I was getting out of line somehow, and I remembered as he’d asked me especially to keep a close eye on some of the men, as they might be thinking the captain wasn’t looking out for them proper.

I wasn’t too concerned about mutiny brewing, not just then, in particular as I had been keeping an eye out, and hadn’t seen a man aboard who didn’t have faith in the captain. They might not think much of the rest of us, but they all admired the captain and trusted in him to do right by them.

Which made my news that much worse. “Mr. Abernathy,” said I, “you know as well as I do that any word said on this deck can be heard by any as might care to listen from below the rail, either on the halfdeck or on the docks, be they crewmen or townsfolk or any others that might chance by, not even mentionin’ the possibilities of sorcery and black magic as might be involved. You were with the captain at Little Hengist, weren’t you?”

He blinked at me, and looked about as if he expected to see the Sorcerer’s creatures climbing up the rigging, and then he turned back to me and said, “Very well, Mr. Jones, lead the way, then.”

I led him straight to the cabin, where the poor captain’s body lay and Black Eddie stood guard, and we closed up the sliding trap on the skylight above the map table, and we checked the stern windows and made sure they were tight, and Black Eddie went from one cabinet to the next and made sure that there was nobody tucked away in any of them, neither a crewman tucked small nor the Sorcerer’s homunculi, not as we really thought the Sorcerer still gave a tinker’s dam for any of us aboard the Bonny Anne, but you never know.

And when we were sure that the place was as private as we could make it, I turned to Hasty Bernie and said, “He’s dead.”

The night air on the ride down to the ship, and the business of getting the corpse aboard and getting ourselves alone and private with Bernie had given my head time to clear, and there wasn’t any doubt any more. I’d heard that snap I’d heard, and I knew it for what it was.

Bernie snapped his head around like to break his own neck and stared at that lump on the bunk. “Dead?” he said, “Captain Dancy?”

“Dead as a stone,” Black Eddie said. “Whilst Billy was fetchin’ you down, I took a look at ’im, and listened for his heart and felt for his pulse, and the man’s dead if ever a man was.”

“Good Lord,” Bernie said, staring at the corpse. “Now what are we going to do?”

I blinked, and looked at Black Eddie, who looked back at me.

“We were hopin’,” Eddie pointed out to Bernie, “that you could tell us that.”

“Me?” Bernie looked from one of us to the other and back, with a look on him as if we’d just suggested he bugger the Governor’s pet penguin.

“You are in command,” Eddie said mildly.

Bernie looked at us each, desperately, and then crossed to the bunk and knelt. “You’re sure he’s dead?” he asked.

We both nodded, but Bernie bent down and checked for himself, feeling for a breath from the nose and mouth, listening for the heart, feeling for a pulse, and finding nothing at all.

It was just then that someone knocked at the cabin door, and we looked at one another like as we were schoolboys caught with the maid and her bloomers down, and Black Eddie stared at Hasty Bernie, and Hasty Bernie stared around the room, and after a moment I called, “Who is it?”

“Got a letter for the captain,” someone answered.

“Slip it under the door,” I said.

The fellow hesitated, and then said, “I don’t think I can do that, sir; I was told to give it to Captain Dancy and no other, or it’d be my neck in a noose.”

I glanced at the others, but they just shrugged, so I went to the door and opened it.

There stood Jamie McPhee, with the letter in his hand, and I saw the red seal upon it and knew it wasn’t just a bill from the chandler nor any such trifle.

“The Captain’s ill,” I said. “Got a clout on the head in a fight, and that atop a bottle of bad rum, and he’s in no shape for readin’ a letter. If you’d care to come in and put it in his hand, you’ll have done as you were told, but you needn’t wait for him to wake; he’s dead to the world, and it might be noon before he rises again.”

Or it might be Judgment Day, I added to myself.

The boy looked past me at the body on the bunk, and the situation seemed mighty plain, so he shrugged and said, “Well, I done my best, Mr. Jones, and with both you here and Mr. Abernathy there watching I reckon it’s right enough. Here’s the letter then, and I’m shut of it.” And he handed me the letter.

Parchment, it was.

Jamie hurried off, and I closed the door tight and took the letter to Hasty Bernie.

I held it out to him, but he looked at it as if it were a hungry piranha, and at me as if I were straight out of Bedlam. “That’s for the Captain,” he said.

“And that’s you, sir,” I said. “Seein’ as Captain Dancy’s dead.”

He stared at it for a moment longer, and I stood there, waiting.

“Oh, all right, damn you,” he said, and he snatched the letter away and looked at it.

His face went white.

“Oh, Lord,” he said. “It’s from Governor Lee.”

“Open it,” Black Eddie said. “Let’s hear the worst.”

2.

His hands shaking, Bernie broke the big red seal and opened it, and he read it aloud, and what it said was this:

“Dear Captain Dancy, As you will recall as well as do I, when I granted you Pardon for your Crimes this three years past, there were certain Terms agreed upon by us both. Though we have not always seen eye to eye on every Detail, I have, I feel, fully lived up to my end of the Arrangement, and I confess you have done well enough on your own. However, one Provision of our Agreement remains in Doubt. You must surely know to what I refer. Having seen Mistress Coyne twice this fortnight past, how could you not? I trust you will remedy this Oversight forthwith. Should you fail to satisfy me of your good Will by this coming Dawn, either by completing our Arrangement or by suitably demonstrating your Intent, I fear I will be required to consider the entire Agreement void, your Pardon revoked, and your Ship forfeit to the Crown. Signed, Geo. Lee, Governor.”

When he’d read that, Bernie stared at the paper for a long moment. Then he looked up at Eddie and at me, and said, “Good Christ, whatever is this about?”

Eddie and me, we shook our heads, as we hadn’t either of us any more idea than a duck.

“Who’s this Mistress Coyne, then?” Eddie asked.

“I have no idea,” Bernie said.

“Nor do I,” said I.

“An’ what do we do now?” Eddie asked.

“Your ship forfeit to the crown, it says,” I remarked. “Seems to me that we’d want to avoid that. I’m not overly concerned about losing the Captain’s pardon, as that was for a sentence of death, and he’s clear of that, but I’m not eager to lose the ship.”

“Could he take it?” Bernie asked thoughtfully. “We’ve men and guns, after all. We could fight.”

“Aye, that we could,” I said. “But we’d lose. The Governor’s got men and guns himself, aboard the frigate just across the harbor.”

“The Armistead Castle,” Bernie said. “I’d forgot her.”

“Aye,” I said. “That’s the one.”

“And the Castle’s ready for sea,” Eddie pointed out. “I saw meself, they’ve a full crew aboard, standing a proper watch tonight, not a port watch.”

“The Governor must ha’ meant that to fright the Captain,” I said. “He’s lettin’ us know he’s serious in his threats.”

“I don’t know about the Captain, but it frightens me right well,” Hasty Bernie said. “That frigate’s sixteen guns a side; we couldn’t possibly stand up to her.”

“Aye,” Eddie said. “Well then, shall we fetch the men and raise anchor to run? We can be over the horizon by dawn, if we’re brisk about it.”

“Nay,” said I, “for then we’d be fugitives, and shut of Collyport forever, not to mention having all the rest of the Royal Navy after us.”

“Well, and aren’t we fugitives now?” Eddie asked.

“Not here,” said I. “Not with the governor’s pardon.”

“But that runs out at dawn,” Eddie said.

“Not if we show our good intent,” I told him.

Bernie was still staring at the parchment, but he said, “Maybe if we just went to the governor and told him what happened...”

“Would he believe us?” I asked.

“We’ve got the bloody corpse to prove it, ye blidget!” Eddie said. “How could he not?”

“Are ye plannin’ to drag the captain all the way up to the governor’s palace, then, and haul it in with us when he agrees to see us—if he agrees to see us?”

Black Eddie had to think about that one for a moment.

“We might could try it,” he said at last, but we knew by the tone that his heart weren’t in it. I was ready to mention the Caliburn Witch, and her promise to live and let live only until she heard that Jack Dancy was dead, but I could see Eddie wasn’t going to argue, so I held off.

“Why’d the governor want to be so bloody cryptic in his letter, anyway?” Bernie snapped.

“And why’d the captain not tell us what in hell he wanted with that wagon, and what he’d promised the governor?” Black Eddie retorted.

“And when,” said I, “Did the captain ever tell us what he was up to?”

That silenced them both, for the truth was that Jack Dancy had always been close with his counsel. As he told me once, “Billy,” he said, “if you don’t tell people what you’re planning, they won’t worry about what might go wrong.” And sure enough, he’d always pulled off everything he’d put his hand to, no matter how bad it looked, no matter how bad it was, he’d always pulled it off. Sometimes he only survived by the skin of his teeth, but he always survived, as if all the gods of luck owed him heavily and had interest to pay.

Well, his luck had run out tonight.

And we were standing there looking at one another, the three of us, when the cabin door opened. We heard the hinges creak, and the three of us spun about, and Black Eddie’s dirk was out, and my own hand seemed to be on the hilt of me own dagger, and there we all were, staring at Miss Melissa, who was by her face just as surprised to see us as we were to see her.

“Good evenin’ to ye, gentlemen,” she said, “Is the captain in?”

Eddie and I looked at one another, and then at Hasty Bernie, who swallowed and said, “Miss Melissa, there’s bad news.”

“Oh? Is he drunk, Mr. Abernathy?” She looked at the body on the bunk and stepped into the cabin.

Bernie looked at the two of us, but we were no help to him, and his face twisted up. “Worse,” he said.

Miss Melissa gave him a look such as I hope I never have to endure. “He’s hurt, then?” she asked, closing the door behind her.

“Dead,” said Black Eddie.

“Dead?” She was at the bunk before I could blink, tipping the corpse’s head back for a good look.

For a moment, we all just stood and watched her, as she saw what we’d all seen. Then she let out a great sob.

“Damn you, Jack Dancy!” she said, her back still to us, and her voice weren’t steady at all, “What the hell did you go and die for? Eddie, go get Doc Brewer—he was down in the after hold last I saw, counting those masks we got at Pennington’s Cay.”

Black Eddie threw a look at Hasty Bernie, who nodded, and then Eddie trotted out the door.

Miss Melissa turned, and we could see the tears running down her face, and it seemed I felt my own throat thickening and my eyes going damp. All that strong drink must have numbed me, a bit, for surely the captain’s death was enough to make a man cry, but it wasn’t until I saw Miss Melissa weeping that it came home to me.

“How did it happen, Billy?” she asked me.

I shrugged, and said, “He fell. Hit his head on a brick wall, and his neck snapped.”

She stared at me, and the tears stopped.

“That’s all?” she asked.

I nodded. “That’s all,” I said.

“That son of a bitch!” she said. “You mean it wasn’t the Governor’s men? Nor the Sorcerer? Nor the Pundit? Nor the Amber Lassie? Nor ’Tholomew Sanchez?”

“No,” I said. “Wasn’t any of those. He slipped and fell while drunk, and that’s all there was to it.”

“Well, I’ll... a man like Jack Dancy, dead like that?”

I nodded.

“That’s not fitting. It’s a damn poor ending to a life like that!”

“I’d agree with that,” I said, and Bernie nodded.

For a moment the three of us stood silent, thinking about the captain. It was Miss Melissa who broke the quiet.

“What were his last words, then?” she asked me. “Did he leave us with a fine speech to remember him?”

I had to think about that. We’d been in Old Joe’s, and we’d just beaten those sailors and were on our way out through the back, and Jack Dancy had turned to me, smiling and drunk.

“His last words,” I said, “were, ‘Billy, I’m going to need five guineas later tonight; have you got ’em?’“

Miss Melissa glared at me like as I’d belched in church. “That’s a hell of a way to go out, asking for money!”

I didn’t argue any. Instead, I said, “I think there’s something you’d best be seein’, Miss Melissa.” I pointed to the governor’s letter.

Bernie handed it to her, and she read it, and then she looked up and asked, “Who’s Mistress Coyne?”

“We don’t know,” I said. “That’s just what we were askin’ amongst ourselves when you came in.”

She squinted at me suspiciously, and I looked her in the eye because I wasn’t doing anything but telling the simple truth. “D’ye think Jack was bedding her?” she asked me.

I shrugged. “I don’t know, Miss Melissa,” I said, “I truly don’t. I never heard her name until this letter arrived, not half an hour ago.”

“Miss Melissa,” Bernie said, “while I understand your concern with the mysterious Mistress Coyne, might I point out that it’s rather more urgent that we discover just what promises Captain Dancy had made to Governor Lee, than whether he’d been... ah...”

“Than whether he’d been tomcatting about again,” she finished for him. “You mean you don’t know what the promise was?”

“No,” Bernie said.

She looked at me, and I shook my head.

“Nor I,” I said.

“Well,” she said, looking at the letter, “We can’t ask the governor, for he’d not have the likes of us in his palace.”

I threw Bernie a glance, and shook my head as he started to open his mouth. There was no need for her to know that we’d been in the palace half a dozen times with Jack Dancy, going in by way of the caves round the other side of Collins Island that led into the wine cellars. Nor did she need to be told that Captain Dancy had once walked in the front gate at the governor’s invitation. The circumstances for that one didn’t bear telling to the captain’s lady.

“So that means we’ll have to see this Mistress Coyne,” Miss Melissa announced.

I blinked.

“Beggin’ your pardon,” I said, “but how are we to do that? We don’t know who she is, or where, and we’ve no more than five hours to dawn, I’d judge, when the governor’s said the ship’s to be forfeit.”

“Well,” Miss Melissa said, “It seems plain to me that somebody knows who she is and where she’s to be found. You tell me that you two don’t know, but someone aboard might—did Jack go alone when he saw her, without word to any? And even if he did, there’s the governor who knows who and where she is, and the governor’s spies who told him that Jack had been to see her; can’t we ask them?”

“Well, we can’t ask the governor, can we?” I said.

“And half the crew’s out carousing,” Bernie pointed out.

“Well, then, what about the governor’s spies?” Miss Melissa asked.

I had to think about that. Something seemed familiar there.

“Mr. Abernathy,” I said, speakin’ slowly so as to think about what I was saying, “wa’n’t it one of the governor’s men what brought you that bottle on Sunday?”

The bottle I referred to had had an imp in it once, and the captain had wanted it for a deal he was making with the vengeful brother of the harbormaster’s first wife, but that’s beside the point.

“Aye,” Hasty Bernie said. “It was. What of it?”

Miss Melissa looked at me. “D’you think, then, that this man might know where we can find the wench?”

I shrugged. “He might, and what better have we got to do, than to ask him?”

“D’you know where he’s to be found, then?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “But I know who does.”

It was at that moment that Black Eddie flung open the door and stepped in, with Doc Brewer close on his heels—and Peter Long the bo’sun right behind Doc Brewer.

“Here, you can’t come in!” Bernie called at Peter. “The captain’s ill!”

“Oh,” Peter said, taking in the lump on the bunk and noticing who he was following. He stopped with his toes on the sill. “Well, then, tell the captain I’ve got his parrot.”

Hasty Bernie blinked in surprise, and Miss Melissa stared, and I asked, “What parrot?”

“The one he sent me after, Billy. He told me to go up to the Hightown Market and buy the big parrot from the one-eyed bugger in the red and gold tent, and I did, and I’ve got the damn bird in the fo’c’sle, and it like to bit me nose off.”

“All right, Peter,” said I, “If he didn’t hear that himself I’ll be sure to tell him, you’ve my word on it.”

“Thank ye, Billy. I’ve no fancy to keep the bird myself.” He tipped his cap, and turned away.

Black Eddie and Doc Brewer had been standing in the cabin listening to this, and when Peter was gone and Doc was closing the cabin door, Black Eddie said, “A parrot?”

“I’ve no more of it than you, Eddie,” I said.

“Doctor,” Miss Melissa said, paying no attention to Eddie and myself, “the captain’s dead, and there’s no doubt of it, so it’s not your medical skills that we wanted. It’s necromancy, and you’re the man aboard that knows most of magicks, so I sent for you.”

“Dead?” Doc Brewer started, and turned to the bunk.

“Yes, he’s dead, damn him!” Miss Melissa snapped, with her hands on her hips and fire in her eye. A pretty thing, she was then.

“Miss Melissa...” Bernie started to say, but at a glare from her he thought better of it.

Doc Brewer wasn’t listening. He was inspecting Jack Dancy’s remains, poking at the neck with his fingers and muttering to himself.

“Whacked his head, he did,” he said. “Snapped the third cervical vertebra, and the severed edge went right through the spinal cord, by the look of it. He probably never felt a thing.”

That was some comfort to me, hearing that.

Doc muttered on for a moment, whilst the rest of us gradually lost interest in talking and got to watching and listening. Finally, Doc straightened up and said, “He may not even know he’s dead, it was so quick. If that’s the fact, then the chances are good that his ghost is still back where he died, trying to ascertain what’s happened to him. A witch might be able to locate the spirit and converse with it, but earthbound souls aren’t anything I can handle.”

Miss Melissa started to protest, but Doc Brewer held up a hand to silence her. “On the other hand,” he said, “Jack Dancy was a sharp man, and a realist, and he may have seen what happened and know he’s dead. In that case, there’s no telling what’s become of him, whether he’s earthbound or on to his final rest or somewhere in between. If he’s yet in limbo, I can bespeak him, and if he’s in hell, which I pray he’s not, for rogue that he was I liked the man and I thought well of him...well, if he’s in hell, I may be able to reach him but it’s not sure. If he’s gone to the reward of the blessed, alas, though he’ll be happy, we won’t, for if that’s the case he’s beyond all earthly concerns and can’t be reached by any means known to mortal man save direct divine intercession—and I’ve no knack for that, let me tell you! The Pope himself can’t rely on it!”

Hasty Bernie snorted. “Of course he can’t,” he said, “He’s an old fraud, no holier than I am, and his whole church...” He caught sight of our faces and stopped.

Black Eddie’s a Papist, of course, and we all knew it, and Hasty Bernie had no call to speak ill of the Bishop of Rome in front of Eddie that way, but his own faith had got the better of him for a moment.

We didn’t hold it against him, though, and Miss Melissa carried on, asking the doc, “So you might be able to reach him and ask him what his agreement with the governor was?”

Doc was puzzled by that. “The governor?”

Miss Melissa handed him the letter, and he read it.

“I don’t know,” he said, handing it back, “but I’ll see what I can do. I’d best prepare my spells—the sooner the better.”

We could none of us argue with that, so we stood politely as the doc left.

When the door closed behind him, Miss Melissa turned to me and said, “You were sayin’ that you can find the governor’s man, who might lead us to this Mistress Coyne?”

“Not I,” I replied, “but Jamie McPhee, as he handles errands like that for the captain.”

“Let’s get on with it, then,” she said. “Have him in here and get on with it!”

“Couldn’t we wait until the doctor...” Bernie began, but Miss Melissa cut him off with a glare.

“Now, Mr. Abernathy,” I said, “You heard what Doc Brewer told us; it’s as like as not he can’t contact the captain. And we’ve no time to waste in trying. Eddie, can ye call the lad?”

Black Eddie nodded and stepped out, and the rest of us stood about fiddling our thumbs, staring each at the other and thinking on what we should do.

3.

We had none of us come up with anything when Jamie arrived, of himself, without a sign of Black Eddie. We sent him to talk to the governor’s man and find out who this Mistress Coyne might be.

“ Why?” he asked.

Hasty Bernie started to say, “Well, lad, the Captain...”

Miss Melissa hushed him. “It’s not your concern, boy,” she said, “and we’ve no time to explain. You just go and ask, and come back here quick!”

He nodded, and hurried out.

We all looked after him as he left. Hasty Bernie remarked, “Collyport’s a rough place by night; I hope he’ll have no problems.”

“Ah, the lad knows the town,” I said, “There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Nothing to worry about!” Hasty Bernie shouted, glaring at me. “The Governor’s about to claim the ship, the captain’s dead, and not one of us even knows what’s happening, and you’d tell us not to worry?”

“Well,” I said, “and what good did worry ever do a man? There’s naught more to be done until we hear from the lad or Doc Brewer, is there? Then there’s nothing we can do, and no reason to worry!”

“An odd philosophy,” Hasty Bernie said.

“A fool’s philosophy,” Miss Melissa retorted. “How do we know there’s naught can be done? What if the doctor can’t reach the captain, nor the boy find this Mistress Coyne? Are we to give up the ship without a fight, and starve in the streets?”

“Oh, we’d not starve,” I said. “A man who’d sailed with Jack Dancy can surely find another berth! But I’d as soon keep the ship, I’ll agree with that.”

“Is it ours to keep, though?” Hasty Bernie asked, suddenly thoughtful. “Did the captain own it? Who are his heirs?”

“We are,” Miss Melissa snapped. “Who else could there be?”

“I thought his family,” Bernie began. “His children...”

“What family?” Miss Melissa shouted. “He swore he’d never married!”

“Nor did he,” I told her.

“Then what children?” she demanded triumphantly.

“Miss Melissa,” I said, “you must know better than that. By last count he knew of thirty-one, he told me this Sunday past, and he’s been the sole support of the seven whose mothers aren’t presently married. And there’s a sister back in Weymouth, the captain spoke of her often—she’s married to a chandler by the name of Wiggins, I understand.”

Her mouth fell open and she stared wide-eyed at me.

“I suppose that Mrs. Wiggins would be the heir of record,” Bernie said, “given the lack of a marriage. But did Captain Dancy truly own the ship himself, or did he have a backer?”

“Thirty-one?” Miss Melissa squeaked.

“Or thereabouts,” I told her. “You’ll understand, the captain often took the lass’s word, and I’ll not swear they were all of them entirely truthful. But then he may have missed a few, as well, so I’d judge as it might balance out.”

“Thirty-one bastards?” she shrieked at me.

“Or thereabouts,” I repeated.

She stared at me, and Hasty Bernie asked, “Do you think Mrs. Wiggins would know if there were a backer? I’ll need to send her a letter in any case, so I thought...”

“Who cares?” Miss Melissa screamed, turning to Bernie. “Who cares about any sister, or backer, or the thirty-one bleeding bastards that son of a bitch left? We’re the ones who have the ship, and I don’t intend to let the Governor or anybody else take it away! Call the men to their stations—we’ll take this ship out and sink anyone who tries to stop us!”

I looked at Bernie, but he was looking helplessly back at me. “Miss Melissa,” I said, “I don’t want to lose the Bonny Anne any more than you do, nor will we if we can help it, but there’s no need for all that, now. The doc’s trying to bespeak the captain, and Jamie’s gone to find us Mistress Coyne, and there’s still a fine hope that we’ll be able to keep the Governor’s pardon and the ship, safe here in Collyport. If ye must do something, you’d be better to see if you can think what the Captain promised the Governor, not sending the men to stations.”

“Well said, Mr. Jones,” Hasty Bernie said. “Though I still think that determining the ship’s rightful owner...”

“Can wait,” I said, interrupting him. “Whoever owns her surely won’t be wantin’ her forfeit to the Crown, and if we can hold her free we’ll be in a position to bargain when the time comes. First, though, we’ve to hold her free.”

“Aye,” Bernie admitted.

“And to do that, we’ve to know what the Governor wants.”

“Or to get out of Collyport,” Miss Melissa said.

“And go where?” I asked her, as sweetly as I could. “In a ship forfeit to the Crown, every English-speakin’ port will be closed to us as fast as the word can reach them—and every other port is already closed to the Bonny Anne!”

“All right, then,” she said, “What does the Governor want?”

“I’ve no idea,” I admitted, “But the Captain did, and he’d made arrangements, it seems.”

“What arrangements?” she asked.

“Well,” I told her, “Black Eddie was to have a freight wagon at the ship by midnight, and it’s there on the dock now. Peter Long was to fetch a particular parrot, and he’s got it in the fo’c’sle. It might be there are other things as well that I’ve not happened on yet.”

“A freight wagon?”

I nodded. I didn’t mention that we’d used it to fetch the captain’s corpse in.

“And a parrot?”

I nodded again.

There was a knock at the door.

We looked at one another, and then Miss Melissa called, “Come in!”

The door opened, and there was Black Eddie with a scrawny little ape of a man I’d never clapped eyes on before. Before Eddie could speak, the stranger barked at us, “If ye’d changed yer damned plans, ye might ’a’ had the courtesy to ha’ told me!”

“See here, man,” Hasty Bernie said, “Who are you talking to that way?”

“I’m talkin’ to you, ye pompous twit,” he sputtered, “You and yer damned captain, what told me to wait for ’is bloody signal that was due at midnight and he ain’t gimme yet! And there he is, sleepin’ off a bottle or two, ain’t he? Damned if I shouldn’t ’a’ known it. Bloody idiot. Bloody hell!”

He turned and would have stamped away, save that Black Eddie was in his way, which gave Miss Melissa time to ask, “What signal?”

The stranger turned back and squinted at her, then snapped, “A red light on the mizzen. Didn’t the damned fool tell ye?”

She shook her head, and Bernie and I just stood there.

The little man looked over at the captain’s mortal remains and snorted. “Reckon he passed out before he got that far. Well, then, d’ye want me to fire that warehouse, or don’t ye?”

Bernie and I looked at each other. Miss Melissa started to ask, “What warehouse?” but I tapped her shoulder before she’d got a good start on the second word, and she hushed up nicely.

“We’re runnin’ a little late tonight,” I said. “As ye said yourself, the captain’s been no help to us.” I looked at Bernie.

“Aye, if you could bear with us yet for awhile, we’d appreciate it,” he said.

The little man looked us all over and was about to snort again when I said, “Listen, man, you go back to your post and gi’ us ten more minutes beyond. If the red light’s not up by then, belay the whole job and go home to your bed with our blessings. There’s an extra silver guinea for your trouble. Fair enough?” I fished the coin from me purse and held it up. Didn’t leave me much, but he didn’t look the sort to settle for a shilling.

He squinted again, then said, “Fair enough. Hand it over.”

I obliged him, and he tucked the guinea away, and Black Eddie led him back to the rail.

Miss Melissa watched him over the side, then slammed the door and spun on us.

“What in hell was that about?” she asked.

Hasty Bernie shrugged.

“Seems to me,” I said, “as the captain had a diversion planned. A big one. And I’ll wager I know what warehouse it is, too, as Jack Dancy was always a man to get the most for his efforts.”

Bernie blinked. Miss Melissa stared at me for a moment, and then a smile spread across her face.

“Sanchez?” she asked.

I nodded. “He’s out to sea now, but he’s got a good lot of his booty tucked away where he didn’t figure it to be shot up if he meets an unfriendly ship. Wasn’t worth our while doin’ a thing to it in the ordinary course, but if it’s a diversion we need anyway, why, there ’tis ready to go.”

“But what do we need a diversion for?” Bernie asked, his face troubled.

“I don’t know,” I said, “But we have ten minutes to decide whether we need one at all.”

“If Jack arranged it, we’ll probably need it,” Miss Melissa said, and I had to agree that that was generally true.

“There’s a freight wagon,” I said. “And this letter from the Governor, and visits to Mistress Coyne, and now a fire to be set as a diversion just as the freight wagon was to be here.”

“And a parrot,” Bernie added.

“And a bloody damn parrot,” I agreed. “With all that, then, does either of you have any notion of just what might be goin’ on?”

They looked at each other, and then back at me.

“No,” Bernie said.

“Seems to me,” I said slowly, “that a diversion over at the warehouse is meant to draw attention away from the ship. If it were a diversion elsewhere that the captain wanted, he could have made it himself ready enough right here, or any number of ways.”

“If it really is a diversion,” Miss Melissa suggested.

I considered that, while Bernie protested, “Captain Dancy wouldn’t burn down that warehouse just for spite! And why on a signal from the ship, if he just wanted it done?”

“Maybe not a diversion,” I said, “so much as cover. Now, the captain must have planned on being here aboard ship at midnight, so as to give the signal, and to do whatever was to be done with the freight wagon. Suppose that you’re aboard your ship, and you see a fire over there on the great wharf—what do you do?”

“I put out to sea, of course,” Bernie said. “To get clear of sparks.”

“D’ye think, then, that Jack was going to run?” Miss Melissa asked. “He was no coward!”

I shook my head. “No, not Jack Dancy. He wouldn’t ha’ run from Governor Lee, nor from the Armistead Castle, nor from the devils of Hell. Nor would he give up Collyport so easy. So if he’d knowed what the Governor was on about in that letter, and that this was the night he had to deliver, he’d ha’ done his damnedest to deliver. So he planned on doing it from the sea, somehow.”

“What about the wagon?” Bernie asked. “Maybe he figured on sending the ship to sea, so that everyone would think he was gone, and all the while he’d be about his business with the wagon.”

“No, Mr. Abernathy,” I said, “for then he’d want the Bonny Anne’s departure noted, and he’d ’a’ had us sail out in broad daylight, not put out at midnight to escape a fire. No, the fire’s to give us a reason for leaving harbor at night, I’m sure of it.”

I had an idea, then, of where the captain might have had in mind to go, but I didn’t know the why of it yet at all.

There’d be no point in leaving at midnight if we were to be bound for another island; we couldn’t reach another that night, and if we’d a need to reach another at a particular time it would be easier to make the time right along the way than by sailing out in the dark—even in a harbor we knew as well as that one, sailing out at night is a bit of a risk.

So we were going somewhere else on Collins Island, somewhere that was best reached by sea, and where he didn’t want us to be seen, and where we would have been seen if we’d sailed there by day, and somewhere that wasn’t close enough to row there easy in the ship’s launch.

I knew what that meant, plain enough. The captain had meant to sail around to the caves.

But why?

If he’d meant to meet with someone there, then we were bound to miss it entirely, as it was more than an hour after midnight and we hadn’t even got most of the crew aboard, as far as I knew.

But then, if someone was waiting in the caves for us, he weren’t about to go much of anywhere in any hurry, as the cliffs above and to the sides were a mighty rough climb, and the cliff below led nowhere but the sea.

There was the other end of the cave, of course, but there weren’t many as knew about that.

All the same, if we were to have met someone there, he might be there yet by the time we could reach him, or he might not, and I’d have been much happier if I’d have known just what to expect.

I wished as Jamie McPhee would hurry back.

Someone knocked at the door, and I thought as my wish had been granted, but then Black Eddie called from without, “It’s been nigh on ten minutes.”

“Aye,” I said, and then I called, “Send up the signal! And prepare for sea!” Boldness, Captain Dancy used to tell me, boldness will win sooner than wit.

“What?” Miss Melissa shrieked at me, and I looked at her quite reproachful, as it hurt my ear.

“Mr. Jones,” Bernie said, “Billy, do you know just what you’re doing?”

“Not entirely,” I confessed, “But I have a fair to middlin’ idea.”

“What about Jamie?” Miss Melissa asked, still shouting, but not half as loud.

“I’ll send a man to fetch him,” Bernie said.

“I’d not waste the time,” I said. “Beggin’ your pardon, Mr. Abernathy. But what you might do is put a boat over, and leave it by the dock with a couple of men aboard, to row the lad out to us when he arrives.”

Bernie stared at me thoughtful for a moment, then nodded, and he left the cabin to see to it.

That left me, and Miss Melissa, and the corpse, and when I realized I was the only living man there with her my tongue dried out and of a sudden I found nothing to say.

She hadn’t the same problem, though.

“And who do you think you are, Billy Jones, to be ordering about Mr. Abernathy and doing what you please?”

“I’m second mate of this ship, Miss Melissa,” I answered her, “And I’m just doin’ what I can to see us all safe, now that the captain’s not here to do it.”

She looked me in the eye for a moment, and I didn’t blink. Then she turned away and looked at the captain’s body and whispered, “Damn you, Jack Dancy!”

Then she turned again and marched out.

4.

Icovered up the captain and tried to make him look natural, just in case someone should chance to look in, and as I was about to go up on deck there was old Wheeler coming in, about to whine about somewhat or the other, and thinking quick I held up a finger to hush him.

“The Captain’s bad tonight,” I told him. “Don’t you touch him, unless you want to kiss the gratings tomorrow!”

Wheeler nodded, and went about his business, throwing a glance over his shoulder every so oft, but not going near the corpse.

I just hoped the captain wouldn’t start to stink too soon. Maybe Doc Brewer could do something about that.

Then I went up, and at first I thought that dawn was breaking and we’d wasted the whole night, but then I saw as this light was orange, and not the pink of dawn at all, and I realized as it was the warehouse on fire.

Around us, other ships were casting off, their crews running about and shouting. I could see the Armistead Castle spreading canvas already— she had a good crew, that ship.

And there aboard the Bonny Anne about me were the men and boys hanging in the rigging and watching the fire, and chattering amongst themselves like so many gulls, and the ship still at the dock!

I looked about and saw Hasty Bernie on the quarterdeck, staring up the streets of Collyport, and I was as angry with him as I’d ever been. “Hey!” I called. “You bloody damn fools, that’s a fire over there, and there’ll be sparks in the air, and our sails could catch! Cast off! Get us out to sea!”

I saw Peter Long throw a look at Hasty Bernie, but Bernie just nodded, and a moment later we were making way, pulling away from Collyport on the westerly airs.

I saw that at least Bernie had put down a boat, with Black Eddie in it, lest Jamie should happen along. And I saw that those other ships were putting out, as well—the Bonny Anne would be second or third out of the harbor, behind the Armistead Castle and maybe a merchantman off to starboard.

And the sparks were blowing in the wind and coming after us, and I didn’t like it at all, and as I called the orders to work the sails I made sure to send a boy below for buckets and lines. It was just like the captain, to have come up with a diversion that could burn the ship!

It was only when we were safe out at sea that I took the time to think about anything but getting the Bonny Anne clear, and looked about.

There was Bernie on the quarterdeck—as I was myself, I noticed, having come up and taken the wheel without thinking about it. Miss Melissa was beside Hasty Bernie, and the two of them were arguing in whispers—I didn’t trouble myself about just why, as yet. The rest of the crew, those as were aboard, were going about their business as they should, despite it being the middle of the night and near as black as the Sorcerer’s soul.

Now it seemed to me as the time had come to decide what to do. The captain’s plan called for sailing around the island to the caves, I was sure, but did we really want to do that?

Well, I supposed we did, as why else were we at sea?

I looked over at Mr. Abernathy and the captain’s lady and decided that I’d best not bother them about it, as it would only mean more argument. I turned the wheel and put her on the starboard tack.

She was turning sweetly when I heard a hail from the masthead.

Our boat was coming out from the harbor, with Jamie McPhee and Black Eddie and, the lookout swore, a woman in the bow.

“Heave to,” I called, “and bring ’em aboard!”

The men went to it with a will, and that boat seemed to skim right up to us in a mighty pretty piece of rowing, so it wasn’t but a few minutes before we had the boat up out of the water and Jamie and Eddie and the woman on the halfdeck.

And sure enough they had a woman with them, a tall, comely thing, with red hair free to her waist and wearing a red and gold gown to go with it. She had a wide-brimmed red velvet hat on her head, with a veil all around, and white gloves to her hands, which seemed a little more than was purely necessary for the weather.

I called the orders to get us under way again whilst Jamie and Eddie brought her up to the quarterdeck. They took her over to Hasty Bernie, as he was the senior officer aboard, but I caught Eddie’s eye and gestured for him to take the wheel.

“We’re bound for the caves,” I whispered to him. “Fast as we can get there without riskin’ the rocks.”

He nodded and grabbed the spokes, and I slipped over toward the others.

“Mr. Abernathy,” Jamie was saying, “This is Mistress Annabelle Coyne.”

Hasty Bernie took her hand and bowed, and smiled his best formal smile, and then stood there staring at her and looking stupid. ’Twas plain to me that the poor man had no idea what to do. I thought back on the watchbill and realized that he’d most likely been without sleep for nigh onto thirty hours, while I hadn’t missed but an hour or two’s sleep as yet, so I stepped forward.

I smiled and tipped my hat, once I remembered I was wearing it, as it happens I was, and said, “I’m Billy Jones, Mistress Coyne. Welcome aboard the Bonny Anne.”

I could see Miss Melissa out of the corner of my eye, and she looked somewhat put out, both with Bernie and myself, but I didn’t worry about that as yet.

“Thank you, Mr. Jones,” said Mistress Coyne.

“My apologies, Mistress Coyne,” Bernie said, “It seems I need Mr. Jones to remind me of my manners. Welcome, indeed, and thank you for coming.”

Miss Melissa glared at Bernie, and I knew that Mistress Coyne saw it; wasn’t no love lost between those two women, be sure of that!

“Thank you, Mr. Abernathy,” she said. “But I must confess, I’m not sure why I am here.”

Bernie blinked at that, and he and I both looked at Jamie.

“She wouldn’t say a thing to me,” Jamie blurted out. “So’s I brought her.”

“Ah,” Bernie said.

Miss Melissa suggested, “Jamie, tell us what happened.”

He glanced about, but there wasn’t any there as didn’t want him to speak, so he spoke. “Well, you sent me to talk to a man I know and ask as to who Mistress Coyne was, and I did that, and he told me as he didn’t know a thing about her, save where she lived and what she looked like, and that she was at the governor’s palace every so often, and that the governor was at her place on occasion, and as the two of them sent notes back and forth. And I figured as that probably wasn’t all you’d wanted me to find out, so I asked for more, and he swore as how that was all he knew, but he could show me her place, and I said as I’d be pleased if he did, so he did, and there she was, and I was looking in the door—it’s a little tea-room that she runs. Anyway, I was looking in the door, and she saw me and asked me what I wanted, and I didn’t know as what I should say, and she asked who I was, and I told her, and she asked as who sent me, and I said that I was from the Bonny Anne, and she asked as whether Captain Dancy had wanted something of her, and I allowed as how I hadn’t any idea, and then she asked if the ship was in port, and I said of course it was or I wouldn’t be there, and next thing I knew she was coming with me back to the ship to see what was happening, and here we are.”

He stopped as if the words had run out sooner than he’d expected, and had surprised him in doing it, and he sort of blinked at us in confusion.

“Thank you, lad,” Bernie said. He turned to Mistress Coyne and asked, “It seems to me, mistress, that you came here of your own will, and that you know why better than we.”

“I’ll tell you what I know, Mr. Abernathy,” she replied tartly. “I know that Captain Dancy had told me his ship would be leaving port at midnight, and here it is after that when a boy turns up at my shop saying that the Bonny Anne is still in port, and with a tale of being sent to find out who I am, when Jack Dancy has known me well these several months past. So I came to see what’s become of the captain. I’d hoped to see him here on his own quarterdeck, and instead I find you in command. Could you tell me why?”

Bernie harrumphed—did a fine job of it, too, rocking back on his heels. “Well, mistress,” he said, “As it happens, the captain is indisposed. Very much so, I’m afraid. Our ship’s doctor, Emmanuel Brewer, is tending to him now.”

Mistress Coyne said, in a very quiet voice, “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“So were we,” Bernie replied. “And after he was taken ill, we had word from Governor Lee that he was concerned over some agreement he had made with the captain. The message was not at all clear, I fear, but it did let us know that the Governor took the matter, whatever it is, very seriously. Being loyal subjects of the Crown, we wanted to do our best to carry on despite the captain’s temporary inconvenience—but I’m afraid the captain had neglected to inform any of us of just what it was the Governor wanted. However, your name was mentioned in the Governor’s message, so we thought perhaps you could shed a little light on the situation.”

“I see,” said Mistress Coyne. I looked away for a moment to judge our position—the cliffs to port loomed up black and appeared a good bit closer than I really cared to see them.

When I looked back Mistress Coyne was lifting her veil, and the light from the mizzen lantern caught her face full. I swallowed and tried not to stare.

It was plain to me in that instant why she had worn a veil; a face like that isn’t to be risked parading openly through the streets of Collyport at night.

“Jack Dancy didn’t tell you anything?” she asked.

We all shook our heads—Bernie, Miss Melissa, myself, even Jamie.

“Jamie, run along and get some sleep,” I said, now that I’d recalled he was there.

The others turned to stare as Jamie started a protest, and when he met all those eyes he thought better of arguing. He shuffled away, disappointed.

“You’ve not mutinied, have you?” Mistress Coyne asked, once Jamie was clear.

Bernie and I were honestly shocked, but I saw as how she could think it might be. We both spoke at once, but I think we made it plain we’d done no such a thing.

Mistress Coyne looked about, and asked, “Where are we? Where are you taking me?”

Bernie started to say something about how it wasn’t her concern, but I spoke up and said, “We’re bound to a place we know of around the other side of the island. The captain told us that much, though we were late on gettin’ a start.”

“Do you know what you’re to do there?”

“No.”

She nodded. “I see.” She studied us, and then looked Miss Melissa straight in the eye and asked, “And who might you be?”

Miss Melissa took a deep, angry breath and turned red as a boiled lobster. Bernie spoke up before she could shout, though.

“This is Mistress Melissa Dewhurst, a good friend of Captain Dancy and aboard the Bonny Anne at the captain’s personal invitation.”

“I’m delighted to meet you, Mistress Dewhurst,” Mistress Coyne said with a nod, “but I fear that you must be bored by all this chatter?”

Miss Melissa drew another breath, but this time ’twas myself who stopped her.

“Miss Melissa,” I said, “I’d take it as a great favor if you would go below and see whether there’s been any change in the captain’s condition.” And I pointed to the cabin skylight.

She nodded, and gave Mistress Coyne a look such as I hope I never receive from any woman, and then marched off the quarterdeck.

Once she was gone I kept an eye on the cabin skylight, lest Miss Melissa be clumsy in opening it to hear, while Bernie asked, “Now, Mistress Coyne, if you don’t mind, is there anything you can tell us?”

She looked about dubiously, and saw that the only people on the quarterdeck were herself, and Bernie, and me, and Black Eddie at the wheel. She could hardly expect the helmsman to leave his post, and Bernie and I were the captain’s two senior officers and two of his closest friends. None of the men in the rigging were close to hand.

“I don’t know the details of Captain Dancy’s plan,” she said, “but I do know what Governor Lee wants of him. He’s to remove Madame Lee.”

Bernie looked puzzled. “Remove Madame Lee?” he repeated.

Mistress Coyne nodded.

“Remove how?”

“Alive.”

That was some relief, in any case; I’d no particular desire to kill a woman, and besides, it hardly made sense to hire a man like Jack Dancy as a mere assassin. There’s many a simpler way for a man to kill his own wife, should he care to.

There’d been that fellow on Pennington’s Cay, for one—but no, that wasn’t all that much simpler at that, and not relevant to the present case.

I tried to recall what I’d heard of Madame Lee.

The Governor had brought her back from another island five years before, and had held a wedding that was still the subject of many a barroom tale or boast, though there wasn’t but two people actually killed that day, and at least one of them clearly deserved it. I’d no idea what her maiden name might have been, or which island she’d come from, nor for that matter of much else about her. I’d never laid eyes on her, nor had any man I knew of, not to swear to. I knew precious little about her, if the truth be known.

There were rumors, of course, but I’d not put faith in rumors, after some as I’d heard where I knew the truth of the matter. Why, the rumors would have it that Jack Dancy...well, they lied, and enough of that.

But as to the discussion we were having with Mistress Coyne, the next word spoken came from Mr. Abernathy.

“Why?” Bernie asked, and in my heart I cursed the man for a fool. Hadn’t he heard what Jamie had said? Hadn’t he seen Mistress Coyne’s face? It was as plain to me as I might want that the Governor had it in mind to keep company with Mistress Coyne, and for that sort of entertainment the presence of a previous wife can hamper one a mite.

“Why alive, do you mean?” Mistress Coyne asked, and I realized perhaps Bernie wasn’t the fool I thought, as it was a sound question. As I said, there’s many a simpler way for a man to kill his own wife, and in particular when the man is the governor and chief magistrate of a crown colony, and none’s to argue if he says his wife fell from a cliff and wasn’t pushed, or that the meal she died of was rotten but not poisoned.

But then I saw Bernie’s face, and knew that he was a fool. He started to say, “No, I meant—” but I cut him off.

“Aye,” I said, “It seems to me as that’s a sound question.”

“Well, because...well, there are reasons that...” She stopped, cross with herself, and started over. “I don’t know for certain why the Governor wants her taken alive, but I do know something about her that might have something to do with it.”

I nodded, “And what might that be?”

Mistress Coyne grimaced. She said, “Madame Lee is a witch.”

5.

Hasty Bernie and I looked at each other, and we each saw the dismay in the other’s eyes.

We had both battled the Black Sorcerer with Jack Dancy. We were both beside him when he fought the devil-kites at Bethmoora, and when the night thing came aboard in Dunvegan Sound. Bernie was there when he outwitted the Pundit of Oul. I was there when he sweet-talked the ship and the lives of a dozen men, myself among them, away from the Caliburn Witch. We’d both seen Doc Brewer work a few little spells, and even those could be enough to terrify any sane man. And we’d both seen enough of other magic to know that neither of us cared to see more.

The prospect of kidnapping a witch was not exactly one that cheered the either of us.

And here we were with little choice, when it came right down to bottom, but to do that very thing. In fact, we were already asail toward the caves, and I knew now why. It wasn’t to meet anyone, there was no rendezvous we’d missed; it was because through the caves we could get into the Governor’s Palace and catch Madame Lee and bring her out the same way without being seen and without stumbling across the palace guards, as we might have done by any other route.

That is, unless the captain had been planning something complicated, as he might have been, but as we had no way of knowing.

I thought about it for a moment.

The warehouse fire was to get us out to sea without arousing suspicion—and so as to provide an alibi, as well, for later on, should anyone be looking into the matter of Madame Lee’s disappearance, Jack Dancy could swear that he and his ship weren’t even in the harbor at the time, so how could he be involved?

And Mistress Coyne and the Governor’s letter fit in, as well—I judged that Mistress Coyne and Governor Lee had got a mite impatient with the impediments they’d been encountering and wanted the captain to get on with it.

After all, if Governor Lee had made his arrangements with the captain three years ago...

The patience of the man would fair qualify him for sainthood, if that were the truth of it, but thinking it over I saw as it wasn’t likely that the whole plan had been made that long ago. Not many’s the man that keeps the same mistress and the same wife so long as that. Besides, the governor had only been married two years at that point, which seems a tad hasty in tiring of a wife. No, my guess was that the governor’s agreement with the captain was merely that at some time the governor would set the captain a task to discharge his debt, and that this was the task he’d come up with.

And a task worthy of Jack Dancy’s talents it was, too, kidnapping a witch. Even he hadn’t attempted it before.

I wished Jack Dancy were still alive to do it.

So the fire was accounted for, and the letter—but how did the freight wagon fit in? And the parrot?

Had we taken the wagon on board or left it on the dock? I couldn’t for the life of me recall just at that moment, though I didn’t recollect any order to bring it aboard, nor seeing it anywhere but the dock. I hoped it didn’t matter, but I feared it did. Seeing as the captain had said the wagon was to be there at midnight, and as the fire was to be set near about midnight, I judged as we should already have done something with that damned wagon, either taken it aboard or done something with it back at the dock.

“Beggin’ your pardon, Mistress Coyne,” I asked, “but would you have any notion as to what use a freight wagon might be in this little enterprise we’re attemptin’?”

She considered that for a moment, and then said, “No.”

“I feared as much,” I told her. “What about a parrot?”

She looked at me as if I were daft and asked, “What about a parrot?”

“Ah,” I said. “Never you mind.” It was plain that the captain hadn’t told her any more than he had us, as to the exact details.

There wasn’t much more to be done on deck until we reached the caves, so Bernie and I made some polite chitchat with Mistress Coyne for a moment, and then I slipped away to see just what might be happening elsewhere aboard the Bonny Anne.

First off, I saw as the freight wagon wasn’t aboard. We’d left it sitting plain on the dock.

I looked into the fo’c’sle, to see the parrot for myself. There it was, on Peter Long’s hammock, giving me the beady eye. I called to it, but it wouldn’t say a word.

Next I betook myself down to the surgery, where Doc Brewer was sitting cross-legged, naked to the waist and painted like a savage, with black candles burning and a great clutter of skulls and suchlike about him.

He looked up when I came in, and his face was red and puffy, and the sweat was rolling down his chest like rainwater running down the masts. “Hello, Billy,” he said.

“I’m not interruptin’, am I?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No,” he said, “It’s of no use. I can’t find a trace of him.” He got to his feet and leaned against a bulkhead. “It’s wearying, it is, calling like that.”

I nodded, and tried to think of something sympathetic to say, but before the words came he asked me, “Where are we bound, Billy? I feel the ship moving. Did you find out what the captain was up to?”

“In a manner of speaking,” I admitted. I took a moment to gather my nerve, and then I asked him, “Tell me, could you be handlin’ a witch, if we took one prisoner?”

He blinked. “A witch, you say? Are we to capture a witch?”

I nodded. “That we are.”

He turned and poked at a canvas bag that hung on the bulkhead. “That would explain this, I suppose.”

“Would it, now?” I asked. “And what might that be?”

“Oh, the hide of a salamander, and the bones of an eel, and a variety of other things. The captain told me the day before yesterday to find what I’d need for making a geas, the strongest I knew how. I suppose he meant for me to put a geas on her not to harm us, or some such a requirement.”

“And you have it all?” I asked. A thought struck me. “You wouldn’t need a parrot, would you?”

“A parrot?” He stared at me. “I’ve no use for a parrot, not for this spell nor any other I know.

“Oh, well,” I said, “I was just askin’. So, do you have what you need for this geas, then?”

“Oh, of course,” he said, “Save for the hair of the victim.”

“Well,” I said, “I don’t suppose ’twill be any great feat to cut a lock of her hair for you. How long will it take, once you’ve the hair?”

He pursed his lips and considered that, and I commenced to worry, as I had hoped he’d be telling me ’twould be no time at all. Instead he said, “Well, it would depend on just when I began, but four to six hours, most likely.”

“Ah,” said I, thinking about what it would be like trying to hold an angry witch prisoner for six hours, with no magic against her. I wondered what the captain had planned—had he gotten a hank of Madame Lee’s hair, somehow, that Doc Brewer should have already had?

I thought he might, at that. I told Doc to get ready to start his spell and then I went back up on deck.

Peter Long met me there and asked, “Mr. Jones, what’s to be done with that blasted parrot?”

“Hold onto it,” I told him. “We’ll no doubt know soon enough.” Then I went on to the quarterdeck. Hasty Bernie and Annabelle Coyne were still talking.

“Mistress Coyne,” I asked, “did the captain, by any chance, mention anything to you about Madame Lee’s hair?”

She stared at me. “Now how did you know about that, Mr. Jones?” she asked lightly.

“About what, Mistress?” Bernie asked.

“About the hair. I fetched him a handful of hair, taken from Madame Lee’s brush—I don’t know why. I guessed he was planning to have a wig made for some part of his deceptions.”

“And what became of that hair?” I asked.

“Oh, I haven’t the faintest notion,” she replied. “I gave it to Captain Dancy yesterday.”

I closed my teeth hard to hold back a curse. “Mr. Abernathy,” I said, “I’m going below, to take a look at the captain’s condition.”

“Very good, Mr. Jones,” Bernie said.

The moment I stepped through the cabin door Miss Melissa demanded, “What’s this about that woman’s hair?” She stepped down from the stool under the skylight and glared at me.

“Doc Brewer needs it for a spell,” I told her. “To put Madame Lee under a geas.”

“Oh,” she said.

“It’s most likely somewhere in this cabin,” I said.

“Do you think old Wheeler would know?” she asked.

That hadn’t occurred to me to wonder, and I allowed as how it hadn’t. She went and rousted the old man from his hammock, whilst I began opening cabinets and drawers.

Jack Dancy’s old servant wasn’t at his best just then, roused in the middle of the night, but at last we managed to explain that we were looking for a hank of a lady’s hair that the captain had probably hidden somewhere. I hadn’t found anything of the sort in my search—though some of the items I had found stirred my curiosity a tad. Whatever did the captain need with a playbill for an opera in Southampton? Or a shell carved to the shape of a herring? And where did he get some of those pictures?

Of course, I recognized a few of his souvenirs, like the tip off the narwhal’s tooth, and the green pendant he’d got from Madame Kent after Cushgar Corners.

Well, wasn’t none of that important just then.

“A lady’s hair?” Wheeler asked, and we both nodded, and Miss Melissa shouted at him a little.

He paid her no mind; instead he crossed to a cabinet I hadn’t tried yet, and reached around the side, and opened the cabinet door, and then reached in to the hinge and opened that same door again—the door was made in two layers that folded out.

And between those two layers were pinned a hundred locks of hair, each one tied in a ribbon.

And weren’t none of them labeled or tagged.

6.

Istared at those damned locks of hair for a moment, and then I said words that I’d never have said in the presence of Miss Melissa had I remembered she was there. She said some of the same sort herself, though.

A thought struck me, then. Those hundred hanks were all the colors in which one might expect a lady’s hair to be found, from ash to black with a bit of a side-trip out to red along the way. I’ve known men as would only take a blonde lassie, or a redhead, but never let it be said that Jack Dancy put any such arbitrary limits upon his interests.

“And what color, then,” I asked, “would Madame Lee’s hair be?”

There wasn’t a soul there who could answer, so I betook myself back to the quarterdeck and put the same question to Mistress Coyne.

“Brown,” she told me. “A middling brown.”

And wouldn’t you know that full forty of those lovelocks were of a middling brown?

Naturally, Madame Lee wasn’t one of the four redheads, nor the lone ash blonde.

And then we were anchored below the caves, and I saw the night was growing old, and there wasn’t more time to worry about it. If we were to spirit Madame Lee from the palace before her maids were up and about, we’d to do it right soon.

I gathered up a few things I thought might be of use, and then I stood on the quarterdeck with Bernie whilst the call went round for volunteers for a shore party, and the men began to gather on the halfdeck, and Hastings Abernathy and I eyed each other a bit, each hoping the other would speak first.

Hasty Bernie was the senior, though, so it was his place, and at last he sighed and said, “One of us must go ashore, Mr. Jones, and the other keep the ship.”

“Aye, sir,” said I, not letting a thing show.

“I don’t see,” he said, “as there’s any necessity as to which of us takes which post.”

“No, sir,” I said. “Nor do I.”

“D’you want to lead the shore party, then?”

“’Tis your decision, sir.”

“Do it, then. As senior, my first responsibility is the ship. And besides...”

He didn’t finish the sentence, but then I don’t suppose he had to. We both knew as I was better at this sort of affair. Hasty Bernie was twice the seaman I was, and a finer hand with the sextant and chart than ever our poor dead captain could have hoped to be, but he weren’t quite as fond of improvisation, nor as quick with a cutlass, as I was.

So I was glad of the duty because I thought I’d a better chance of pulling it off—but at the same time, I reckoned that chance to be pretty pissing poor, and I’d have been fair relieved if Bernie had taken it upon himself.

I went to the rail and looked over the men I’d be leading. There was Peter Long, and Black Eddie, and Ez Carter, and Goodman Richard—I’d no complaints about who was there and who wasn’t, save that Doc Brewer might come in handy.

He was nowhere to be seen, though, and I decided against sending for him. Instead I made a little speech.

“All right, boys,” said I, “the Captain’s gone and gotten us into another one, and we’ll just have to get ourselves out. I’ll tell you what it’s about on the way, not that I know meself.”

And then we were climbing up the ropes to the cave mouth, and I was trying to think if there was anything more I should have brought, besides the lantern, and matches, and the cutlass, and the brace of pistols, and the powder and shot, and the dagger, and the sack of biscuit, and the flask of rum, and the fifty feet of line, and the cosh in my pocket.

A little gold might have been nice, in case any bribery were called for. I had three shillings in my purse, and that was all.

Well, it didn’t seem worth going back for.

The caves were dark as the Dungeon Pits on Little Hengist until I got the lantern going. Then I had to remember the route without the Captain leading the way, which took me a little bit of a moment.

I managed it, though, with only the one wrong turning, and despite what he said to me between oaths I swear that Black Eddie’s foot was still a good ten feet from the brink of the pit when I realized we’d have done better to have turned left than right at the big pillar.

We came out in the palace wine cellar and stopped to catch our breath and look the matter over.

“Well, now,” I said. “Here we are in the palace, and ahead is the stair to the kitchens, and from there we’re to find Madame Lee. Being the hour that it is, I’m thinking she’ll be in her chamber. Now, where would that be?”

Black Eddie and Peter and the others stared at me like as if I’d just ordered them hanged.

“Don’t you know?” Peter asked.

“There’s no need to be takin’ that tone with me, Peter Long,” I told him. “No, the fact is I don’t know. How would I? Nor would any man aboard the ship, for that matter.”

“Any man, no,” Good Richard pointed out, “but what about the women? Or Jamie?”

I didn’t think Miss Melissa knew even as much as I did, but I saw as how he could have a point where Jamie McPhee and Mistress Coyne were considered.

“Well, it’s too late now,” I said. “We’re here and they’re not and we’ve to make the best of it. Be ready, but no pistols—we don’t want to rouse the whole palace. Come on, then.”

I drew my cutlass and led them up the stairs with the blade naked before me, and the four of them followed at my heel with their own swords out.

At the top we gathered tight together whilst I worked the latch, and then the door opened and we all tumbled out into the kitchens, blades at the ready.

There were two people there, a man and a girl, and I judged them to be the palace baker and either his assistant or a scullery girl. Ez and Peter ran up to them and had steel at their throats in a trice.

I put down my lantern, but kept my sword ready as I walked over, a bit more leisurely than Ez and Peter had. I tried to behave as if I burst into places like this an hour before dawn, taking prisoners, as a regular thing.

“Tell us truth and no harm will come to you,” I said.

They said not a word, but just cowered there, mouths agape. I took it for acceptance.

“Where is Madame Lee’s chamber, then, and how do we get there from here?” I demanded.

The baker, if such he was, looked at me with even greater astonishment, but the scullery girl piped up, “It’s in the north wing. You cross the hall to the stairs, go up two flights, and around, and then down the corridor to the right, and it’s the last door on the right.”

A fine girl, that—would blab anything to anyone. “Thank you, lass,” I said, and then I looked the situation over and felt some misdoubt about it.

If we left these two free, they might raise the alarm. If we bound them, they might be found—and besides, I thought we might need all the rope we had for other uses.

“Eddie,” I said, “You stay here and watch these two, and make sure neither of them tells a soul we’re about.”

Eddie opened his mouth to say something, most probably to protest being asked this, but then he took another look at the girl and changed his mind. “Aye aye, Billy,” he said.

“Good, then. You others, come along, and try to be quiet about it.”

With that, I led them along the course the lass had described.

We crossed the hall and found the stairs, climbed the stairs and found the corridor, and then we stopped, for the wench hadn’t mentioned that a guard was posted outside the door of Madame Lee’s chamber.

And what was worse, he saw us before we saw him.

I was wavering there between giving it all up as a botch and fleeing back down the stairs, or charging ahead, since we did outnumber him four to one and perhaps if we were quick we could convince him not to rouse the palace, when he called in a loud whisper, “There you are! My Lord, you’re two hours late!”

I blinked at him, and then grinned, and I led the lads down the passage. I saw Ez Carter sheathe his sword, but the rest of us kept ours ready.

“Hurry up,” the guard hissed, “My relief is due soon, and nobody bribed him.”

We scurried up to the door beside him, and none of us had said a word yet.

“What kept you?” he asked me. “And where’s your captain?”

“The Captain had a bit of a mishap,” I said. “A whack on the head. He’s in his bunk aboard ship.”

“Is he all right, then?”

“Oh, as right as he’ll ever be,” said I, which was true after a fashion.

He nodded, and then he took a glance at a window at the end of the corridor, which I had not until that moment noticed. “The wagon’s ready?” he asked.

“Um,” said I, and I heard Ez Carter swearing under his breath.

The guard insisted, “Is the wagon below the window there, ready to catch her?”

“Well, no,” I admitted. “If the truth be known, it’s not. We had a little mishap—the same one as hit the captain on the head, do you see.”

At the least, I thought, now I knew what the wagon had been intended for.

The sentry looked disconcerted, as if he’d just seen a tax collector smile, but before he could say anything more the bedchamber door opened and a woman’s head thrust out, long hair hanging free, not decently put up.

“What’re the lot of you doing here whispering outside my door at this hour?” she said.

Good was the first of us to react. He dropped his sword and grabbed for her, and caught her round the neck with one arm and pulled her out into the hallway. She was a tall wench, and thin, with hair the color of mahogany, and I thought me I knew the face from somewhere. She wore a black nightdress trimmed with lace, a pretty thing, and clearly not meant to be seen in public. When Good Richard laid hold of her her arms flew up to either side, and she made a noise like a spitting cat.

And Goodman Richard shriveled down away from her, and was turned into a toad, right before our eyes.

Whilst the rest of us were still staring, Ez Carter caught her across the back of her head with a belaying pin he’d had in his belt, and witch or no witch, she went down in a heap.

“That’s her?” I asked the guard.

He nodded, staring.

I had me a thought, wagon or no wagon. I took a quick few steps to the window at the end of the passageway and looked out.

I could see all of Collyport from there, spread out before me, and the harbor beyond. The warehouse fire had died down some, but still glowed orange. All the same, I could see that some of the ships had put back into port; the Armistead Castle was back at her berth, but I couldn’t put names to the others.

I looked down, then, to where a wagon might have waited, if we’d have had one.

Sure enough, there was a road down there—but it was a hundred feet down, and the wall was sheer stone.

The captain might have planned to take Madame Lee out that way, but I wasn’t about to try it. I’d brought rope, but not enough, and I hadn’t brought any tackle to secure it. Nor did I know where the road went, and men on foot, carrying a woman, would be slower and more likely to attract notice than a freight wagon would have been.

We’d have to go back out the way we came—for one thing, aside from the rest, we’d left Black Eddie in the kitchen. I turned back.

“Come on, then, this way,” I called to the others, snatching up the toad and tucking it in my pocket with one hand while my other retrieved Good’s cutlass. “Pick her up between you and come along!”

“Wait!” the guard called, “You can’t...You owe me five guineas for this!” With a start, I remembered Captain Dancy’s last words. I also remembered the three shillings in my pocket and frowned. “And besides,” the man continued, “when they find me...”

Ez Carter gave me a look, and I nodded. He let go his side of the woman, and while Peter Long hoisted her up across his shoulder, Ez walked up and whacked the guard soundly across the pate with his belaying pin.

He sat down suddenly against the wall, and a moment later, when I glanced back from the corner, I saw him reach up to rub his head. I could see the lump from there.

We none of us worried about him; with an eye on the witch, who was already beginning to stir, we ran for the kitchens.

Black Eddie was waiting, with the baker and the maid. The baker had his hands tied behind him and was perched on a stool, facing a wall; the wench wasn’t tied at all.

“Come on,” I told Eddie, and he buttoned his pants and came on. The girl got to her feet and looked around, and at the sight of Madame Lee her eyes widened.

“Maybe we’d best bring her along,” Eddie suggested.

“Please yourself,” I told him, not caring to waste time arguing, “As long as she doesn’t slow us down.”

He grabbed her wrist, and Ez grabbed the lantern, and we all trampled down the stairs to the wine cellars, Ez first, then Peter with Madame Lee over his shoulder, then me, and then Black Eddie, dragging his girl along by her wrist.

I saw as how leaving the baker as we had meant that the secret route through the caves would be a secret no more, but I didn’t see any way that could be helped, since we’d no wagon outside the window to escape in, as the captain’s plan had called for, and I’d no stomach for killing the baker in cold blood. A corpse in the kitchen might well tell the tale in any case.

Madame Lee raised her head from Peter’s shoulder and looked at me, and I began to wonder what flies tasted like.

“Madame,” I called, with my best manner, “before you act rashly, remember there are four of us left, and if you enchant another, the rest will kill you in self-defense.” I lifted the cutlass that was still in my hand. “We mean you no harm, I promise.”

I was none too certain that cold steel would kill a witch as easily as that, but I hoped.

And I was more certain than ever that I knew that face, though with the long hair flying loose about it, and all of us bouncing giddily down the stairs, I couldn’t place it just then.

We reached the bottom and ran through the cellars, through the door into the caves, where we found ourselves in gloom relieved by only the single lantern—it seemed worse, somehow, than it had on the way in. I looked, and saw the glass was a trifle smoked, as the wick needed trimming. I wished I’d brought more than the one, as we’d no way to trim the wick there.

Well, a man can’t think of everything, and we had the one, and it was still enough to see by. I tucked the cutlass in my belt—I had two there now, my own and Goodman Richard’s. “This way,” I said.

“Mr. Jones,” Peter said, “might I put her down for a moment? Or could someone else carry her?”

“Is she heavy?” Ez asked.

“Not so you’d notice,” Peter said, “But it’s awkward, carrying a woman about that way, all on one side.”

“I can walk,” Madame Lee said, and she raised her head again, and when I saw her face in the lantern-light and heard that throaty voice again I recognized her at last.

“Oh, my good Lord in heaven, and all the saints and angels,” I said, staring. “It’s the Caliburn Witch herself.”

7.

She blinked at me, and then smiled like a cat stretches. “Billy Jones,” she said. “You’ve a few more gray hairs than when last we met, haven’t you?”

“By God I do,” I agreed. “And you’re the cause of a few of them!”

She just smiled at me again as Peter set her on her feet.

“You’ve sworn not to harm us,” I told her, “For as long as Jack Dancy lives, you’re sworn not to touch a single man of the Bonny Anne’s crew.”

“Well do I know it,” she answered, still smiling. “And where is Captain Dancy?”

“Aboard ship,” I said. “He’s feeling poorly.”

The smile winked out like a blown candle-flame.

“My Jack?” she said. “My Jack’s ill?”

“I’ll say no more,” I told her. “It’s not my place.”

The other men were staring. Ez and Peter hadn’t yet joined the crew six years before, when we’d tangled with the Witch; Eddie hadn’t gotten a good look at her face in the dash down the cellar stairs, and hadn’t been in the passageway when she came out of her room. And poor Good, of course, was a toad—I could feel him squirming about in my pocket—so he couldn’t have said anything if he recognized her.

They’d all heard of the Caliburn Witch, though. Everyone in the islands had heard of the Caliburn Witch. Sometimes we’d wondered why none had heard anything new of her these past few years.

In a way, though, dangerous as she was, I was glad to see her there, for she had sworn not to harm us, and wouldn’t likely flee at the first chance. We might not need Doc Brewer’s geas at all.

And of course, against the likes of her, the best geas Emmanuel Brewer could concoct might not be any more use than trying to bail the ocean dry with my hat. The Caliburn Witch was not to be held lightly.

It occurred to me that Captain Dancy hadn’t known which witch he’d been sent after, or he’d not have bothered about a geas. That was something that might bear a little more thought when I had time.

Just then, though, the toad in my pocket was still squirming, and that squirm reminded me. I pulled Good out of my pocket and held him out. “Can you change him back now, if you please? You did swear not to harm him.”

She smiled that cat-smile again. “Surely I swore that, but I don’t see that he’s been harmed. He looks a fine, fat, healthy toad to me.”

I frowned at her. “I’d reckon it harm to turn a man to a toad, and I think so would the captain. He’s lost the use of his voice, hasn’t he? Don’t you reckon that as harm?”

She shrugged. “It might be said so,” she admitted. “Alas, I can’t turn him back here and now. I keep a spell ready to hand at night, against just such as you, but I’d never any need before for the cure, and I haven’t got it with me.”

I was about to argue, when Eddie said, “Billy, shouldn’t we be getting back to the ship?” He pointed at the lantern, which was burning low and smoking more than ever.

I looked, and saw that he had a sound argument. “Come on, then,” I said, tucking the toad away, and we wound our way back through the caverns to the sea.

I feared we might have to tie the witch up and lower her down hand over hand, but she gave us no trouble about scampering down the lines, as if climbing ropes were something she did every day between the Governor’s audiences.

Then again, for all I knew she might have been able to fly down, but she didn’t.

The kitchen wench rode down pickaback on Black Eddie, arms about his neck and legs about his waist, and he damn near lost his hold a time or two on account of the added weight.

At the last, though, we were all down safely and back aboard the Bonny Anne, and the moment I came up the side, bringing up the rear as befit my position in command of the party, Hasty Bernie gave the order to up anchor and take us back to Collyport.

He was safe up on the quarterdeck, seeing to the ship, and the rest of my party was scattering to their posts in the rigging, whilst I found myself on the halfdeck with the four females.

“Which one is Madame Lee?” Miss Melissa asked, puzzled, though how she could think a lass as young as that serving maid could be the Governor’s wife of five years I don’t know. Governor Lee had his faults, but I’d never heard any say pedophilia was one of them.

“Who’s that?” Mistress Coyne demanded, jabbing her thumb at Eddie’s wench.

“Mistress Coyne!” the girl said, staring at the Governor’s woman, “What are you doing here?”

“Who are these two?” asked the Caliburn Witch suspiciously.

I sighed, and tried to decide where to begin.

A croak from my pocket decided me.

“Madame Lee,” I said, “Allow me to present Mistress Melissa Dewhurst, who’s aboard the Bonny Anne at Captain Dancy’s personal invitation.”

The two women glared at one another, but before either could speak I turned to the next. “And Mistress Annabelle Coyne,” I said, “who came aboard to assist us in certain matters, and who had the misfortune to be caught on board when a fire on the docks compelled us to depart.”

She smiled graciously at Madame Lee, though with a little more tooth showing than might be strictly necessary.

“And I’m afraid,” I said, “That I didn’t catch the name of the young lady who came aboard with Black Eddie.”

“Susan Bowditch,” said the wench, and she dropped a curtsy.

“Mistress Bowditch,” I said with a bow. “Welcome aboard. And you, too, Madame Lee, of course.”

Madame Lee paid me no heed. She was staring at Mistress Coyne with that cat-smile on her face again. I’d never seen it until an hour or so before, but already I was growing sore weary of that expression.

“I begin,” she said, “to understand. Rouse Jack Dancy out here, I’ve something to tell him.”

I exchanged a glance with Miss Melissa.

“I’ll see if he’s to be roused,” Miss Melissa said, and she turned away and trotted to the cabin.

The ship was heeling over as we rounded the Seal Stones, and I could see Mistress Coyne shifting as she tried to keep her balance. Poor little Susan Bowditch had to grab for the rail, and I guessed she’d be seasick soon.

The Witch, of course, didn’t notice. It would take more than a ship’s motion to bother her.

“Ladies,” I began, thinking we might go below, and then I stopped.

I couldn’t take them down to the cabin, not with the captain’s corpse still stretched out there. The wardroom that I shared with Bernie was hardly a fit place for them, the fo’c’sle even worse. The black, airless depths of the hold would hardly be an improvement.

The gundeck, perhaps?

I decided we’d do best to stay where we were.

I looked about. The sky was lightening in the east; Bernie had a good lot of canvas spread, and we were making way nicely. I judged we’d be back in Collyport within an hour, if the wind didn’t turn foul.

An hour on deck in such mild weather would do no harm.

“Excuse me for a moment, ladies,” said I, and I trotted over to the starboard shrouds, where Black Eddie had just descended to the deck.

“Eddie,” I said, “What were you thinking of, bringing the wench along?”

“I’m sorry, Billy,” he said. “She just got the better of me for a moment.”

“Will it trouble you any if we put her ashore when we make port?” I asked.

He thought about that for a moment. “She’s a pretty little thing,” he said, “But I suppose it’d be best.”

That was one problem solved—and as I watched Mistress Bowditch lurch against the rail and spew over the side I didn’t doubt that she’d want to be put off the ship.

I knew what the wagon had been for, now—that was another problem solved. The captain had meant for us to come in through the caves, but go out through the window, so that the route in would remain a secret, safe for later use. He’d probably have told the baker that we crept in earlier and hid in the wine cellars.

And we’d done what the Governor wanted—another problem gone.

Now there were just three more that I saw left to us.

First, now that we had the Witch aboard, what were we to do with her?

Second, how were we to keep her from discovering that Jack Dancy was dead, and that her oath not to harm us was thereby void? She’d sworn long ago that the Bonny Anne and all aboard would be hers when Jack Dancy died.

And third, what was the parrot for?

Well, I judged that solutions would either present themselves or not, and in the meanwhile there were things to be done.

I glanced over, and saw Mistress Coyne and Madame Lee exchanging words, and with them looks meant to freeze the heart. Little Susan Bowditch was still sick at the rail.

And here came Miss Melissa back again.

“My apologies, Madame Lee,” she said, “But the captain’s in no state to be seen, nor will he be for some time yet.”

The Witch gave a smile worse than any I’d yet seen on her face, and I thought my heart would stop.

“Mistress Dewhurst,” she said, “I’ve seen Jack Dancy at his worst.”

Miss Melissa threw me a puzzled and angry look, and I told her, “Madame Lee once held the captain prisoner for a fortnight, six years ago.”

The Witch grinned. Jack Dancy had been her prisoner, right enough—but not in the dungeons with the rest of us.

I could see that Miss Melissa didn’t know what to make of that, but she could hardly ask for explanations just then. “All the same,” she said, facing up to the witch with a courage I didn’t know she had, “Aboard his own ship, he’ll not be seen at his worst.”

I tried to distract them all by saying, “Mistress Coyne, we’ll be back in port shortly, and we’ll be sending you ashore there.”

She was about to reply when a cry came from the masthead, “Sail ho!”

We all looked up, and I called, “Where away?”

“Dead ahead!” came the reply.

We looked, and sure enough, there was a frigate rounding the point ahead, just where we’d been headed. We were closing on her quickly, and she was turning broadside to, rather than continuing on her course. She was scarce a quarter mile away—the headlands had hidden her—and we were bearing down on her.

“What colors?” Hasty Bernie called from the quarterdeck.

“She’s flying the Governor’s flag,” came the reply. “She’s the Armistead Castle!”

That was all right, then— we all knew the Armistead Castle. We’d seen her in port that night, seen her ahead of us when we put out to sea, and I’d seen her back at her moorings from the palace window. She was the Governor’s own ship that he called out to chase away any pirates foolish enough to venture into Collyport without his permission, and as we were on the Governor’s business, so to speak, we’d naught to fear from her.

We were just beginning to relax when she opened fire.

8.

It wasn’t a full broadside, just a warning shot, but the ball whistled overhead and scared the bloody hell out of us all.

“What the hell?” I asked, and that was the mildest remark I heard on that deck. Miss Melissa and Mistress Coyne said far worse; Madame Lee and Mistress Bowditch didn’t bother with words.

“Heave to!” Bernie called, and the men hurried to obey, while the women and I stood there amidships, all of them talking at once, trying to figure out what was happening.

“Hail her,” Bernie ordered the man at the masthead, but the lookout called down, “They’re lowering a boat!”

That meant a parley, I judged.

I began to have an idea what was happening. I couldn’t be sure, though, and I thought I’d best cover every possibility I could. I pulled the rope from my waist, that line I’d taken into the caves and not used.

“Your pardon, ladies,” I said, and I proceeded to bind their hands behind them—first Madame Lee, and then Mistress Coyne, and just to be sure I went on and tied Mistress Bowditch and Miss Melissa, as well.

Miss Melissa started to protest, but I whispered, “Bear with me, Mistress, please.”

She shrugged and let me tie her hands.

Then I drew one of the two cutlasses on my belt and waited for the parley boat to arrive.

A few minutes later—which seemed like half of eternity—the boat bumped up against the side. A couple of the men secured it, and Peter Long, who was one of them, called, “Officer coming aboard, Mr. Jones!”

As the officer’s cocked hat appeared in the entry port I lifted the sword to Madame Lee’s throat.

The man’s face was shocked, when he saw me standing there behind a row of women, all with their hands bound, and one with my blade against her neck.

“My Lord, man,” he began, and then stopped.

“Speak your piece,” I told him. “Why’d you fire on us?”

He blinked, and then said, “I’m here at the Governor’s orders, sir. He’d heard that the crew of the Bonny Anne had abducted an innocent woman from Collyport, one Mistress Annabelle Coyne, and he came down to the port and sent us out after you.”

I blinked back at him, much relieved. The Governor hadn’t double-crossed us, then, and wasn’t going to sink us for kidnapping his wife. Instead, he’d thought we were double-crossing him, and stealing the wrong woman.

“Governor Lee’s aboard your ship?” I asked.

“Yes, sir, he is,” the officer replied.

“Well, then, you can tell him he’s been misinformed. Mistress Coyne was not kidnapped; she came aboard of her own free will, and she’s free to go, any time she chooses.” I turned the cutlass about and used it to cut the cords on Mistress Coyne’s wrists. Then I cut Mistress Bowditch’s, as well—this was as good a time as any to get her out of the way. I pushed them both toward the officer. “Here she is,” I said, “And another as well, and you’re welcome to take them back with you.”

The officer stammered for a moment, and then asked Mistress Bowditch, “You’re Annabelle Coyne?”

“No,” Mistress Coyne said angrily, “I am.”

Mistress Bowditch was still too seasick to say anything; she just nodded.

“And those other two?” the Governor’s man asked, pointing.

“Spoils of war,” I said, “and none of your concern.”

I thought that the Witch would betray me, and I think for a moment she thought so, too, but instead she grinned.

“They don’t speak English,” I added.

The Witch nodded eagerly. Miss Melissa glowered at me, but kept silent.

The officer—a lieutenant, he was, by his uniform—looked about, and then decided to take what he was given and see what happened. “This way, ladies,” he said, and he helped Mistress Coyne and Mistress Bowditch down over the side.

Then the boat pulled away, and Miss Melissa shouted, “Get these ropes off me!”

Madame Lee didn’t say a word, but the ropes fell away from her wrists.

I set to untying Miss Melissa, and spoke up cheerfully. “There, now, ladies, we’ve settled that! We’re rid of those two, who would have been nothing but trouble, and we still have you. I take it from your silence, Ma’am, that you had no particular wish to be sent aboard the Armistead Castle?”

I looked at Madame Lee, and she looked back.

“Mr. Jones,” she said, “I’ve known for some time that my husband was tired of my company, and I’ve no more love for him. I enjoyed playing the Governor’s lady and being mistress of Collyport, but it’s not worth the grief if he’s going to such extremes as this to get rid of me!”

My mouth fell open.

She sneered—a harsh word to use of a lady, but she did. “Come now,” she said, “Did you think I didn’t know, when I saw Annabelle Coyne on this deck, that it was George Lee who had sent you to kidnap me? And furthermore, do you think I didn’t know why? He’s trying to rid himself of two problems at once—Jack Dancy and myself. Jack didn’t know who I was, but my dear Georgie did. So he sent you to capture me, and Jack agreed, thinking he could handle an ordinary witch—Doc Brewer’s surely prepared a little spell of some sort! But then Jack was to find himself with no mere hedgerow enchantress, but the infamous Caliburn Witch aboard, the same who he had scarcely escaped six years ago. Georgie knew I’d rather stay aboard the Bonny Anne with my Jack than in his palace with him, and he was right!”

“Your Jack!” Miss Melissa burst out.

“Aye,” the witch told her, “my Jack, or he was once, at any rate, and long before he was your lover. But what’s it matter now, that he’s dead?”

My mouth fell open, and Miss Melissa’s snapped shut.

“Dead?” she said.

“How did you know?” I asked—for I knew better than to lie any more to the Caliburn Witch.

She gave me a bitter smile. “I know my Jack,” she said. “If there was still breath in his body, he’d have come on deck when someone fired on his Bonny Anne.”

We could scarce argue with that, for it was the plain truth.

“How did it happen?” the Witch asked.

“He slipped and hit his head,” I said. “In the alley behind Old Joe’s Tavern.”

Her eyes widened. “Is that all? It wasn’t the Black Sorcerer? Nor Bartholomew Sanchez? Nor the Pundit of Oul?”

“No,” I said. “Just a fall and a broken neck.”

She shook her head.

It was at that moment that the frigate fired a full broadside at us.

The roar swept over us, and the balls tore through the rigging; I heard lines snap and canvas tear and shot howl through the air. We all spun in astonishment.

“Man the guns!” Hasty Bernie cried from the quarterdeck, and men swarmed to the gundeck.

“What?” the Witch cried. “He dares?”

“Dares what?” I shouted back over the pounding feet and the rattling of the gun tackles, “Who?”

“That worm who called me his wife! That little bitch from the kitchens told him I was aboard, and now he means to sink us!”

“How do you...” I started to ask, but then I remembered who I spoke to. Instead I asked, “Why didn’t he just sail away?”

“And let everyone aboard his ship know he was leaving his lady in Jack Dancy’s hands? He couldn’t do that. How could he ever hold his head up again if he sailed away and left his own wife in the hands of an adventurer like Jack Dancy?”

“But then why didn’t he send a boat to parley...” I began.

“You bloody fool!” she shrieked, turning on me, just as the frigate’s second broadside thundered out at us, “He doesn’t want me back, he wants me dead! Even a witch can drown in twenty fathoms of salt water!”

I heard the crunch of a ball hitting the side, and saw a fore mainsail sheet flying free where a shot had snapped it, and then our own guns roared out, raggedly. Doc Brewer tottered up from below, the canvas bag of unused arcana in his fist, looking about wildly.

I knew we had no chance; the Bonny Anne carried eighteen guns to the frigate’s thirty-two, and smaller guns at that. We had scarce thirty seamen aboard, what with having left port so hurriedly, while he surely had two hundred. “Strike!” I called to Bernie. “He can’t sink us if we strike! Better a dungeon than drowning!”

“NO!” shrieked the Witch. She staggered across the deck and snatched the bag from Doc Brewer, then tore it open.

She looked up at me with a grin of triumph on her face, and snatched out something long and thin and yellowish. She lifted it above her head, stretched between her two hands, and shouted out something.

What she shouted was in no language I had ever heard before, nor any I ever wish to hear again.

The frigate’s third broadside roared out, but when I looked at the Governor’s ship I saw that it had heeled back, and that most of the balls would pass over us, too high to do any damage.

And our own ship was heeling back, as well, and the sea between us seemed to be rising up, and I tried to guess what trick of the tide or the gunfire could cause that, and then I realized it wasn’t any natural trick at all.

The wave rose up higher and higher, above the level of our decks, and then still higher, above the spars; the frigate was hidden from sight now behind a rising wall of surging green water.

The Witch was standing, arms raised and spread, like a statue; wind whipped her hair about her as if she stood in a hurricane, but elsewhere the air was almost dead calm now, the sails hanging limp. Her eyes blazed with a green fire.

The water rose up until it seemed to cover half the sky—and then it fell.

On the frigate.

The backwash sent the Bonny Anne rocking and bouncing, yawing wildly, and I grabbed for the rail, and saw others doing the same—everyone but the Witch herself grabbed for a handhold somewhere.

Spray burst up over the side and caught me in the face.

When I was able to clear my eyes and look again, there was no trace of the Armistead Castle anywhere, only the rocks and the tossing waves.

The sea calmed gradually, and I heard Bernie sending the men to repair the damage we’d taken in the battle. I didn’t concern myself with that; instead I paid attention only to the Caliburn Witch.

The light had faded from her eyes, and she lowered the yellowish thing and tossed it to Doc Brewer. I finally got a decent look at it, and saw that it was the skeleton of an eel.

“That should teach the man not to mistreat his wife!” the Witch snapped. She turned. “Mr. Abernathy!” she called. “Set a course for Drummond Isle; we’ll be putting Mistress Dewhurst ashore there, in her home town!”

Miss Melissa started when she heard that, and glanced at the Witch, but didn’t say anything.

“Aye aye,” Bernie called back, in a puzzled tone.

I was just as puzzled. “Your pardon, ma’am,” I ventured, “but what is it you’re planning?”

I remembered well how, six years before, she had sworn to see me and my mates dead.

So did she, I judged.

Was she planning to set Miss Melissa ashore first, and then sink us, or burn us?

Such scruples hardly seemed likely, given that she’d had no hesitation in sending Mistress Coyne and Mistress Bowditch to the bottom, along with everyone else aboard the Armistead Castle. True, Mistress Coyne had been her husband’s mistress, and Mistress Bowditch had tattled to the Governor, but Miss Melissa was her dead lover’s woman, so she’d grounds for a grudge there, too.

“Well, Mr. Jones,” she said, turning back to me with the least-malicious smile I’d yet seen on her face, “I’ve had my fill of the Governor’s Palace, and for that matter all of Collyport. I’d seen all I cared to of Caliburn Island five years ago, or I’d not have left it. I think the time has come to roam a little, to wander about—and it seems to me that a ship and crew have just fallen into my hands that would suit me fine for that wandering. There’s the little matter of your deaths, yours and a dozen others, a sentence I handed down back on Caliburn six years ago. Well, I’m willing to commute that sentence to a few years of penal servitude—aboard this ship, under my command.” She made the smile into another of her cat-grins. “Or I could hang you. It’s your choice, Mr. Jones.”

It took me no time to decide that one. “Aye aye, Captain Lee,” I replied, saluting.

We put Melissa Dewhurst and five crewmen who asked ashore on Drummond Isle eleven days later, where for all I know they’re all living peacefully to this day. John Hastings Abernathy, who after all had never angered the Witch and hadn’t been with us those six years before, was retired three months after, and put ashore in Collyport, where he took a post with the new Acting Governor as portmaster. I was promoted to first mate.

Captain Dancy we gave a fine burial at sea the very afternoon after the sinking of the Armistead Castle. Captain Lee turned the toad back into Goodman Richard, using Doc Brewer’s paraphernalia, that same night.

As for the rest, Captain Lee says she’ll set us free when she grows bored. She’s no worse a master than was Jack Dancy, for the most part, and as she’s taken a fancy to me I’ve no need now to wait until we’re in port to find a woman to share my bunk.

Like most of Captain Dancy’s plans, the whole affair had all worked out well enough, if not the way we expected.

I see how it was meant to work—the fire for a distraction, the entry through the caves, the escape in the wagon below the window, the geas to hold the witch under control until we could put her ashore somewhere. Captain Dancy hadn’t planned to have Mistress Coyne aboard, nor to have the Governor think that Mistress Coyne had chosen Jack Dancy over himself and come out to get her back. He hadn’t known that Madame Lee was no ordinary witch, but the Caliburn Witch.

It’s pretty much all clear now.

But we never did find out what the damn parrot was for.

What the Parrot Was For

On the next page is the answer to a question left unanswered at the end of “The Final Folly of Captain Dancy” and you really don’t want to know until after you’ve read the story.

(It’s trivial, anyway, just a very minor detail. You’ll be disappointed. I hadn’t intended to answer it, but people keep asking me, so eventually I figured I might as well tell them what they wanted to know.)

So if you must know, then turn the page...

*The parrot used to belong to a brothel, and will, on cue, say, “Come on boys! This way!” Captain Dancy was going to send it in a nearby window, then cue it to talk, so as to lure away the kitchen staff in the Governor’s Palace. This would mean that the secret of the entrance through the wine-cellars wouldn’t be given away.*

*So now you know.*