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Messages From A Concrete Ship

1 Introduce system

Please note my new email address. OK I know that you think that I am inviting big brother to check up on me all the time but I would prefer to be checked on by my elected government that by a multinational. Not that I trust either of them but the UK government will probably snoop on me anyway because of the project; but the multinational probably won't bother if I don't use their server.

It didn't take long to set up. They've fitted out this place in the shopping centre; it looks like something half way between a bank and a shop. It's got a fancy glass front and is full of quite decent looking computers. Somebody has etched "Big Brother" into the glass in rather neat looking letters by the door. Looks as if they tried to get it off and then realised that they would have to replace the whole piece of glass so they have just left it there. Even polished it a bit to show they don't care. It made me stop for a couple of seconds before deciding that I don't care either. I swiped in my ID card, let it scan my irises and my finger tips and then typed in my password a couple of times. They have this dozy looking bloke supposedly checking that we aren't doing something clever with fake fingerprints or something but he doesn't seem to be doing much. A few cameras about but I can't imagine anybody checks them. All done in a few minutes and I get masses of free web space with no pop-ups or adverts or anything. I know I could have got the web space and just not used the email but I like to keep things simple. Some people refuse to get ID cards and can't do it but that's fine; I'm a great believer in free choice. I've filled in my address and the other bits and sent in to register it so I should get bombarded with all the data anybody ever sends to anybody about me. That's what the new law says. If anybody wants to tell anybody else about my credit reference, criminal record, or even what brand of sausages I buy, a copy has to get sent to me. In the meanwhile we can use the terminals for free for as long as we want so since the family have gone shopping I thought I might as well use it.

I keep hearing about how your part of the design is almost done. The whole thing is apparently due to go to the minister in a few weeks. It's all very low key here. The basic idea is that since we all know that the most people are still anti-nuclear and wouldn't be at all happy with the safety of the ships we aren't saying much about it. We're not keeping it secret but not exactly making it public either. I don't know if it really fits in with my ideas of a democratic process but I support it because I am so keen on the idea itself. It's the age-old problem with democracy I suppose – you can agree to give everybody the vote but it's impossible to define who everybody is. I'm sure that if we took a vote of the people living near the yards they would be in favour because of the new jobs. Particularly because it won't be getting any nuclear fuel until long after it's been towed away from their patch. Then there's the people around here and the rest of the country. We are sure they are against it but if you tried a vote from all of Europe it might be different. They're quite keen on nuclear power now to reduce global warming. If you included the rest of the world and all the places that have been getting the floods I am pretty sure you would get a vote in favour so perhaps we can justify it that way.

The other argument is that even if the national vote would be against it just now they will have all changed their minds by the time it's finished. What we are saying is that we are so much cleverer than they are and know what is good for them but it doesn't sound so good when you actually put it that way does it?

We have an election coming up here next year but I can't see that making much difference because both main parties seem to have much the same ideas. As far as we can tell if the minister supports us and then loses his job the other one will support us too. In many ways it may be easier for the second man because he can always blame it on the other one.

This place could do with a drinks machine or something. I guess the trouble is that after all the security with logging in you're not allowed to get up and leave your terminal and it would be a bit much to go through it all again just to get a drink.

They seem to be quite helpful in here. An old granny just walked in announcing to the man that she wanted to use the system to vote using her son's computer. She's quite convinced that her neighbour stole her poll card last time. She hasn't a clue and the man is helping her through it. I just hope her son doesn't con her out of her password and use her vote himself and then go on to everything else of hers in the system. The banks are very keen to link into it so they really know who they're lending money to. They're offering lots of free gifts and all that junk if you register your account on the system. More profit for them but it means big brother has a quick way to look at my bank account as well as everything else. Might be handy for the old granny's son if he's short of cash one day but I guess I always see the worst in people. I think the idea is that they are supposed to set up people like that so they can only access the system through terminals with id scans.

2 Politics and risk

I got to go to the meeting with the minister. I presume you heard what he said. Somehow we always think that the further up the pile you go the more efficient everything becomes. We've all looked at bits of debates in parliament and seen what a joke they are but you always think that someone somewhere is really running the show in a sensible way. If they are it doesn't seem to have much to do with the man we met.

He was smart enough and had some very clever civil servants with him but everything was a panic to find ways of getting around something. They knew all the legislation and the whole thing was about how it could be worked around to get the job done without and public debate. His attitude was quite simple. He didn't exactly spell it out but as far as he was concerned he had been appointed by an elected government and that was good enough for him. He knew perfectly well that they would not vote for him again if they knew exactly what he was doing but he is prepared to take the risk. If things work out ok he can try to sweep the whole project under the carpet and tow the barge away to South America and blame somebody else, but if the hurricanes off Africa move north he can park it in the Thames estuary and won't be caught out having done nothing. I'm not complaining about the result but the way we got there was enough to make you wonder if the whole system is wrong.

I was called in at the last minute. It was all done as a rush job and the designs weren't as complete as they should have been so they decided to get one of the designers along to explain the missing bits. That's what they said but I was mainly there as a fall-guy to blame for not being ready on time. The boss came in and told me what an honour it would be to present the design. I fell for it and went.

He seemed to soak up my presentation like a sponge. I was expecting stupid questions like how a ship with ten foot thick of concrete in the hull can actually float but he was way beyond that. He followed the layout with the reactor in the middle and the power plant at one end and the nuclear fuel at the other. He even asked why I called the fuel end the front when it can be towed either way round. He wanted to

know how we would protect the fuel handling crane and all sorts of detail like that. He wanted to know if we could extend the life so I told him all about how we could get the spent fuel off it and put new on but only back at the fuelling dock. All that sort of detail. He was asking just the right questions to make me almost begin to think he was on our side.

Then finally I put up our draft programme and he kept asking how difficult it would be to cancel it at any stage. I tried to be as positive as possible, saying that we could always find some other use for the hull and that you could pull out without too much money wasted at any time until it was almost finished. I thought I was being clever and knew where he was coming from but I should have drawn huge black lines across the thing to mark where the elections would be because he pretty much did that for himself. Then he dropped the bombshell and cut the programme in half. It's go to be past the point of no return by the next election so the opposition can't promise to cancel it as cost cutting. He didn't actually say that but it was obvious that was what he was working out. Otherwise he won't back it. Simple as that. Then he followed up by saying that he wanted at least four of them. At first we thought he was joking when he said four in a year once we got started.

We didn't dare to complain. Nobody even suggested that it might be unsafe. He knew we wouldn't dare. Who could resist an order for four nuclear power stations every year? He just ended the meeting at that and left us sorting out details with one of his assistants.

My attitude is that it will be very safe. It will make the world a much safer place. It might blow up. It might sink and leak fuel. It might get hi-jacked by terrorists and have its fuel stolen. When the spent fuel is unloaded it might get spread everywhere. Anything could happen but it will make the world safer. Safety is a balance of probabilities and the alternative looks pretty unsafe to me. If we can make it just a little bit less likely that the hurricanes will come or the sea level will rise and all the other things happen then it will make the world safer. If you want to be safe you have to take risks. The trouble is that they have to be the right risks. We don't actually know that burning more and more coal and oil will actually do any real harm to us but we can't take the risk. We shouldn't take the risk of the hurricanes and then to avoid taking that risk we should take another risk with nuclear power. Then we shouldn't take the risk of having power stations built all over the place but we should build them in a safe place where they can be very carefully inspected and deliver them complete and take the risk of having them on ships. We shouldn't take the risk of giving nuclear technology to more and more countries but we should run the risk of them attacking the ships to try to get it. Then there's the risk of doing it faster. For all the wrong reasons he has got it right. We should take the risk of fast-tracking the programme because we shouldn't take the risk of delaying it.

I shall be on the ship. That's been decided now. My design team moves up to the yard to fast-track the first hull out and then some of us go with it through the whole process and finally to the fuelling dock and on to commissioning. I shall be glad to take the risk.

3 Democracy

I've moved. I've never seen a site start so quickly. We are all staying in this hotel near the yard. They used to use it to build oil production platforms but that work ran out a few years ago. The earthworks have already started for the first dock. We had to change the plan and move it off to one side because we shall need to fit in a second dock because they want four hulls every year and there is no way we can build one and float it out in less than six months. Because this is intended to be a long-term project making a large number of them we are setting it up much more than they did for the platforms. They just used an earth-sided dock with an earth dam they dug away at float-out. We are building the whole thing out of concrete with a pile of big blocks for the dam. We have had to open up a quarry for it.

There is real excitement in the town. There has been a lot of unemployment since the last oil platform was built. Anybody who's seen these sites before will know that they probably won't get many of the skilled jobs actually on the site but there'll be quite a bit of work in places like this hotel and the shops. It's not a good way to solve unemployment but at least it's a way.

They have been very careful not to say where the thing is going to go. The leaflet they have done simply says that it could replace a coastal coal fired station and goes on to calculate how many millions of tonnes of carbon dioxide production that will be avoided. It then points out that since most coal fired power stations are on the coast so they can get there coal by sea there are several hundred around the world that could be replaced. We've got about fifty regular protestors who have formed a camp outside the gate but they haven't been able to get any media attention at all because it doesn't make much of a story to talk about a nuclear threat unless you know who is going to be threatened. The leaflet says it may even be sent to some third world country as a sort of aid package where it will still do just as much about greenhouse gasses as if it was used here. We all know that the great British public is generally not bothered about a threat to somewhere they never go and have hardly ever heard of so it just isn't a story at all. The people in the town really like the protestors because they are customers just the same as we are. We get along fine with them as well because everybody knows that they won't get anywhere.

Their biggest banner says "A disgrace in a democratic country". I was talking to one of them and he pointed out that since this thing will be moored at sea it won't need any form of planning permission. There need not be any discussion or consultation with the local people at all. No public enquiry or anything like that would be required; it could simply arrive one day and nobody could do anything about it. I agreed with him that it wasn't democratic but he agreed with me that nobody would vote for a government that was so stupid that it changed the law deliberately to make it difficult to go ahead with a project it was very keen on. He didn't like it when I pointed out that it was a natural consequence of how a democracy like ours worked and the democracy seemed to be working the way it was supposed to so it couldn't really be a disgrace. If a politician has made it clear that they want to do something and are convinced that it is the right thing to do, they look a bit stupid if they don't do it if they can.

With all the protestors they have tight security on the site. Everybody has to have an id card to get in and they do an iris scan to get through the gate. Nobody minds having to have a card any more because the government just changed the system and now instead of paying to get one we all get paid to have one. It's a

hundred pounds a year and you have to check your records and confirm they are correct before you get it. The problem some people have is that we then have to give the company permission to access our id files to download our data to make the system work. Their answer is simple, it's a security site and if you want to work on it that's what you have got to do.

The next thing they are going to do is to use the system to check up on everybody's qualifications. There's going to be a big exercise to match up the databases and if the right qualifications don't show up in our id files we are going to have to chase it up because they won't let us work any more without them there. They already almost fired one man who had a criminal record show up in his until he managed to show it was somebody else with the same name and date of birth.

If you look at each bit of the system they all look fine. Nobody wants to have their power station built by somebody who hasn't got the qualifications they say they have any more than they want to be treated by a fake doctor. The criminal records really started the process because nobody wanted their child taught by a sex-offender and once it had started it just kept on going. It does bother me to know how much they know but in all probability they knew it anyway on the original databases and all that has changed is now I know that they know it.

4 Introduce referenda - fishing

We are about to move. The basin was flooded a few weeks ago and the hull was floated out on the spring tide. The first things to get put on it once it was in deep water were the accommodation modules. We had to keep it as light as possible for the float-out and anyway the modules came in by barge so it was easiest to lift them on out in the bay. Just six of us engineers and a small sea-crew are going to stay on the hull as it moves on around the coast to where all the rest of it will be built. Everybody else is staying here. They have already reinstated the dam and started on the next hull.

The modules are right at the back end beyond where the turbine hall will be so we are going to have a fine sea view from our windows. We move on to our next town soon but we have to wait for a good forecast because the hull doesn't have any decks yet. It would be a bit ironic if the whole thing was sunk by a storm when one its main purposes is to prevent them.

I expect you heard about the riot about sending troops to Malaysia [the Middle East]. It was the worst we have had for generations and seems to have been caused by not having anybody to vote for at the election who would not send troops. The government's concession on referenda is turning out to be incredibly popular. Anybody can put up a proposition on the web site and if enough people support it they have to hold a referendum on it. It seems to have tapped into the fact that a lot of the young people in this country are just bored. They go out for a few drinks and then log onto the website and support anything that looks as if it would change the system. It seems to just be like a computer game with a bit more to play for. The government seems to have been caught by surprise that the software actually works. Popular ideas get moved to the top of the list so it is easy to sort out the rubbish.

It will be a shame to move on. I have grown to quite like the town here. The trouble is that it is a fishing town and there is a proposition on the system to ban all

commercial fishing. The harbour is incredibly picturesque with all the fishing boats and the nets all over the place. We are too far north for large numbers of tourists so it is relatively unspoilt. It has to be admitted that it would be a great loss for the town if it all stopped.

The Greens put the proposition on the system and it is for a complete ban on catching anything unless you are going to put it back or you, or your family, are going to eat it.

This would mean that anybody who wants fish and can't catch it has to eat some that has either been farmed or imported.

As human beings we should learn to make sensible use of what nature gives us. That way must be our best hope of survival. The fish in the sea are a free resource that is now quite easy to take and costs no money or energy to sustain. All we have got to do is to learn how not be greedy and take too much. The trouble is that we can never do that. We have never managed to control what we take from nature and there is no reason to suppose we can start now. The big thing about the Greens' idea is that it would be quite easy to enforce. There would be none of the fraud we get now with illegal catches above quota limits etc.

Having the chance to vote on individual issues makes you think a lot more about how you should make decisions. It is easy to vote for a party as being generally a bit less offensive than the rest but single issues are harder. Is the decision that is best for the environment automatically ethical? Investment funds that call themselves ethical won't put money into nuclear power so I'm already lost on that one. They also won't put money into tobacco and I can't see how that ever damaged the global environment.

Fishing may not seem the world's most fundamental issue but in neatly encompasses a good number of them. If we go for fish farms we shall use more energy and cause more pollution. If we just import fish and pass the problem to somebody else that can't be right. If we try to stop fishing worldwide it might mean a better life for future generations when stocks recover but right now people would go hungry. If we do nothing it will all run out anyway as the remaining stocks collapse. It would be nice to think that we could control it in some way and keep this harbour alive and make proper use of what nature gives us for free but I know we can't. Maybe in a few years but not now.

5 Birthright payment

We've arrived at our first stop. We are in this estuary. It has rather strong tidal flows so they've had to put in some substantial dolphins for us to moor up to but apart from that it's ideal. We are by an industrial city and directly opposite us, about a mile away, is a vast steel fabrication yard. They are going to convert this steel-lined concrete tub into a massive floating shed. We've taken some mobile cranes on board to drive around inside the hull and help put the frame up but for the cladding they have got some barges that look like medieval siege towers that will tie alongside us for the men to work from. Finally they are going to fit a big high-level crane. There's a shear-leg barge coming in for that. We only stop for three months so they started standing columns up the day we arrived. The odd thing is how light-weight it all looks.

Because ships don't get earthquakes it doesn't have to be nearly as strong as a building on land.

I've been into the city a few times. Typical rust-belt type of place with some quite good city centre regeneration. Looking at the local paper they have endless trouble with racial violence. There are a lot of ultra right-wing types blaming everything on immigrants but I can't help noticing that only about half the men putting the frame up are white. There's no problem out here; they all get along fine. Our first referendum is going to give them all a lot to think about.

It all started with an idea that sounded daft. Somebody entered a proposition that everybody should get forty pounds a week. Not for doing anything – they should just get it as their birthright. It was largely ignored until the chancellor pointed out that it could be done. Tax allowances, benefits, pensions and a host of other things would have to be cut but it could be done. He was at a dinner party and I don't think he expected it to get reported but it did. They also reported what he said next. He said that with the id card system it could be set up to be paid only to full citizens with right of abode.

The proposal very neatly gets right to the heart of what a modern nation-state is really about. People who look different aren't attacked because people are scared of them. If that happens we just pay for more police. They aren't attacked because they support the wrong cricket team. They aren't attacked because people think they will take all the jobs. They are attacked because people think they are taking the nation's money.

For most of history people would rally to their nation's flag to defend their territory from invaders. In the Western world that simply doesn't happen any more. Nobody is going to invade us. Of course there's supposed to be the "war on terror" but that doesn't involve heroes and battles, it just costs money. It is self-sustaining and can never be won or lost. The only winners are the politicians that run it. Keeping an eye out for weapons of mass destruction that might reach us is also just another cost. All we now expect of our nation is that it should spend money on us; and we don't like the idea of it spending the money on anybody else. The aid budget just survives with enough publicity for droughts and famines but the idea of spending it on immigrants has no support at all. The idea of raising their taxes and not giving them anything back has enormous appeal.

There's nothing new about these ideas. The British Empire wasn't conquered for glory. It was done for money, and it was incredibly successful at it. The glory bit was added later. The problem was that all the money got spent on two world wars that left us bankrupt. If that hadn't happened we would be able to afford a lot more than forty pounds. Even Hitler didn't want his "living space" just for the glory of it. He wanted to use it to get rich and make the Germans a wealthy elite.

The USA may have invented its constitution with all its worthy words about freedom at the end of the war of independence but it started the war because of increasing taxes. Even the Romans came to Britain to make money out of the tin mines, and a bit of a bonus selling the locals as slaves.

The whole idea of rallying to the flag has always been about stopping somebody else taking our money or, if we got lucky, taking some of theirs. Patriotism always was a slightly dubious idea and in the modern world it means nothing. Some people still have pride in British liberal values but they are a vanishing minority.

If somebody was truly patriotic they would remain here even if their personal and financial interests were better served by being elsewhere. They would disown any friends who chose to emigrate unless they were going to the tiny remains of our empire. It never happens. When people stay here because they like the towns and the countryside it's just personal choice, not patriotism.

So if we say that all the nation owes us is money what we have to decide is how much. Suppose we never contribute anything in taxes what is our share of the accumulated wealth built up by previous generations or just found as the land we live on? Forty pounds a week isn't much but it is a start. We can't make it too high or immigrants simply won't be able to survive for the years it takes them to get full nationality. We should never forget how much we need them. The idea of simply letting them buy nationality could be interesting.

In reality, it's rather irrelevant to the problems in the town. Most of the attacks are on people from families that have been here for generations and are far more genuinely British than their attackers. It actually raises the possibility of taking the birthright away from the attackers just to make a point.

6 Religion 1

They gave us more tugs now we have a superstructure. It acts like an enormous sail and they had to be sure they could control it if the wind increased. It is particularly bad because even the sides of the hull rise fifteen metres above the water at the moment. When the reactor and the turbines are put in we shall float a lot deeper but for now a strong wind could take us away at enormous speed.

The tugs have taken us up the mouth of a river to an old walled city. The river runs narrow and deep and we have been able to come alongside a large modern factory. They are installing the control room and auxiliary generator that go immediately next to our accommodation. We shall come back here for our last stop when they will install a duplicate system at the far end and finish wiring it all in. The generator is a massive machine in its own right but its sole purpose is to provide power for the control systems if the main turbines fail. Alongside it there is an enormous fuel tank. It seems wrong for a system that is supposed to avoid the use of fossil fuel to carry so much of it. It just serves to remind us that waiting until the oil runs out is not an option. Generating nuclear power needs a great deal of other fuel and, as far as I can see, always will do.

Looking out at the city the sky-line is dominated by a beautiful cathedral. I love these ancient buildings and walked up to it soon after we arrived. Whatever your beliefs, or lack of them, the thought of all those people all that time ago creating such magnificent structures has to be inspirational. What always fascinates me about them is the devils carved into the stone. It is amazing how we ignore them. With the Church so closely linked to a politically correct state we see the devil as nothing more than a guest appearance on the Simpsons. It is impossible to think that sanitised version of modern Christianity is involved in a conflict with anything or even worse that it might be losing. There is a proposition on the referendum system to disestablish the Church. It has not attracted a great deal of attention but it is arguably the most important of all.

The first thing I look at is the concept of evil. How do we know that something like the holocaust was evil? Can we not just argue that it is a survival trait of a species to look after other members of the tribe and we have projected that onto a wider population and called it something far more fundamental than it really is? I don't go for this and I take it much further. I don't feel the need to have a book to tell me what is evil and I also see nothing wrong in calling something evil when perfectly good and sensible people in history saw nothing wrong with it. I am deeply suspicious of anybody who quotes a religious book because it is probably so old it is irrelevant. I know that it creates problems to claim for yourself the right to judge good and evil because you must presumably also grant it to everybody else. Neo-Nazis can see nothing wrong with the holocaust. There must be groups of people who similarly see nothing wrong with every other act of its type in history. This is probably why evil has been removed from the politically correct landscape.

At this point we run the risk of going down the neo-Conservative route and following the US Marines in their attack on their Axis of Evil. Their problem is that they have never paused to think where the evil actually came from. The modern Church has great difficulty with this question. They promote the concept of an all-powerful God who somehow just decides not to stop things like the holocaust. They even put up the incredible idea that it is all part of God's plan. Faced with such a God it is hardly surprising that congregations are rapidly disappearing.

The masons why confidently carved their devils into the stonework needed to make few assumptions about their God. If God was clever enough to create the world he could not possibly have wanted it to end up the way it is. They had no idea what the 20th century would bring or that it would become the worst one ever for the spread of evil but they already had some terrible history to look back on from where they were. The devil was at work in their world and he was winning well enough for them to be sure he would be around for as long as their cathedral stood by the river.

For all that time, and long before it, God has failed to overcome the devil and now we see aircraft carriers being despatched to do the job. This must surely be a human folly which will go down in history alongside the other crusades that came before it. They were all a product of a poisonous mixture of church and state in which politicians try to play God. It seems very doubtful that there is actually much we can do about the devil itself. It is hard to imagine that either God or the devil are much interested by the hymns that are sung in church. What we can do is to use the enormous resources that we now have to help as many other human beings as possible and try to put right some of the damage. The chances of military operations forming part of that help are very low indeed.

And what of the future of the devils in the stonework as they stare down at the unseeing masses who troop past below them? They should be left in the care of the state. To encumber an independent church with the cost of maintaining the buildings would be as bad as trusting them to do the job. The devils must be cared for by the state so however much the church sanitises its message it can never remove them and the story they tell.

7 Legalisation

We have just installed the first of the really big components. A one gigawatt turbine weighing a thousand tonnes. It was quite tense because we have floated the barge onto a solid base and let it settle on the tide. As soon as it came to level they linked up the rails and started the load rolling. If one of the bogies had stuck when it was half on and half off and we had lifted again on the tide we would have had to flood the hull to stop it tipping. That would have made an awful mess and delayed us for at least a month.

The men who built the turbine are incredibly enthusiastic. The prospect of long-term work is an amazing incentive to them. They showed me round the factory. They have been making turbines here for generations but these ones are so big they have had to demolish whole buildings to move them about. The next two are almost complete and there are several more being made. They have started machining the rotors for a pair that won't be needed for the next 18 months but they are so complex it takes that long to make them.

We are back in rust-belt but this time there is no town-centre regeneration; just miles of old north-light factories with derelict sites and terraces of houses all around them. The estuary looks ok from a distance. It's only when you get close up you see how bad it is. There are rows of boarded up shops and houses all over the place. There used to be a coalmine here and the pithead machinery is still standing and just rusting away as it looms over everything.

I went for a walk along the seafront. The mud is hard enough to walk on so at low tide you can walk along past the bottom of rows of narrow gardens that just end in broken-down fences. Anywhere else they would be highly desirable and all gentrified but there is no sign of that here. All there is to see is bits of rusty metal and pools of oil.

In one of the gardens there was a derelict looking greenhouse with some healthy looking cannabis plants in it. A few yards further on there was a small group of youths sitting under a tree smoking. They didn't see me coming and looked worried when I walked past and tried to hold their cigarettes out of sight but the wind was blowing my way so I could hardly miss it. I always think that proper leaf smells so much better than the acid tang of resin. I gave them a friendly smile and walked on.

If you stand back and look at our attitude to illegal drugs you have to think that there is a conspiracy. You don't have to be remotely paranoid; it leaps out at you. The world got along fine without drug legislation for hundreds of years and then the Americans decided to ban alcohol. As soon as they banned it they created a whole industry of people who tried ineffectually to enforce the law. Careers were started, offices established and a power base formed. When prohibition ended all of these people were threatened with the loss of their highly paid jobs so illegal drugs were invented. Alcohol consumption actually went down when it was legalised but nobody took any notice. It just happened that a few years previously the UK had introduced licensing hours to get the workers out of pubs into the munitions factories during the first world war. The fear arose that these same workers would take to drugs so the idea of drug laws seemed a good way to keep the factories working. Thus to prevent unemployment among American enforcement officers and a totally unproven threat to British factories a whole raft of international treaties were made to uphold this new moral crusade. To this day it is run by a closely guarded inner circle of so-called experts. To get into this elite you have to uphold the basic beliefs. Anybody who dares

to suggest that the entire edifice is worse than pointless is, by definition, not an expert. The doubters are also suggesting that we break international treaties so they are dangerous liberals.

The history is even worse. Britain happily wrecked China with opium – something from which it arguably only just recovering. Having done this we now claim the right to tell the world what they should be doing to solve our problems. We support the Americans when they go into weak countries like Afghanistan and Columbia and use drugs as an excuse to do what they like. We claim that we are doing them favours but at the end of the day it is our laws that are causing their problems. If we legalised drugs the entire criminal infrastructure that is wrecking their countries would simply collapse.

I have never seen a calculation of how much they could take off income tax if they legalised drugs but it must be a fair bit. Not only could you save all the enforcement costs but you could also tax them. With all drugs clean and pure and supplied with health warnings health costs should go down as well.

The main point is, however, just one of personal freedom. Why shouldn't people smoke what they want. If they want stronger drugs why shouldn't they have them too. The law should be about what we do to other people not what we do to ourselves. There is nothing wrong with telling people they shouldn't drive cars when using drugs or even telling them to keep off the streets but that should be the limit. If some young people want to sit under their tree and try to escape from the ugly world around them who are we to tell them they can't.

8 Arms sales

We are finally installing the reactor pressure vessels. They have been made in a shipyard and are basically just large cylinders with a lot of plumbing to take the heat away. Power reactors are fundamentally very simple things – far less complex than bombs with their high explosive charges and beryllium reflectors. All a reactor is is a pile of fissile material much like the first one in the squash court in Chicago. Having said all this we are having to move fast to get finished in three months because the whole vessel with the shielding concrete will be far too heavy to move so we are having to pour all of the concrete while we are here. The vessels came on board as two cylinders, one inside the other, and the concrete pumps are working 24 hours a day to fill the gap between them. By the time we move on it has all got to be ready for the fuelling machine to go on top and we shall be floating a full two metres deeper in the water.

There is not much happening at this shipyard. I have seen some pictures of it 50 years ago with a dozen freighters on the slipways. Now the reactor vessels are almost all the work they have except a couple of warships and the royal yacht. I am really keen on the yacht. When they had the referendum on making the monarch retire at 60 I was in favour but the Prince of Wales has to miss his turn so the prime minister managed to get him the yacht as a consolation prize. We had to change, the prospect of a permanently geriatric monarchy was no good for tourists and promoting exports and as far as I am concerned that is what they are for. Nobody comes here for the weather, the service or the value for money. It's actually quite a big ship with a two decks of exhibition space for the public to walk round when it is in port. Some

of his ideas for the exhibition are a bit crazy but no harm in that, the tourists will love it.

The warships are another matter altogether. I don't have too much of a problem with some ships for our navy. If only to assist with aid missions, prevent piracy and enforce fishing controls we need a few ships. Even submarines to preserve the nuclear deterrent until we can negotiate out of it are possibly justified. My problem is with the arms exports. I can see no justification for selling arms to other countries whether they are new or even second hand like the US selling the battleship General Belgrano.

If a soldier in a country that we have hardly heard of shoots another soldier in some local war who is to blame? Do we need to blame anybody or even care? Can we just say that it is nothing to do with us and if we didn't sell them guns they would kill each other with machetes like they did in Rwanda or possibly buy guns from another country. For me the answer is clear – if somebody is killed with a weapon that was either made or designed in the UK then we carry a fair part of the blame for that death. We should not only refuse to sell weapons but we should look after the ones we make for ourselves so nobody copies them. Selling them to countries that already have a big arms industry might be ok but it would be difficult to ensure that they were not sold on later. We should know by now that selling arms to so-called reliable allies never works. Iraqi weapons of mass destruction made in the USA should be enough to show us that.

I find the whole concept of war very difficult to rationalise, probably because it is intrinsically irrational in the first place. If I had been conscripted would I have gone to war? Would I have killed anybody or would I have been one of the many who apparently aim their guns to miss? Can we blame war on the common foot soldier? We have had enough wars to end all wars to know that realistically there will never be one for as long as any human beings survive. The human element may almost disappear with robot tanks and planes doing the real damage and soldiers just moving in after. Their only jobs may be to try to control anything that is left and probably distribute aid and try to reconstruct. Who can we blame then?

The ban on exporting landmines is a classic case of hypocrisy. We want to ban them because we might be there to see the result of what they do. Killing civilians in large numbers with bombs and shells is ok because we are diverted from pictures of the damage by stories of the outcome of the battle. If a mine kills the same civilians a few years later all there is to see is the damage without any of the glory.

The problem is the way that the military is so completely part of our society that we can't help supporting it. Whenever we pay taxes we are probably supporting subsidised arms exports somewhere. We are certainly supporting the military establishment who help to sell the arms. Almost anything we build or make indirectly contributes. As a highly successful high technology industry the arms industry probably also contributes to our lifestyles, it certainly creates employment. If it exists we are automatically part of it and must share the responsibility for it.

The only solution is for the ship they are building to be used only by UK forces and completely destroyed when they are finished with it.

9 Country league table

The fuel ponds are the last really big sections of the power plant and they are being installed. They are large precast concrete tanks which have the bases for the fuel handling machines already fitted into them. We are having a lot of them because we shall take on enough fuel for twenty years running and must then store all of the spent fuel for that time. There is no question of fuel transfers while we are on station. After twenty years the plan is that a replacement arrives to take over and this barge is towed back to its home port for refuelling and refurbishment. The fuel ponds will be lifted off complete with the spent fuel in them. The assembly goes almost right up to the far end of the hull with just enough space remaining for the backup auxiliary generators and control room.

We have come a long way up a wide river estuary. We came under two bridges, one of which was a road bridge with a pedestrian access along each side. This gave the protesters their first real opportunity to come near us. There were a few of them with banners hanging down as we went under but they did not get much coverage in the papers. It is amazing how any one subject can only stay in the news for a short time and the press pack are now totally fixed on Malaysia.

Having voted to withdraw our troops I get the feeling that quite a large proportion of the population are feeling slightly guilty. I don't know what to think. I opposed the invasion and I know that you did too but I am now very worried about your nephews and can't help feeling that pulling our troops out has made their position a lot more dangerous. What I am keen on is the new proposal that is coming up for voting. There are only about 320 countries in the world and our governments seem to pick ones to invade for reasons that are quite different from the ones they tell us. What we need is a logical basis for these decisions which is transparent and has nothing to do with oil. Actually the number of countries which could merit a serious invasion is quite small. They are not going to invade a Western country and of the rest a few like Russia are too big and plenty are too small for a real war so there are not that many left.

The idea that the UK should have assessment as its major worldwide objective seems to me to be excellent. Having once dominated such a large part of the world with varying amounts of respect for the human rights of the local populations it is entirely appropriate that we should take one step back and just watch and analyse.

If a country tries to take new territory it is quite clear now that military intervention is necessary to stop it. This now seems to be well established. Just threatening to take territory does not really matter because it is clear that the threat is hollow. I am also not sure that we have the right to do much about weapons development. We have nuclear weapons so why shouldn't they? We should not help or encourage it but it is not a justification for invasion. They know and we know that anybody who uses weapons of that type would invite a massive counter-strike. Mutually assured destruction works.

What we should be assessing is the quality of governance. Bad governance seems to me to be the only justification that could possibly be used for regime change. The first criterion that I would apply before any action is taken is that a country would have to be the worst in the world. If there was another that was worse there could be no justification for doing anything. Of course even if a country came bottom of the table and stayed there a war would still be exceptionally hard to justify.

I can't actually define what good governance is. I know that it must include human rights, lack of corruption, health and education and measures of that type. It should probably include a fairly elected government but this should not be the most important criterion, it matters far more what a government does rather than where it came from. Prosperity is a difficult one because some countries have no hope of prosperity however well they are run and others like the former communist ones have made bad decisions for perfectly good reasons. Dealing with minorities is another unsolvable problem. If two communities have a historic dispute and you introduce democracy the larger one will be in power however many safeguards you have. If the two groups live in the same areas you cannot have a federal structure to give the smaller one self-determination. There is no solution so all we can expect of a government is to do something reasonable to give rights to the smaller group.

The decision on how to assess governance must rest with the people who are going to measure it and must be flexible so it can be changed in the light of experience. Those people should not be politicians with an agenda or even leading industrialists with their agendas. With all their faults and potential problems the job must be done by academics. A committee of academics should be drawn from many different countries and cultures and given massive resources to establish a rating for the governance of every country on a regular basis. Once established, the committee must be self-appointing to avoid political manipulation.

The result will be fascinating. Where will the UK be in the league tables? Is our government any good? I can see that many governments might take specific measures to help their rating but see no harm in this; it would probably benefit the population. At elections we would not need to believe the politicians or the press because there would be an independent assessment of how well a party had done while in power.

10 Religion 2

This is our final stop before taking on the fuel and moving on to start generating power. We still don't know where that is going to be. There is talk of preparations to connect into the grid by the Thames estuary but apparently there is also work at Lagos, Calcutta, Kuala Lumpur and some other cities. The final decision will be highly political and since the press are not asking questions nobody is in a hurry to answer them.

Wherever we go I shall stay on board for the first few weeks so if the local people don't like us I shall know all about it. If they cut the transmission lines when we go to full power our systems will be very hard pressed to cope. All that energy will build up with nowhere to go while the generators shut down. It shouldn't explode but we can't test it.

We are back at the cathedral city. They are installing the second set of auxiliary generators and the second control room. These are at the far end of the hull from our offices but there is an immense amount of activity taking place everywhere because they are wiring up the whole system. Everywhere you go there are bundles of cables hanging out from ducts in the walls and people working at consoles connected to all the different systems. Every time we find something that doesn't go together properly we not only have to fix it but also tell the designers so they can get the next ones right.

There is no sign of any slow-down in the production rate. One hull is being built every three months and because we have come back to a place we have been before there is one moored up next to us. It is one year behind us and has come to get its first set of auxiliary systems and control room. Looking around it gave me a feeling of having stepped back a year, there are many places where they have improved the design but it all looks much the same when you walk through it.

With so much activity down at the dock I am drawn back up to the cathedral for some solitude. This time I walk past the devils in the stonework and through the door. Inside I walk once around the walkway past the tombs of ancient knights set into niches in the walls and then sit down in a chair close to the central aisle. I look up at the ceiling for some time trying to understand what drove the builders to make something so magnificent. It is pure advertising – I know that. In the same way that we are now sold new computers they were selling Christianity by dazzling prospective purchasers with the very finest technology. Once they had them suitably impressed they were ready to sell the deal.

I finally look down at the cross on the altar and try to work out what the deal really is. I find a good definition of sentience to be an understanding of the inevitability of death. With that understanding must come a fear of what lies beyond it. Most of what religions are selling is a solution to that fear. In many ways this is an easy thing to sell because every person must have the fear and nobody can prove whether the goods have been delivered. The way that it is generally sold is also clearly suspect. The idea that a person must have faith in the seller in order to be able to use the goods does not convince me at all. I cannot give credibility to anything that depends on blind faith. Faith is great for the here and now. If you have faith death is solved and you can be happy. If it leads you to charity rather than crusades it is a force for good. I still don't trust it.

I also find the next part of the deal somewhat ridiculous. I cannot believe that constant repetition of statements and songs to glorify God will somehow make Him more inclined to sort out death for us.

The surroundings draw me in. The footsteps of other visitors and the stress and confusion of life outside no longer intrude. I am drawn to prayer. My prayer is not to God. Even if I felt that God would listen I would not presume to call to him. Any problems that I may have are of little significance in the overall scale of things and he must be well aware of the problems of others. My prayer is a process of questioning myself about the world as I perceive it. I, like all other beings, am ultimately a creation of God and have been given the means to tell right from wrong and a desire to act on it. Prayer is one way to access this process.

I have no time for the creationists. They read a book that is largely nonsense and take a story from it that was probably written as fiction and assume that it is true. Man is a product of evolution and I see no reason to assume that God played any direct part in the process. Our creation and probably our ultimate demise are and will be products of the laws of science. Innumerable other sentient species have and will come from these laws and we are no more significant than any of them. God may influence them and the devil may too but their existence would happen anyway.

I also have little time for religions. They all sell much the same deal and when they manage to sell faith the result is suicide bombers, human waves and the American religious right. It seems in America that the more discredited the religions

become with their endless obsessions with the sex, sexuality and sexual problems of their ministers the more religious the nation becomes. Religions sell triumph when they are surrounded by failure. Christianity even seems to sell triumph over other religions which must surely be entirely pointless. The responsibility for ending barbaric excesses of other religions rests with civil justice, not Christianity. If the crusaders ever did convert any infidels there would have been no benefit to them.

Sunlight shines down through a high window onto a carving on one of the hammer beams that support the arched roof. In exactly the way that the builders intended I am inspired to the absolute conviction that there is more to man than the ability to survive and breed.

11 Tax carbon

We have been towed down the coast again to our final port of call before we move onto station and generate electricity. Our mooring is by far the most complex dock that has been built for us. When we came in a pair of tidal gates closed behind us so for the first time we are completely stationary. A canopy reaches out right above the top of our enclosure to keep the weather out and gleaming gantries are stacking containers of nuclear fuel onto a loading platform to be picked up by our fuelling machine. Some is being loaded directly into the reactor and the rest goes into the ponds. For the first few years of running there will be little need to move it about but after twenty years all of it will have been rotated about and the barge will be towed back to this same dock and unload a full inventory of spent fuel. The vast sprawling complex which stretches away into the distance behind the dock has facilities both to make new fuel rods and to reprocess the old ones.

There is a town nearby with a passable old harbour but no fishing boats. Over many years of activity at the nuclear site radionuclides have escaped or been deliberately discharged into the sea. This is a historic legacy, mainly from the early days of nuclear weapons when there was a race to build them at any cost. For many years now there have been no measurable discharges at all but the pollutants already in the sea and nearby estuaries have half-lives measured in thousands of years and show little sign of dispersing. With this comes a complete lack of public trust. The local community has no problem, they have grown rich from the jobs at the plant and there are plenty of yachts to fill the harbour, but the world beyond is deeply suspicious. Slowly pictures of our barges have become familiar and there is some level of acceptance but oil is still seen as a safer form of energy. Supplies are running lower and the climate gets worse but the world is addicted to it. In this country we have tried to tax it as highly as possible but people travel abroad and see it much cheaper and complain about the difference. Airlines pay not fuel tax at all.

The only solution seems to be a tax at source for oil and many other resources that cannot be replaced. It goes without saying that this is a hideously complex idea because it involves getting resource rich countries to pay large amounts of tax to some sort of central authority. The whole idea of the exercise would be to reduce their exports and the result would be that they would probably become poorer. Some people may suggest that this may even finally be a cause that it is worth going to war about. Quite apart from other considerations a war wastes more resources than any

other activity so however bad the climate became I would never support it but trade sanctions might be a solution.

The key to the idea would be deciding where the money was spent. It is tempting to suggest that it should be used to feed the starving millions in Africa and elsewhere but given the massive inefficiency of existing aid programmes the chances of a vast politicised bureaucracy achieving anything much seems small. Many of the countries providing the money might also disagree with the places it was sent. What is needed is a programme that could benefit all countries and the clear choice is space travel.

When the hero in the sci-fi film says that the future of mankind lies in space it may be a cliché but it is also correct. If we have not already passed the point of no return in the destruction of the environment on this planet we shall surely pass it soon. Anything we do to try to save it is well worth the effort because it will delay the process and could make a difference in the race to evacuate but the final outcome is inevitable. This planet will change so significantly that it will certainly not support the populations of people and animals that are now living on it. It might be possible for a few to remain and survive but most of us must leave as soon as we can.

Within the galaxy there must inevitably be planets that would be suitable to colonise. It is also almost certain that there are other sentient species on some of the planets which would reduce the number available to us but the proportion of the total number that are currently in use is hopefully not too high. It is reasonable to assume that if there was a very active space-faring species in this part of the galaxy they would have come here by now.

Our programme should therefore be to explore as far and as fast as possible. There are currently a good number of different space programmes in different countries. All of them should be funded to develop competitive ideas for the design of the space ships. If necessary these would have sustainable environments to enable them to travel for years, possible even generations. In order to build them without depleting the earth even further it will be necessary to use the resources available on the moon, other planets and asteroids. If the rockets to get to the moon could be designed, built and used in just few years using the technology of a previous generation all of this should be quite possible with sufficient political will.

12 Access Rights

We are in the Thames estuary. It always seemed unlikely to me that they would send the first barge away to a distant country where it would be difficult to sort problems out. The trouble is that it was impossible to test most of the plant until we arrived on station. Once there was enough fuel in the reactor to run it towing at sea would have been dangerous so it would have involved unloading some partly used assemblies back into the ponds. Also the turbines can't be run without somewhere to send the power so it would have needed a temporary grid connection. So here we are with completely untested plant all connected up and just beginning to power up. As far as I know it is all working fine but in truth I don't know exactly. The commissioning crew are working on it because we have handed it over to them and shall soon be leaving. The sea crew were busy for a few days securing all the permanent anchorage

and then almost all of them left. We are just fixing the last snagging items but when the last badly fitting door has been fixed we shall also move out.

We are going to do hull 12 next. In the 30 months we have been building this one they have been starting four new ones every year and the 11th is just about to start. We get a three month break to make up for all of the holidays we have missed in order to meet the minister's incredibly tight deadline. All of us believe in the value of this project – we were the team that thought of it in the first place. In order to make it happen we have missed out on most of our week-ends and holidays and worked right through Christmas one year. Several of the men have been complaining about how their children are suffering because they are growing up without them. I have expressed lots of sympathy and done my best to sound helpful can't help wondering about it.

A politician can't go wrong by extolling the virtues of family values. It is an assumed truth that children who grow up without their parents are damaged for life. Anything that goes wrong with a child can be conveniently blamed on some fault with their family. If they under-achieve in school it is blamed on lack of family support. Single parent families are assumed to be an automatic failure.

Just a hundred years ago the exact opposite was assumed. The rich kept large households and often had little time for their children. Long voyages to the empire often took them away for much of the time. Even when they were at home the children were despatched to boarding school. This was taken as a model to aspire to and a capable nanny with other servants to help was seen as the ideal. Many people still rank boarding schools at the top of the educational system. These views are often disputed but there is no clear argument to say this system was worse than what most children have now.

The statistics which report problems with children from single parent families will be heavily skewed by those with financial problems. It is easy to blame an absent parent for outcomes which are simply caused by poverty.

A far more complex problem is that of security. Children will inevitably feel worry and stress when their family circumstances change and, in the case of separations, complex and often ineffectual legal proceedings cannot help. There is, however, little evidence of this being much of a problem when parents faced the hazards of service in the empire. This danger was a part of life and the children must have been aware of it.

In reality the quality of a child's life will probably depend on the quality of the care they get, not on their relationship to the person that gives it. Social and environmental factors probably come next. Nevertheless even children adopted into the best caring families are still taking up their new rights to trace their natural parents and find out about them. The wealthy children of 100 years ago saw their parents occasionally and, no doubt, had regular news from them. This is arguably the one place where the natural parent is definitely needed. All children like to identify with their natural family know where they came from. The other part of this process is the parent contributing to major decisions in the life of the child.

The government has started any number of initiatives to try to improve the quality of care of children but with a complete failure of the legal system it has fallen to a referendum to generate a proposal that can help with the last factor.

The proposal has simply taken a useless existing concept and made it useful. We already have a mothers' day and a fathers' day each year. At present they are nothing more than one more commercial opportunity for the suppliers of over-priced cards and chocolates. The new proposal would make it mandatory for all children under 16 to be with the relevant parent for the day at their homes. Exceptions would have to be made for some military personnel but virtually nobody else. Only about half the workforce will have children under 16 and most organisations now employ both men and women in comparable numbers so, given that both days fall at weekends, the chances of problems with employers would seem remote. For those caught up in custody battles this right would be totally separate and unavoidable. The children would then, as with those kept apart 100 years ago, at least know what their parents were doing and have some idea of their hopes and their input to decisions. The one day each year might be increased slightly but not too far.

For myself I shall enjoy my three months and when we assemble again I shall look with amusement to see how many of the complainers show signs of relief that they are returning to the relatively simple task of building a nuclear power station.

13 Tourism

The government must be very pleased. We have built a nuclear power station about four times faster than anybody else ever did before and nobody has noticed. When it started generation they never even put out a press release. One or two of the broadsheets found out and had brief reviews and the tabloids ignored it. An enterprising local boatman is running trips out to have a look so it is a minor tourist attraction but that is all. Significant events rarely seem to make it into the news.

I am going to be a tourist for the next two months. Our generous bonus means that I can travel in comfort. With my credit card and computer I can book travel, visas, hotels and entertainment in any part of the world. Reasonably safe travel to most places has been possible for a hundred years but internet booking and the almost complete end to travel restrictions which came at the end of the cold war makes it easier than ever before. There is hardly anywhere on the planet where I cannot travel in comfort. There is hardly a city in the world where I cannot fly in and take a taxi to a good hotel. In most of them I shall also find a McDonalds and a cash machine I can use. In all of them my mobile phone will work. If I wish to travel into deserts, forests or other remote areas I can generally hire a car or find a driver to take me there. The system is a magnificent example of human co-operation and achievement and is totally and completely boring. Travel is no longer an achievement and has no purpose as an activity itself.

Tourism is the world's largest industry and growing fast so if the travelling has nothing to offer it must be something at the destination. Some may travel to spend time in the sunshine but many who live in hot climates seem just as keen to travel. Others may travel for new experiences in food and drink but world trade has reached the point where almost all varieties are available in Western countries. Tourists will also often visit local museums and historic structures but frequently they have never bothered to go to far better ones in their own countries. Similarly the coach will often stop for them to view the countryside when few of them may take time to visit the countryside at home.

The tour guide will give an account that is far worse than that available on the internet where all of the sights may be viewed at leisure.

Those countries that lack monuments or much to put in museums have no difficulty in simply creating attractions. Las Vegas must be the best example of this where some low grade scrub land has been made into a massive attraction. To bring in tourists they try to re-create the atmosphere of other places like Venice, Paris or New York. They know that now most of their visitors could easily travel to the original but that does not deter them. They present themselves as a study of the bizarre.

If they lack everything the final solution is shops. It is easy to believe that many people just travel to shop. The newer attractions at Las Vegas are focussing as much on shops as gambling.

Governments strongly encourage travel. Tourism is supposed to make war less likely by promoting understanding of foreign countries and create mass employment and thus the main cost, which is aviation fuel is tax free.

Human beings are natural explorers. History is full of accounts of adventurers who went out to explore the world and without them most human progress would not have been possible. The extent of travel in ancient times is still only just being understood. There is now evidence that the Vikings travelled right across Northern Europe by land and river and traded with Byzantium. It is hard to believe that they carried a credible amount of trade goods with them but it must have been an incredible adventure and the few trade items which survived the journey back would have been wonderful souvenirs. Unfortunately now there is nowhere left that has not been explored. The ability to display the location and a local map on a pocket GPS removes most of the excitement.

Perhaps we just travel because we think that we will enjoy it and when we come back we look at the photos and think that we have enjoyed it. The brochures create an image and we do our best to follow it.

So why should I care? I shall travel and I shall enjoy it. The problem is that tourism is not only the biggest industry it is also one of the most damaging to the environment. The planes are spoiling the atmosphere and the ships are probably worse. The hotels and holiday homes are completely unsustainable. We cannot carry on with it. Either rising fuel prices or tax must soon slow it down and it remains to be seen what will happen next. Shall we be happy to visit the good things that we find near us or are we really just trying to get away and will find it hard to accept it when we can't escape?

Alternative History

Recent historical research has indicated that the official account of Germany's failure to develop nuclear weapons during World War 2 may not be correct. The failure may not have been a deliberate effort by scientists with Jewish sympathies; it may have simply been an error by one scientist. Had this man not made the error, the outcome could have been very different.

Frederick sat back using elegant mechanism of his leather office chair to recline it into a comfortable position. He was tired but this did not bother him because in one week he was due to retire and then he could have all the relaxation he wanted. He saw the day's events as the culmination of his career. The old Fuhrer had died of natural causes at an extraordinary 103 years of age and the young Fuhrer, although young was a relative term; had just been sworn into office in good health. Having been responsible for their personal protection for the last forty years Frederick was proud of his achievement.

In response to a gentle knock at the door he shouted, "Come" but did not sit up. Hearing the door open he asked "What is it?" in a tone that would make it clear to his junior that such an intrusion would need a good justification at the end of such a long day.

The response was laughter. He swivelled his chair to face the door tilting it up as he went and found himself face to face with the young Fuhrer himself. He was removing his hat to reveal his hair with its first streaks of grey, and closing the door and sitting down on the only other chair in the room.

Frederick was almost lost for words. "I am honoured. I could have come to your audience room if you had called me. This is most unusual. Please excuse the state of my office..." He tailed off into silence as the Fuhrer sat still silently laughing at him.

"Relax Fred." He replied, "I may be the Fuhrer now but you're still Uncle Fred to me. I like this office the way it is and think that I shall use it myself when you retire."

"Can I get you some refreshment? My secretary could bring some coffee."

"A glass of brandy would be most welcome. I am told that you keep a fine vintage in here."

Frederick did indeed keep an excellent vintage in his cabinet concealed within the bookcase. He was somewhat alarmed to find out that the Fuhrer knew about it but relished the taste of it when he had poured out two good measures.

"Many years ago." The Fuhrer began. "Very many years ago, when I was just 12 years old I heard you say something and I have waited all this time to ask you about it."

Frederick waited, having no recollection of what he might have said.

"You said that there were some things that I ought to be told about what really happened so that I could stop making a fool of myself by telling lies to people who knew the truth."

He remembered now, the new grass had only just been sown where the last traces of the concentration camps had been obliterated and this poor innocent child was telling people what a kind and caring person his father was. The boy must have

had good hearing because he had just run by as he had made the remark to a colleague.

“Why have you waited so long to ask about it? There are few still alive who know the whole story.”

“I asked my father and he grew angry and made me swear never to ask anybody again but for my security I must know. I must know all of my enemies.”

“You are right. I can, and must, tell you a lot about your father and what he did during the war. I must also tell you where to find documents about it, but before I start I shall tell you about my contribution.”

“But you were just a child in the war.”

“Yes I was, but without my contribution we would have lost. One day just after the start of the war my father had to visit Professor Heisenberg and, because my mother was sick and there was nobody else to look after me he took me with him.”

The Fuhrer was intrigued. He thought he knew all about Professor Heisenberg, the father of Germany atomic weapons, which had saved them from the advancing allies and brought them to world domination. “What did you do?” he asked.

“I spilt the coffee. I was standing around feeling bored and he had this fascinating little ornament on his desk. I reached out to touch it and he shouted at me to leave it alone. As I jumped back I spilt his coffee all over his papers.”

“How did that help the war effort?”

“One of the papers was his calculation showing that the critical mass of enriched uranium needed to make an atomic bomb was 4000 kilos. The paper was to be presented to show that it would not be possible to make a bomb because it would take hundreds of years to produce that much. He was furious because the coffee had dissolved the ink and he could not read some of the calculations. But when he repeated them for the presentation he came to a different conclusion, very different, he concluded that only about 4.5 kilos were needed and we could make one with a few weeks’ production from an enrichment plant. He told me about my contribution years later just before he died.”

At that moment the assassin’s bullet shattered the window and embedded itself in the Fuhrer’s shoulder. Frederick knew immediately what it was and slammed his hand down on the alarm button as he dived to the floor to give first aid.

When the stretcher was taken away Frederick slumped into his chair. Everybody knew what had to be done but only he had the authority to decide where it should be done. He could not retire until it was done. It had only been done on two previous occasions but on the last one, and that had been during his term of office, it had been done twice. That time the bullet had missed by a wide margin but retribution still had to be taken. The thought of what he had done haunted him every day of his life. The first bomb had killed a million people in Panama city before new evidence had emerged and a second one had been used to kill a further hundred thousand on moonbase three.

Within minutes hundreds of troops had sealed off the area and helicopters were circling above. Within hours the bodies of two men were brought in. Frederick looked at them and their equipment. They looked good, very very good. They must have been good to penetrate his security. His men had not killed them; they had taken cyanide.

The guns were German made of course, because all other nations were prohibited from making them. All serial numbers had been removed. There was only one clue to work on. The men were African. They must have been brilliant, the last black people living in Germany had left half a century ago; most Germans scarcely knew what they looked like. To get to Berlin without being stopped was an incredible achievement. To be anywhere outside Africa was very rare for an African.

Frederick looked down on Khartoum from the window of his jet transport. The rail tracks stretched across the landscape to the North, South, East and West in perfect straight lines and below him the massive locomotive sheds stood to either side of the great junction. In many ways he knew that the Fuhrer envied his counterpart in Italy. Mussolini had died when his surviving son was just 17 years old leaving him in control of Italy and it's assigned control over the whole of Africa. Those with a sense of humour had suggested that the child must have been deprived of a train set because he set about the most phenomenal railway construction programme the world had ever seen, covering the entire continent. The collective leaders of the African countries had formed a delegation to see him and complain about the cost but he had simply abolished the countries and assumed direct rule. Now the railway system formed the backbone of an economic powerhouse that fed and clothed Europe.

They circled the airport ready to land. It was an entirely military installation because civilian use of aircraft was not permitted anywhere on earth. A massive crowd had gathered outside the fence that surrounded it. A very small number of soldiers could be seen patrolling inside the fence.

Frederick's assistant looked down with concern. "The security looks very casual."

Allowances had to be made. The Major was an excellent man and his bravery was beyond doubt, but this was a very unusual situation. "Remember Major" Frederick replied. "Nuclear retribution is assured for my life. One shot near me and the city goes. It is a very strange position to be in. As soon as you take over when I retire you will be in it."

The crowd stood motionless as the plane landed. None of them had ever seen a jet before. The sleek menacing lines of the mach 2 craft made left no doubt that a senior German officer had arrived. They taxied to the terminal and the door opened to reveal what looked to Frederic like a sort of fashion parade.

Italian officers stood in two lines in the intense heat in full dress uniform. These immaculate uniforms included tall white colonial style helmets each with an extravagant plume from some tropical bird.

Turning to Frederick before descending the steps the Major remarked. "This shouldn't take long. I'm not surprised they did it if they are ruled by that lot."

They were introduced to the Governor General who was at the front of the line. They ignored the rest of the line and walked straight to the waiting car. The governor ran after them and swiftly removed his helmet to be able to join them in the car. Frederick noticed that the black attendant to whom he handed it was as immaculately dressed as the Italian officers.

The car sped down an avenue lined with mature trees with large elegant villas behind them. The building at which they stopped, however, made the villas seem insignificant by comparison. It was a palace of colossal proportions but not lacking in

elegance. Pure white classical columns seemed to stretch endlessly in each direction. All around it fountains were arranged among perfect green lawns.

Frederick turned to the Governor. "If we decide to destroy this city I strongly suggest that you create your new capitol on a more modest scale. You may wish to re-create the glory of ancient Rome but this will have caused anger among the natives."

"On the contrary" the Governor replied. "They have great pride in the buildings of this city."

"You really believe that?"

"Let me show you."

The car turned and they toured the city. There were many impressive municipal buildings and the Governor proudly pointed them out as they passed. They drove on into the industrial areas. Large factories were surrounded by vast neighbourhoods of poorer housing for the workers. Frederick had to admit, however, that even in these areas they population seemed to be enjoying the country's prosperity. Frederick tried giving the driver directions to go down poorer looking streets but they never came to any slum areas.

"You see." The Governor said. "There is no poverty here which is worse than parts of Europe. As for Asia, there is no comparison."

"It is true that Asia is poorer." Frederick agreed. This was common knowledge. For some reason the Japanese seemed never to have stopped fighting the war when they were given control of the continent with the backing of the nuclear deterrent. Despite efforts to suppress them, stories of almost daily atrocities and massacres circulated. "The fact remains" he continued. "The assassins were natives of Africa."

"This part of Africa." the Major added. "So they must have had some reason to be sufficiently angry with your administration."

"You are coming to a lot of premature conclusions" the Governor replied. Seeing that Frederick wished to hear what he had to say he continued. "First you should be aware of the consequences of recent drought in this area. Your men may have been correctly identified as members of tribes which are local to this area but a few years ago several whole tribes moved a thousand miles south to avoid crop failures."

"You mean you forcibly transported them?" the Major asked.

"No, we provided free transport, on the trains of course. We moved several million people in a few weeks without difficulty." He added with pride.

"So you are saying that they may have come from the South?"

"I am saying much more than that. I am saying there are many possibilities. I ask you to consider them all carefully before you destroy this city. You assassin may not have even been aiming at the Fuhrer, there were two men in the room at the time."

"That's preposterous" the Major replied but Frederick said nothing.

They slept in luxury in the palace and in the morning Frederick made a surprise announcement. "We shall travel south by train to see where your missing tribes have gone."

They entered the massive station to be confronted by huge steam locomotives pouring out smoke up to the high vaulted ceiling. They were, however, swept past

them to the Governor's personal train. This was drawn by a sleek diesel, which lacked none of the styling of everything else he had.

Every two kilometres they passed a lengthsman's hut set back from the trackside. Even these men could be seen to wear smart uniforms as they did their best to stand to attention as the train shot past. Soon they passed a train headed by three of the big steam locomotives travelling at great speed in the opposite direction. Behind the engines was an enormous train, over a hundred of wagons full of fruit and vegetables. "It will turn west at the junction south of the city." The Governor explained "Over the bridge at Gibraltar and on to Paris without stopping except for fuel and water."

They enjoyed an excellent breakfast and the Major continued suggesting reasons why the assassins might not have come from his country. "It required an enormous resource, a great organisation, we would have seen it. It could have been the Jews, they have many contacts with the area we are going to because the tribes that were moved out of Madagascar are located there."

The Major was not convinced. "Just more reason to suspect poor administration causing insurrection by crowding two refugee groups into the same area."

The Governor was infuriated by this response. "Central South Africa is vast and fertile and very prosperous. The whole area from Mozambique through the regions of the Rift Valley to Angola and the Congo in the West is a belt of great prosperity where all the people live well. The operation was very well planned." He looked slowly at Frederick and back at the Major. "Tell me sir, who knew that the Fuhrer was in that office? You would have been in the anteroom but who else would have seen him go in?"

Frederick had to step in quickly and obtain apologies from both of them.

The train sped south as the three of them sat in silence. They passed through a small town. Here there was no motor transport. Conserving oil to ensure that it lasted for the duration of the thousand year Reich limited its use outside Germany to the major industrial centres. Exporting it brought prosperity to parts of Nigeria but little was used locally.

Eventually the Governor started to ask Frederick some questions. "We must seek the truth. Why did the Fuhrer come to see you?"

"He came to ask me for some information about things that happened long ago. Terrible things that his father would never tell him about".

"Did many people know that you were going to tell him about them?"

"I had mentioned my plan to tell him at some time to several other officers but nobody knew that he would ask about it on the occasion."

"Don't you think that somebody might have wanted to stop you? They might not have wanted everybody to know what they or their parents had done. They might have thought that he might set up an enquiry or something?"

Once again the Major cut in. "Governor you speak out of turn. You do not understand what we are here for. This is not a murder mystery like a detective story. The procedure is laid down. In the event of an assassination attempt there will be nuclear retribution just the same as there is for armed insurrection or refusal to supply goods. This is unfortunate for this colony because there is clear evidence where the assassins came from. You will just have to put up with it and be thankful that when

we have decided on a location we shall give sufficient warning for your men to move out. Also be thankful that it has not happened often around here so this place will not be reduced to a wasteland like Eastern USA”.

Frederick made no move to contradict this. The Governor made one last plea. “Why should anybody from around here want to assassinate the Fuhrer. His many sons are all just like him are they not? Nothing would be gained. What about justice and seeking the truth?”

Nobody replied so they sat in silence again. Morning coffee was served. The line was so well maintained that not a ripple showed on the liquid in the elegant porcelain cups.

“This really is an excellent train you have” Frederick remarked.

“Thank you sir” the Governor replied. “It has many facilities. It even has a whole carriage dedicated to communications equipment. We shall not reach Nairobi for some hours so if you would like to telephone your office this could be arranged. Perhaps even” he added, “you might care to phone the Fuhrer to see how he is and finish your conversation that was so rudely interrupted.”

This remark brought an immediate reaction from the Major. “You couldn’t possibly. The line might not be clear, it might not be secure.”

“The line would be quite clear and our security encoding is the very best.” The Governor replied. “I can see no reason why not”.

Frederick could also not see any reason why not and was about to stand up when he glanced out of the window to see a large black man standing quite close to the train. He was holding a rifle and for an instant Frederick saw him as the image of the bodies he had seen in Berlin.

“Who was that man with a gun?” he asked earnestly.

“A guide for big game hunting.” The Governor replied.

“Would he be well practiced at hunting with that gun?”

“Yes”

An encampment of tents came into view and Frederick commanded that the train be stopped. They descended from the carriage down a set of steps and were greeted by a large detachment of armed Italian guards who had run down from another carriage. Walking around a low hill to enter the camp the soon saw who the hunters were. A light aircraft with swastikas on the wings could be seen at the end of a short airstrip.

“I never knew that any of my countrymen came down here to hunt.” Frederick remarked to the Major. “It is very surprising that none of my officers mentioned it to me, it could explain a lot.”

The Major was trying to think of a reply when a group of Germans emerged from a tent. They looked surprised to see the visitors and then clearly recognised the Major as a close friend and moved forward to greet him.

Frederick looked on in amazement at the group of Germans with their trained black hunters around them. The Germans had now realised who he was and what he was doing. He stood between the two groups, the Germans in front of him and the Italians behind him and started to think the unthinkable. He turned to the Governor to ask to use his communications system.

He had taken one step when the shot killed him.

The Governor’s elegant features registered shock, but only for an instant.

“That was a most unfortunate accident”. He commented. “Major, could we discuss this”.

The Major stood holding his gun and looked bewildered by this reaction. Nevertheless he agreed.

The two men moved to some convenient chairs in the shade. “This country is a wonderful place” the Governor began. “But we have one problem. The Boers. They should have gone long ago but they said that they had no other country to go to. They have all gathered near the one city and they do nothing but insult us. Because of their German connections we can do nothing about them. Perhaps you could help?”

“Cape town?”

“No, Johannesburg.”

A cargo for the armies of the Union
Or

The judgement of the mermaid

The eye of the storm was calm. The captain knew that he had little time before it passed by and the wind would be on them again. He ordered men aloft, hurrying up the ratlines to secure what they could of the tattered sails. In moments they were out on the spars tying down the frayed canvas and then, with no time to spare, they were back on deck, checking the hatches before going below. Seeing them go, he tightened the lashing on the wheel one last time, shook his fist at the albatross, swore a foul oath at the mermaid, and followed them down, sliding the black iron bolt home behind him.

A few short days later the sea was calm. There had been just one good night with a steady South Westerly stretching the hastily sewn mending of the sails. But the mermaid had followed easily, seeming to laugh every time he looked back at her in the moonlight. They had made just a few degrees north and now the sea was oily flat and calm, and she was preparing to sing.

“Master gunner.” His voice was clear and commanding, showing no trace of fear. “Powder and shot to all guns.”

“Shot sir?” The questioning of this order did not surprise the captain. He would expect an experienced man to make sure when a routine was changed. He could make quite enough noise without the shot.

“Yes, master gunner, shot.”

The master gunner was a legend among the ships. With his five guns he had sunk pirates off Martinique and rebels off the Carolinas, but he had never been asked to do what was now expected of him.

“Load, master gunner”. Crewmen skilfully prepared the guns, hesitating only slightly as they lifted the heavy shot.

“Aim, master gunner.” Those green eyes must surely be able to see right into the barrels as they pointed down at the water.

“Hold your fire.” The commanding voice made even the captain turn sharply.

“Does your lordship claim to command this ship? You have brought this upon us and now I must finish it.”

The captain had been told he was a lord of the realm but knew nothing more. The agent in San Francisco had insisted that he should stop at the desolate port two days south of Valparaiso to board a passenger. He had tried to protest that he carried ore that was urgently needed by the foundries of Maine, but the agent had insisted: One passenger, and his baggage, which had turned out to be the massive oak chest which had taken eight of his best men an hour to load.

“That fish has not brought this upon you”. His lordship replied, standing at the rail to look directly at the mermaid. “We are here due to your incompetence. You should have reefed your topsail as we passed the land of fire, and now we should be in the sea breezes from the river Plate, not becalmed hundreds of leagues west.”

The captain looked up at the foremast. It ended with jagged splinters where the storm had taken the top, spinning away with the sail still attached. He dreaded meeting the owners at the wharf in Manhattan, a whole career besmirched by a few

seconds of bad luck south of the Horn. The albatross looked down on the damage as it flew by, circling endlessly. Both it and the mermaid had appeared in that instant.

The crew believed in him, he knew that, and also the mermaid. It was his lordship she wanted, and she had said so when they had talked in the calm of the sunrise. She had told him stories of slaves abandoned as mines collapsed; tales of the blood on the silver in the great chest with its many chains and locks.

“Stand down master gunner” The edge of certainty gone from his voice. “What must I do? I cannot give you this man. I would certainly hang for it.”

“Your watch, captain.” The mermaid replied.

He reached in his breast pocket for the chain and drew it out. It had been crafter with gold and diamonds high in the Alps and many men had fought and died for it. Nevertheless he held it out as far as he could reach to let it drop.

His lordship could not see this fortune go and stretched out as far as he could to catch it. With a fearful beating of wings, talons ripped at his arm, tearing his grip from the rail and the weight of silver in his pockets drew him swiftly below the [oily] surface.

Mermaids 2. A cargo for the Pacific Railroad
Or

The compassion of the mermaid

The mermaid heard the hurried service and saw the sewn canvas drop beside her. As soon as it was below the surface she looked inside. With years of practice she could immediately identify a kindred spirit. This one wasn't. The soul would very soon be gone. There was only time for a few words.

"It was a collision. They came at our ship in the night. We had rounded Cape Horn many times before. There was nothing we could do. We were good men, all of us. Trying to help build our nation. The land of the free."

That was all. She didn't believe him. His spirit was bad. She couldn't see his face but she could picture it covered in scars from fights he had won, or at least not lost badly, and left dead men behind him in some stinking gutter. She left the iron weights to carry him down and swam on after the ship.

The planking was almost new. It was a magnificent vessel – or rather it had been. It was a three-masted barque proudly showing on its elegant stern that it hailed from New York. But now it was a mess. That it had been in a collision could not be denied. Directly below the forward mast the port-side planking was stove in right down to the water line. The stays had been ripped loose and the mast itself swayed free. Teams of men were toiling night and day at the pumps. Others struggled to throw what they could of the cargo over the side while working full sail on the two surviving masts.

The only time they stopped was when another one died, whether from injuries from the collision or exhaustion at the pumps, they only got a few quick words. Just two hours later there was another: a smaller body. She had hopes for a younger innocent soul who could join her, even become a companion, but this was not to be. His words were even briefer.

"The captain seemed such a good man. Just two more tacks and we would have been clear of the strait and into the Pacific. But he wouldn't bear off."

With that he was gone and she swam up beside the ship to continue trying to work out what really puzzled her. It was massive and black and took up the entire space between two masts. Two men were standing by it. They looked exhausted.

"It's got to go." One was saying. "We'll never make Stanley with that weight of that locomotive dragging us down. I know it's worth as much as your ship but you are going to lose both of them. I know about the Pacific railroad. I know they're about to break through onto the plains. I know how much the government is paying them to build it."

The other man looked haggard and spent. What must originally have been a smart uniform hung from him in shreds. He was leaning onto the rail with his head bowed and looked up just long enough to see the wreckage of his ship.

"They're thieves and crooks in Stanley. They'll bankrupt me for sure. There's not an honest man there. If only we could make Montevideo." His head dropped again. He knew it was far beyond them to get there. Finally he looked back at the engine and just said "sixteen thousand dollars a mile".

With that he collapsed. Two men rushed to pick him up. Once he was safely away they started loosening the heavy chains that secured the engine to the deck. She could see that they were planning it carefully. They waited to release the last one until the ship had ridden up on a massive wave. As it came down the engine rolled forward taking the remains of the damaged mast with it, crashing through the rail and away.

She saw it coming and moved. Looking back she saw that now the ship rode higher in the water. It was lighter and faster but hopelessly down by the stern. Two men struggled at the wheel but still they could only just control it.

Land was in sight. A narrow entrance led to the port but to get to it they had to round a jagged headland and the wind was driving them onto it. In desperation they went about and ran onto the beach in Bluff Cove.

It was quiet now in the sheltered cove. The ship had sailed its last but still dominated the bleak landscape. The low sun shone on the men as they loaded the cutter with the last of their possessions. A small crowd formed in silence on the dunes, watching and waiting for their time to take what they could. She saw the captain emerge and stand at the wheel in the ruins of his ship. Suddenly a shot rang out and he fell.

They said the words more slowly in the cutter. With nowhere to go they had time in abundance but all too soon the ragged bundle of canvas was in the water.

"I always tried to do the right thing for my wife, my sons, and the men who invested in my ship. Now they are ruined all of them. It was only right for me to take my life."

For once she could not tell if he was a kindred spirit.

"It wasn't our fault. We were on a starboard tack and still they came straight at us. We were showing all the proper lights. We even put up two phosphor flares but they still came. We had the right by the laws of the sea. They must have seen us, mustn't they?"

"No." She replied as gently as she could. "Their watchman was not looking. He was sheltering from the storm, neglecting his duty. You have killed many men. Many of your own men and all were lost on the other ship. You cannot remain and live with me. But I shall stay and watch over your soul as it rests here through the ages, and I shall watch your ship until all of it has gone."

Author's note: Much of this is true. The last ribs of the wreck remain on a beach near Port Stanley. Whether the mermaid is still there is not known.

Mermaids 3. Passengers seeking refuge from the famine.

Or

The gift of the mermaid

The captain watched the sheets of ice floating down from the Hudson, gnawing at the oak planking as they passed by. The ice would soon break up in the waves and melt in the salt water when it reached the sea. That was where his ship was meant to be, not here being slowly sawn through while his passengers could only look at Ellis Island in hope that was turning to desperation.

There was no reason why they should not be there, on the island, on their way to new lives. There was no disease on the ship. There was none of the cholera, dysentery and influenza that was killing so many on the dozens of other ships that lay in the anchorage. Their guardian had looked after them all the way from Dublin bay and not one of the three hundred souls had perished during the voyage.

The city quarantine officer had seemed to be a good man; a big man, climbing the ladder from the pilot cutter and stopping to catch his breath before announcing himself in a true Irish accent. He was sympathetic at all times but he simply could not believe that all the passengers, weakened by the biblical famine at the start of the voyage, were now in good health. "So you have a guardian", he said, "what is that? A fairy that looks after you? Yes you said it was a mermaid. With long hair and a tail you said". He did agree that the foul water around them, when it could be seen between the sheets of ice, full of the waste from all the crowded ships, was enough to ensure that the mermaid would never be seen there. He also made sure that basic food and water was sent to them fresh from the city stores.

The surgeon had come later. He had timed it badly, just when the incoming tide swept past stirring up vicious eddies as the ships swung round on their anchor chains. His skiff had some difficulty coming alongside, and when he finally reached the deck he swore at all of them before starting his examinations. After the first few, all healthy, there was a young girl with a child in her arms. He looked at her with a fearful intensity and told her that in this country they burnt witches, "and their children", he added, moving on. He left quickly, leaving no doubt that he would have been happier to see a ship full of disease and death. He ordered that the patrols by the fast steam harbour cutters should be doubled, day and night, crewed by the best men and well provided with lanterns, warm clothing, cutlasses and sharpshooter's rifles.

The first mate of the ship came up the companionway to start his watch, looking around from the ice to the groups of passengers on the midship deck, wrapped up in tattered clothes against the bitter cold.

"It was not a blessing, it was a curse. You should not have helped the bird." He repeated again and again. He had done this often, cursing at nobody, as the weeks passed and ships that had arrived long after them were taken into the dock.

The passengers sometimes looked down at the water, but none were foolish enough to even think of trying to swim for freedom.

The captain had bought the canoe from the tribes of the great lakes and kept it in a sail locker, well away from prying eyes. The birch bark did not fight against the ice like the oak, it bent and moved and whispered past in the night across the river to

the Manhattan wharves. Leaving it in the gloom beneath the stern of an enormous barque he climbed up the timber piling into the lamplight of the dock. He walked past the ship, with its massive bowsprit looming over him, and on into the dank alleyways. There was much on offer that he longed for, good food and drink and more, but he kept on until he saw the stone steps of the church.

The priest was frail but wise and finally agreed to the captain's plan, having discussed earnestly the good of wisdom and the wisdom of goodness and the ways of fairies and mankind. He presented an incongruous sight in his robes the following morning among the nets and ropes of the fishing smack as it tacked through the narrows to the outer bay. The mermaid came quickly to his sign of the cross but the sun was low over the sea by the time she succumbed to his persuasion and gave orders to her companion, companion she insisted, not familiar. The understanding that men would always mistrust pure goodness came slowly and painfully.

An enormous cheer came from the thousands on all the ships when the albatross was sighted over Statten Island flying in from the sunset. As it swooped and dived among them their spirits rose and many started surging towards the windlasses to raise anchors and make for the shore. Seeing this, the captain of the first cutter ordered his men to take aim and a ragged volley rang out. But the bird was not finished. In one final spasm, it aimed its planned last dive at the complex pipes and valves at the top of his steam boiler. The stoker did his best to dampen the coals but, with no way to escape, the stem pressure grew fast until it caused an explosion which could be heard on every ship and right across the city.

At first it seemed a final insult to their ill fated ship that the cutter had been so close that the explosion stove in three planks which had been weakened by the ice at the water line. The crew desperately lowered sails over the side to stem the icy flow and crew and passengers alike manned the pumps as best they could. However soon they saw the flotilla of small boats summoned by the noise, who came and rescued them and, without further thought, took them to Ellis Island.

Revenge unbidden

The fleet sailed through the night in silence punctuated only by the sounding of the solitary signal gun from the flagship, marking the hour. In the thickening sea mist distant shapes of flags and sails were scarcely seen by watchmen sheltering from the cold. The collision came from nowhere, catching the crews at their lowest, disorientated and seeming leaderless. At least that was the verdict of the court-marshal a month later on the dusty Caribbean island.

“Lieutenant Carter, we find you guilty of gross negligence in the command of your ship by failing to keep it on a true bearing and causing a collision at sea.” The admiral was looking him directly in the eye, daring him to reply. “In view of the extreme circumstances you will remain in command of the Kestrel but a severe reprimand will be placed on your record.” His eyes told the story of his son, too drunk to take his first command, leaving it to this upstart from the family of a fisherman, who dared to hold his gaze.

“Captain Burrows.” He continued, addressing the other man but still watching Carter for the slightest reaction. “We accept your assurance and that of your first officer as gentlemen. We find that you acted correctly in all matters and kept the Orion on station in the fleet until impacted by the Kestrel.”

Back on his crippled ship, Carter could feel his men watching him. They knew he had been at the binnacle every second before the great ship of the line had careered at them out of the gloom. They couldn’t understand why he had said nothing and let their reputations be damned along with his. He ignored their looks and drove them ever harder to get their 30 guns ready for action. The broken hull timbers would offer scant protection for his gunners and a storm or a misjudged tack would leave the gun deck awash, but he said nothing.

The Spanish fleet was sighted at dawn and they sailed within the hour. Clearing the headland under full sail the capital ships were soon engaged with the Kestrel and the other frigates holding the ends of the line. Carter felt the deck shake as his port side guns fired high in the air to get maximum range to harass the enemy reserves behind their line. Suddenly the signal came from the flagship “move forward and engage”. He looked at it for a moment not believing. Passing his telescope to his first officer he asked for confirmation.

They moved into a maelstrom of fire. Two enemy ships stood in reserve, they were old but massive, looming over them with eighty guns each. Their crews called out abuse after the first broadside. The shots tore across the deck. Carter looked up from the helm to see the damage just as the wheel dissolved into a shower of splinters in front of him. A few seconds later the fore mast was crashing to the deck and the ship lay helpless unable to bring even her few guns to bear. They waited for the next broadside which would be fired lower to tear their hull apart but it never came. Out-gunned and seeing his line begin to falter the Spanish admiral had signalled to withdraw.

Watching the tow line released from the Kestrel back in the harbour the admiral was heard to remark “not much fight in her, not like the Orion that really fought today.”

The celebration dinner was held on a headland, away from the swamps and mosquitos by the harbour, and commanding a fine view of the fleet at anchor. The

ships carried flags and bunting and all but skeleton crews were gathered at long trestles for the feast. Even the Kestrel had raised a flag on one of its surviving masts but the appalling damage was visible even at the distance. The captured Spanish ship looked relatively undamaged and Carter saw its captain sitting next to the admiral; and wondered why he had ordered the colours struck.

Pigs had been found and roasted and wine from the flagship was served to the officers and local brews to the men. The conversation at the officers' table was brisk as tales of the battle were told and embellished. No mention was made of the Kestrel and nobody spoke to Carter. Suddenly the Spanish captain asked why the frigate had been sent forward. There was a moment's silence before laughter started and rolled back and forth along the table. No answer was given. The Spaniard found he had to laugh as well but Carter could not.

If the admiral had ever actually intended to relieve Carter of his command, he either forgot or decided the Kestrel was too badly damaged for anybody else. Carter thus found himself organising the repairs as best he could.

The mate climbed out of the cutter exasperated. "They've got piles of nails there, they're using them to build all sorts of sheds and houses but they haven't got any for us."

"So use trunnels". Carter replied, "there's all sorts of wood on this island including bamboo. Timber fastenings work for the Chinese so they can work for us."

"They'll laugh at us. Call us a Junk." The man replied. But he was already on his way back to the cutter.

"Good." Carter replied. "Let them".

The long sunny days were being interrupted by high clouds passing quickly across. The admiral called the masters to his ship.

"There are hurricane's coming." He said. Stating what they all already knew. "This harbour kept the fleet safe twice in the eighties so we shall keep the capital ships at anchor. But we need scouts to see what the Spanish are doing. Do I have volunteers to become our eyes and ears? I sailed through a hurricane myself in my younger days, any good sea captain can."

But there were no volunteers. Carter waited for the inevitable.

Before leaving, he was heard to remark that hurricanes came from many directions and a secure anchorage in one might not be safe in the next. Captain Burrows laughed, ushering him through the door with wishes for a pleasant voyage.

The Kestrel sailed with her new fore mast still not fully stripped of bark. The crews from across the harbour looked on, some laughing but some troubled. A few even noticed that Carter had deliberately had the sails set loose. As soon as they were over the horizon they were tightened and the new gun ports and hatches secured with their timber fastenings.

The first officer approached him at the helm. "You could turn back to the South." He said. "I have the word of every crew member that nothing would be said."

"We have orders." Carter almost shouted. "We are to proceed west and to find the Spanish fleet and even to engage it if circumstances permit. We must never, never disobey orders."

Just as the wind was freshening they sighted a mast on the horizon. The first officer passed the telescope to Carter. "Do we change course?" he asked.

"What do the orders say?" Carter replied. "Read them out."

He took the copy from his breast pocket and read "To proceed west until we sight the Spanish fleet."

"Can you see a fleet?" Carter asked.

"No, but there could be more over the horizon."

"No, it is not a fleet." Carter insisted. "And is it Spanish?" He passed the telescope back. The French flag was now visible.

"And what if we disobey orders and engage or turn back to give warning?"

Several of the crew were now watching them. He sent them back to their stations for the storm. Some were quietly smiling despite the danger.

All the sail but a single storm jib was taken in and a sea-anchor deployed to keep them into the wind. The men were sent below except the captain and one helmsman and they were both secure with life lines. Between decks a single lantern hung from a beam illuminating the crowd of men surrounded by the creaking hull timbers. The ship rose on each wave and as it came down water would spurt through the hastily caulked joints. They watched the planks bend and heave, grinding against each other. Holding on to gun carriages to stop themselves being thrown across the deck they watched to see signs of the hidden fastenings weakening with the strain.

Even from the deck Carter could see the oak hull timbers bend as the waves hit. The shock would drive through the ship from the bow before shaking free at the stern seconds later. But the suppleness let it work with the storm rather than fighting against it and a day later they pumped the bilges dry and set full sail.

For days they sailed South of Hispanola, searching for the fleet at Spanish towns before bearing north to harbours on the Cuban coast to complete their orders to the letter before they returned.

The Kestrel now flew before the wind, her mission complete, her rig in good order, her harbour just over the horizon. But the first they saw of it was the smoke, and as they sped on the full horror came into sight. Whole ships had been driven across the beach into the swamp while others lay smouldering against the jetties, reduced to bare keels and ribs where their magazines had exploded.

Launching the cutter they were soon ashore to hear the tale of the fleet wrecked by the storm and then bombarded by the French and Spanish with the marines only just managing to hold off a landing party.

"Both the Admiral and Captain Burrows perished with their ships." The officer reported. "You are now the senior officer present."

Carter soon had teams working on ships that could be salvaged, cutting new planks in the forest and raising cannon from the sandy sea bed.

Climbing up to the two simple graves on the headland his first officer talked of sweet revenge.

"No, never". Carter replied sharply. "I did not seek it."

Life before death

Sam ate his meal slowly and enjoyed the large glass of sherry they gave him to follow. Making his way carefully to his favourite chair by the gas fire he was distracted as the door opened. It was a newcomer. They had been waiting since Mrs Grey had died. He examined the man. They looked reasonable enough, possibly mid-seventies, apparently quite fit for it. But the face, he looked again. The man was looking back now, possibly disconcerted by his welcome. There was a spark of recognition and, for Sam, it lit the fire that burned inside him.

After his brief appearance the man was ushered away to be shown his room. Sam sat restlessly, unable to take his normal afternoon sleep. Eventually the man reappeared and Sam stood up to meet him.

“Hello, I never forget a name. It’s Charles is it?”

“Yes. Charles Hobson. It must have been some time ago. Things go by so quickly these days.”

“Yes, you bought one of the Churchill street flats didn’t you? I saw you at the sales seminar and then a few times at the flats. I remember that seminar so clearly. The salesman with all his clever talk. All their pictures of the flats. Artists impressions, that’s what they said they were.”

“Did they? I forget. I’d rather like to sit down. Is that your chair?”

Sam sat down and Charles dragged up a chair next to him. Few of the other residents were awake. The assistant who had escorted Charles into the room looked satisfied and left.

“Yes. I can’t believe how they conned me.” Sam continued leaning forward. “All their smart talk and clever projections about the rental income. They must have known about the problems. Crooks they were. Just common criminals.”

“Were they?” Charles sat back and looked briefly around the room. “I only really bought it because I thought Bob, my son that is, might want to live there.”

“Your son? He couldn’t have lived there. They were a disgrace. Unfit for habitation. That’s what our barrister said. Totally unfit.”

“No he didn’t as it happened, we let it. He met Cynthia. She really is a lovely girl. So good for him. Really kind. You’ll meet her when they visit.”

“I remember when I first looked in our flat after we had bought it.” Sam was looking intently ahead. “It looked smart, very modern, all the latest gadgets. But even then it smelled damp. I can remember talking about it at the time but the agents, the crooks, said that it was just that they were new. Still drying out they said. So we got tenants in anyway but they soon complained. The first damp patch was on the wall next to the bath.”

“Yes now you say. There was a problem. I think we got a plumber in. It cost rather a lot but we were so busy. I guess they fixed it; don’t remember hearing any more about it from the agents.”

“You fixed it yourself? But it should have been fixed by the builder. Didn’t you go to the meeting? We all had the same problems. It was such a good meeting. The start of the residents association. We all exchanged email addresses, appointed a Chair and a secretary. We all agreed that we should force the builders to fix it all.”

“We were preparing for the wedding. I didn’t have time for anything. All the details. The hotel, the photographers, the cars. It took ages but it was worth it. What a day.” He fell silent.

Sam noticed the flowers in the vase on the table against the wall was looking faded. They might be past their prime but they were flowers. That was what he paid for, the privilege of a private care home with little extras that counted, and the rent from the flat made it possible. They had fresh flowers every week and also in the vase in the hall. He checked them every time they were done and complained if he felt they looked cheap.

“We managed to get one of the salesmen to the next meeting.” He was looking at Charles in earnest. Was he older than he looked? “We gave him a really hard time. You should have been there. We told him what we would do. Even then we told him we would take them to court, however long it took. He went away promising they would fix it all. They always did that. Promise everything and do nothing.”

Charles looked up. “Yes – I think I did get lots of emails. But I was so busy helping them get the house sorted out. Young George was on the way by them. I say young; he’s not so young now. A fine young man with such a future ahead of him”.

“We had monthly meetings.” Sam could remember them all. One of the owners had a restaurant and he let them have an upstairs room. He even laid on jugs of fruit juice for them. The solicitor had started coming once they had all paid into the association’s fighting fund. He had told them all about the tribunal. “We got a massive case together for the tribunal. There were details of everything. It was bad workmanship, all of it. The plumbers must have been hopeless and badly supervised at that. It’s all about supervision and that’s what the builders should have done.” He wondered for a moment if Charles was still listening, but, after a moment, he looked up. “It was such a waste. The tribunal said that they couldn’t adjudicate. I never did understand it. Such a waste of time.” He remembered the meeting after the decision had been sent. But they were determined to fight on. The solicitor said they should go to court. It would be slow and expensive but worth it. All Sam could think about was how to tell his wife. She had nagged him endlessly about risking his money buying the flat, almost up to the day she died.

The assistant came back and asked if they would like some tea. This seemed to wake Charles up and he agreed immediately. Sam was lost in thought about the meeting. The assistant had to ask again before he replied.

“We were all really angry.” Sam continued. “The idea that those criminals should get away with it. We had lost lots of money. Some of the tenants had moved out and the repairs to the damp walls had been very expensive. All the re-decorating; it all added up. So we agreed. We all had to put in three hundred pounds each just to get it started.” He remembered how he had paid in cash so his wife wouldn’t know.

“Yes I think I remember the email asking for that. I was so busy.” Charles replied. “We were pricing this massive job in Saudi. It was really exciting, but we all had to work long hours to get it off in time. And then when we got it I had to go out for weeks. It went really well. When I got back they made me a director. We were all so proud. You can imagine how it was, all the family around.” Sam showed no response.

The tea arrived in simple white china cups with two small biscuits on the tray with them.

“How did the court case go?” Charles asked. “I expect it was in one of the emails but you know how it is.”

“Didn’t you hear?” Sam leaned further forward and snatched up a biscuit. “It was in all the papers. We won. We got our revenge. It was brilliant. They had to pay for everything. And didn’t you hear the rest? They went bust. The whole company. You must have seen the pictures we took. We emailed them all to everybody. We went round to their offices as soon as it was announced and jeered at them. There they are. Standing outside their offices with little boxes of things from their desks. Even the director. The one who had told us that they weren’t liable and it was all our fault for not maintaining the flats. Standing there in his suit.”

“I must have missed them. The grandchildren were a lot of work.” Charles was smiling now. “But what wonderful kids. Three of them now. And Cynthia’s so sweet. We always took them when we could. Just to give her a bit of a break.”

Easy pickings

The session chairman looked up in surprise. The presentation had stopped quite suddenly, no summary of results or conclusions, just one last graph and it was done. The Professor was smiling at him. He had been catching his attention and tapping his watch for the last three minutes to make sure there was time for questions and now he had five minutes to fill. He looked up at the audience in relief. Some hands had gone up; he wasn't going to have to think one up himself. He took the first two from near the front, a friend of the Professor with more of a compliment than a question and an old member, well into his retirement but sharp as a knife, with one that was hard hitting but easily ducked. Finally there was the young Chinese man at the back, presumably a research student, who stood up nervously and took the roving microphone.

"The graphs mine." He said, followed by something unintelligible.

The audience separated into two groups. Those who had been watching looked nervously at the floor, clearly wishing to be elsewhere. Those who had not been listening were mostly looking at the palm trees visible through the small windows and were also wishing to be elsewhere, specifically the pool which was in front of the trees. The chair immediately saw the problem.

"Well I am sure the speakers will be glad to discuss any further questions over lunch. This will be served in the terrace bar today, on your left as soon as you are through the door behind you. Please thank the speakers in the usual way."

Chen stood in the queue for the buffet lunch. He had tried to join a group who looked as if they were also research students but none of them turned to face him or include him in their conversation. Just as he had found a plate and was about to take a spoon-full of rice he felt himself being pushed to one side, spilling the rice on the table. He looked up to see the man who had asked the first question, tall and heavily built, looming over him.

"You mind what you say about the professor sonny. You might find yourself on the next boat back home choppy choppy." With that he was gone, ignoring the startled looks of the other students.

Chen joined the other students again at a table for the dinner. It took until the dessert, and several bottles of wine, before the girl next to him spoke to him.

"Did he really copy your graphs?"

"Yes, he must have copied them from my personal files on the network. I had no idea."

"How could he do that?"

"He must have got my password from somewhere."

"If I was you I'd forget it. You won't be able to prove it and you can still put them in your thesis. He won't try to stop you doing that because then he'll have to explain how you got them. If you make a fuss you'll never pass your viva and get your PhD."

"But he stole my results. He never even listed me as a second author."

She turned away to join in the rest of the conversation on the table. Soon the speeches started. The Professor was a guest of honour and went on for a full 30

minutes. Finally he finished and the other students started to leave. Chen was about to follow when he saw a man walking towards him through the groups of tables. He looked like another professor but it was too late to walk out. The man sat in an empty chair and faced Chen.

“You accused Bill, that’s Professor Thornton, of copying your graphs.”

“Yes I did.” By this time the remaining students were all listening.

“Are you sure? Because if you’re sure, we need to do something. By the way my name’s Professor Hunt, that’s John Hunt.”

They had all seen some of his papers and looked on with interest.

“I represent an informal group. We deal with these things. If you see papers being redacted then that’s probably us.”

The city was different. Instead of a row of hotels behind a beach it had a small group of glass-clad skyscrapers and, all around, less than a mile away, a sprawl of factories and slums with snow-clad mountains beyond. From inside the conference hotel, however, it was identical with plush sofas set in vast open spaces with giant chandeliers above them. The pool was in a vast marble-clad room on the twentieth floor with panoramic windows to enable bathers to enjoy the view of the city which, particularly at night, was spectacular.

To the attentive members of his audience, Bill Thornton seemed slightly more nervous than would be expected of a man of his reputation and seniority. However he presented his graphs in professional manner and the data in them was nothing short of excellent. When he finished, the chair was again relieved to see several hands go up with questions. The Chinese research student was sitting nearer to the front this time, waving his hand eagerly but, possibly due to the lack of time or the number of other questions, he was never called. Now brimming with confidence the Professor smiled graciously at the chair before returning to his seat.

Chen held his hand up all the time until the Professor was seated, trying to catch his eye. The man ignored him but John Hunt gave him an almost imperceptible nod of his head when he lowered it.

Bill sat under a single fluorescent tube dimly lighting one corner of the research room. He had a fine office lined with books but if this account was opened from an unexpected node the network would flag up an exception. The files were labelled with Chinese characters but a single number at the end seemed to designate the Chapter and the graphs were all there in chapters 5 and 6. Chen’s thesis was almost complete and he could see that it would be a credit to the department. However, for whatever reason, his supervisor had never let him put his work into a conference for presentation. Bill had seen him working in the lab and his attention to detail was superb.

Bill looked up startled. It was late on a Saturday evening and he had been sure he would not be disturbed. The door opened. A torch beam swung around the room, eventually shining in his direction. He waved and managed a smile for the security guard who quickly apologised for disturbing him.

The graphs contained a lot more data than he had presented before and they were now ready to go in the final thesis with tidy diagrams to illustrate the key points and patterned shading to highlight the important data. He felt sad that he didn’t have

the time to get his own data but it wasn't his fault that he had such a high teaching and administrative load, and he had to hit his target and get two publications every year. He quickly copied the files onto a memory stick. It would only take him a few minutes to set them up in a presentation, which was just as well because he had a dinner appointment on the other side of town in half an hour. The graphs even had convenient spaces in the bottom corner so when he sent them in to the conference secretariat they could add the sponsor's logo before setting them up ready for him on the lectern. Chen would no doubt wave his hand again but the chair would surely take his advice and not call him and Bill had used a neat little software package which stripped all identity from the files so no allegations could stand up. He had bought it for checking blind reviews for the journal he ran and it was ideal for this.

This time the sponsors had been generous, the conference was on a cruise ship. The main theatre in the bow extended through several decks and easily matched the facilities in the best conference centres. As the ship went slowly on with the day at sea he could feel no motion at all and in these new cruise liners, there was, of course, no noise or vibration from the engines to interfere with his presentation. Bill had been invited to present a keynote paper during the opening plenary session and, at his recommendation, the chair was the same man as before. He came from a minor University and was of Chinese origin but Bill was confident that he was completely reliable.

The opening speeches finished. The captain, resplendent in white uniform, had welcomed them on board on behalf of the cruise line and the Chair of the board of the sponsors had given some thinly disguised promotion for their products. Bill walked to the lectern as the technician in high heels and short skirt quickly loaded his file. He started with a couple of slides of text and moved quickly to the data. He could see that many of the audience were keen to see if the results supported and extended what he had presented before, and he was sure they would not be disappointed.

When he displayed the first graph he saw several of them turn to their neighbours and speak in hurried tones. Thinking this slightly rude, but gaining confidence from the obvious impact of the work he moved on to the next.

But now he saw that those who were talking were Chinese. He saw Chen start laughing, oddly sharing the joke with John Hunt. He turned to see that the chair had stood up and was staring at the screen. More and more of the audience were laughing, all pointing at his graph. At a loss he turned to look at it on the screen. The audience fell silent as he turned. He could hear the footsteps of the chairman on the wooden floor. They hesitated and stopped. The big screen looked slightly different from the monitor on the lectern. The patterns in the shading marking the key data seemed to stand out. He was sweating now – why was it so hot? The low rumble of the air conditioning sounded loud. He almost stumbled. Was the ship rocking? Why hadn't he noticed it before? What was it he could see in the shading? Could they be Mandarin characters? What did they say?

Jamaica

The first William had heard was from one of the crewmen and he had heard it from the first mate. Because they had thirty indentured servants still alive when they docked; they would pay no port charges. The estates were desperate; too many slaves, and not enough British to keep control. It seemed that bringing down a running doe from his lordship's herd with a single shot would be seen more as a qualification than a criminal offence. And now, just a week later, William was fighting for his life, shooting at dark shapes moving in the darkness, his brother wounded beside him. And the men by him, tending to his brother, fighting with him, were slaves.

He saw flames from the mill. First just a few flickers and then a roar as the pile of cane stacked against it went up throwing sparks high over the roof. The burst of light showed three of them, suddenly silhouetted, running for cover, holding their muskets. He fired and the sound of every gun in the bunkhouse going off in a ragged volley followed. Through the smoke he saw all three fall and the slaves were cheering. The bar was lifted from the door and some ran out carrying long spears. One ran into the mill, through the smoke, and moments later there was a rush of water. A torrent from the aqueduct that drove the overshot wheel was pouring out and dousing the flames.

William ran to his brother. The slaves had laid him on the big table in the middle of the room and were cleaning the blood from his leg and binding it with rags. Two wounded slaves lay beside him.

One of the attackers was dragged into the lamplight, bleeding badly onto the dusty boards but still alive. William looked up and the first thing that occurred to him was that the man did not look like a slave.

"They killed the Tainos who were here when your ships first arrived, generations back, killed them and took their women, so they're not like us the maroons. They take our women too, and our food." Luke was the biggest of the slaves, hard-working, loyal, and so strong that nobody would cross him.

The colonel had come over from the big house when he heard they had a live prisoner. "Why did you attack my estate?" He asked.

The man looked blank until Luke repeated the question in the creole patois they all spoke.

The man still said nothing. The colonel stamped on his hand, they all heard the breaking bones. The man still said nothing and then he suddenly shouted back.

"He says he fights for freedom." Luke translated.

"There are hundreds of free blacks on this island." The colonel replied calmly. "And they earned their freedom with hard work, not murder." He raised his boot and stamped hard on the man's chest, right where the bullet had hit him. The man gasped and fell silent.

Late into the night William sat with his brother. At dawn the doctor arrived and opened up the wound to clean it. There was no bullet, it was an old nail that had been bent tight to fit in the gun and spread to tear the flesh when it hit. It was a day later by the time his brother could even speak to him.

"You must get revenge for this". His brother said, as the tropical sun rose on the following day.

“Revenge on who?”

“On the Maroons, they shot me.”

“But they fight for freedom. It’s only taken me a week to see how cruel the slavery is.”

“But the slaves fought with us.”

“Only a few. They dream of being given their freedom for it. Very few will get it and they all help defend the system. The system is the problem, not the people who oppose it.”

They sat in silence, neither wanting to discuss what the doctor had said about possible amputation.

The colonel came out into the fields in person to ask William to join the militia; visible from a distance as his grey mare picked its way through the rows of cane; the slaves not daring to turn and look. They were going into the cockpit country to attack the Maroons where they lived. William accepted immediately.

The march soon took them from the flat lands of the plantations up into the hills. Following a river valley they had steep slopes to either side, covered with thick fragrant vegetation, always dripping wet from the last storm. They were two hundred men with as many slaves to carry the supplies but as the slopes got steeper they could see that just a dozen men could ambush them and leave them helpless.

“The cockpit opens up a mile further on.” The guide had said. “The entrance is so narrow that only one man can walk at a time.”

“We shall camp here.” The colonel said. “If they don’t come out they will starve.” The guide started to reply but, seeing the colonel’s anger, he stopped and went back to join the slaves.

One of the militia captains was soon asking the colonel for permission to take a party up onto the ridge above them.

“What good will that do?” The colonel asked. “The sides of the cockpit are far too steep to get down and anyway they have snipers to cover them. And how will you get there?”

It took a week. They had to go right back to the plantations to cut a new path that followed the ridge right up. They collected more slaves to cut the path with long machetes, carry their supplies over the rough ground, and set up the camp. William was sent ahead to scout and soon saw the Maroons in the rocks to either side of the entrance. He settled behind a broad tree trunk to watch. Below him he could see the militia. As he watched carefully he saw that a slave had been tied to a tree and the colonel was watching as the man was being whipped, tearing into the skin on his back. Luke was whipping him.

William loaded his gun. The sight horrified him. He thought of the past few terrible weeks and of his brother lying in agony in the oppressive heat.

A shot rang out and then another. One hit the tree beside him. The militia in the valley had seen the flash and the smoke and poured shot into the hillside where it had come from.

But the whipping continued. The colonel took no notice of the shooting. The slave had slumped down now. William was sure he would soon die. He could see the bones of his back through the torn flesh.

The smoke cleared and he saw the Maroons on the far side of the valley were still there. The shots from the below had been a hopeless gesture. He was the only one who could kill them. William aimed with practiced efficiency and, like the doe, the man fell dead.

A perfect solution

Paul parked the car well away from the road. It was pointless really. The cameras would have read his number plate all the way out from the city. Gathering the small box of food they had just bought from a corner shop they walked down, not too fast to attract attention, through the debris to the moorings. It was worse than he had expected. Most of the big cabin cruisers had sunk. The gleaming white glass-fibre hulls were broken like egg shells against their pontoons. Only the small yachts along the sea wall, Star Chaser among them, had escaped undamaged [hook].

The outboard started easily and within minutes that were through the entrance heading for the first starboard marker. Clare took the tiller as Paul went forward to raise the sails but there was scarcely any wind to fill them. The forecast said the storms would return but for now they had gone.

By the time they were half a mile off they could see round the [headland] to the wreck in the bay beyond. It dwarfed the cottages at the top of the beach. Hundreds of containers lay in piles and the two halves of the ship lay a hundred yards apart either side of the rocks that broke it. A small launch which had been near it turned to intercept them. Paul turned in to meet it.

"It's ok, he won't know what to look for." He said to Clare, who was now sitting in the cockpit beside him. "The police won't yet have worked out where we've gone. He'll just be checking for looters."

The launch looked as it normally served as a work boat in the harbour that serviced the wind farms.

"Where are you going?" The man on the tiller asked when they drew close. He was wearing the non-descript uniform of a security guard.

"Nowhere hear that wreck." Paul replied.

"Don't tell me you're just out for a leisurely evening sail." The launch came up against the Star Chaser's fenders.

"It might be our last chance." Clare smiled at him. "We were lucky and had no damage in the last one, but they say the next one will be worse."

The man thought about this for a minute before replying. "Seems pretty stupid to me. You could get caught out in it if that old wreck breaks down. Don't expect anybody to rescue you, we're all too busy." He turned his boat away. "And stay five hundred metres from the wreck. It's a restricted site."

They headed along the coast, not straight out to sea where the first search would be. As soon as they were out of sight of the bay Paul lowered the main sail and replaced it with an older one, tan coloured rather than white. It was all they had been able to think of to help them get through. But the storm came back quickly, earlier than forecast.

Before the first strong gusts were on them Paul reefed the mainsail right down, raised a small storm jib and turned the engine off. The sea changed suddenly. One moment it was oily calm and the next there were short sharp waves coming in from the West with the wind blowing the tops off them. The old yacht took it in her stride and when he turned away from the coast she sped forwards. Their last sight of land was a headland which had been covered in trees just weeks before but now lay bare to the elements. Paul set the autohelm and they retreated to the cramped cabin, bolting the hatch behind them.

Clare had always believed that the motion of a sailing boat was kinder in a storm than motor boat. She had never had the chance to try a storm in a motor boat but, as the storm grew, she doubted it could be worse. Looking through the port holes all she could see was green foaming water and even that soon disappeared as the last daylight was lost to black clouds. It was all she could do to hold herself in place on the narrow bunk as the waves grew impossibly steep. Paul was standing in the middle of the cabin. She could just see him by the dim light of the instrument displays. Each time they reached the top of a wave he strained to see out to look for lights.

"We'd have to be very unlucky." He kept reassuring her. "Ships all go down the same routes and we're way off the normal Atlantic shipping lanes". The idea of him going out to change course terrified her.

She was violently sick on the floor. It mixed with bilge water and splashed up over her sleeping bag. She held on and waited.

She saw Paul looking intently at the instruments. "We've got to let it go in two minutes."

"You can't go outside." She said "not in this."

"It's ok, I can stay in."

He reached into the stowage net and pulled out one of the bags they had brought with them. Wedging himself between the tiny sink unit and the door frame opposite he carefully pulled out a shining metal container. Waiting for his moment as they had crashed down one wave and were riding up the next he opened it and poured it out down the sink. Holding on again until the next wave came he worked the hand pump to get some water to wash it through.

"That's it." He couldn't see if Clare was confused or just ill. "The drain goes straight out. There's nothing else we need to do now."

The storm finally passed after a day and a half. It was dawn when they felt the wind dying. Paul ventured out to check the rigging and soon they were washing out the cabin and cooking breakfast. Finally Clare was standing out on the deck breathing in the fresh air and looking at the empty horizon as Paul turned the boat around.

A further three days in the light wind took them back to a few miles downwind of the release point. Clare had the tiller and Paul was standing in the front of the cockpit with his binoculars, scanning the water around them. Suddenly the boat lurched over and then held completely still. Paul grabbed the boat hook and reached over the side. He pushed it into the water. It didn't feel like sand or rock. The pole went into it, but not easily. When he pulled it out it had glistening green over the end of it.

A wave broke over the stern. The boat was fixed by its keel. Paul rushed back and lowered the engine. He could feel it sticking in the mass below them but he still started it and ran it hard astern.

The engine raced. He looked at the tell-tale flow of water to check it's cooling. There was some, but it was stopping. He reached down with the pole and pushed. It went deep and he couldn't pull it out but they were moving.

"It's growing on us." Clare shouted as she looked behind them. She could see the waves breaking on it now.

The water from the tell-tale stopped. Soon there was steam.

"It'll run for another minute or two". Paul [shouted] kept the engine running hard.

A second wave came over the stern. Much higher, flooding the cockpit. Paul slammed the companionway hatch to keep it out of the cabin. But now they were coming one after the other. The boat could not move any more. It was fixed but the waves were moving.

They heard the planes before they saw them. Big lumbering transport planes with air-force markings, flying low. They were dropping liquid. Paul smelt it. Petrol. They turned for another pass, directly towards the boat.

“They can’t burn us.” Clare looked ready to dive over the side.

“No – they must have seen my notes. The oil will kill it, setting it on fire won’t. But we must get inside.” He quickly stopped the engine and threw a bucket of water over it to try to cool it.

Opening the hatch a flood of water went in with them. They sat with it up to their knees. Paul worked frantically at the bilge pump as the planes doused the boat. Almost immediately they could see the mass below them turning brown.

Stopping to gasp for breath he took a moment to point out the irony of using petrol to kill the weed.

Paul was fascinated by the boat but hated being on it [more opinion]. It was a large fast coastguard cutter with a vast array of instruments and totally unlike Star Chaser in every way. They had seen his boat moored against the harbour wall as they went by. He had pointed it out to his dean of faculty but the man wasn’t interested. He just stood looking through the wheelhouse screen scowling at the water in front of them and the storm clouds building up again on the horizon.

The Captain was, however, cheerfully asking about it.

“I’d never been out in anything like that weather before.” He replied, ignoring the dean. “She took it really well. They really could build boats in those days.”

“So what happened to it when you hit the weed?”

“You know the rules.” The dean cut in. “You signed the official secrets act and you know what it means. Now shut up.”

“I’ve also signed it.” The captain replied. “And I need to know in case any is still alive and we hit some.”

Paul’s description was brief. Their arrival back at the marina had been more frightening than the storm. They had sailed into their mooring against the sea wall and suddenly the men had appeared, pointing large guns at them. A man in navy uniform with a loud hailer told them to come in slowly. Some of the men jumped onto the deck and threw the mooring lines back to others on the wall. The boat was hauled in and he was ordered off. No explanation was given. He was just told he had to sign the act and must never speak to anybody about what he had done. Clare was dragged along behind him and had to sign as well.

“No need for any more than that.” The dean concluded. “The weed should all be dead now.”

A plane flew over just as they reached the first fragments [describe]. It was so low they could see the pilot scanning the sea around him.

“They haven’t seen any green weed all day but they keep looking.” The captain said as it flew on.

They began to pick some up in nets. It was three days since it had been killed but it was still in thick tangled clumps.

"If you leave it out to dry it burns really well." Paul said.

"We'll be paying for a lot of that." The dean replied. "It's blowing in on beaches for miles around."

["Why not pick it up and sell it as fuel like it was supposed to be."] Paul was squeezing the water out of some of it in his hand. "That's almost dry enough to burn. There's a good market for non-fossil fuels just now."

"The oil companies are saying that enough of it could stop a tanker." The captain said.

"Exactly." Paul replied. "Burn that lot and leave the oil in the ground".

The captain thought about this for a few seconds. "But it wouldn't burn if it was alive. If it was alive we would never have been able to back off it so ships couldn't go near it. "

"So just avoid it. If it gets hotter or colder it dies. That's what genetic engineering is all about. If it drifts North or South it dies."

"I don't know why I let you come out here with your glib remarks." [The dean took it from him and threw it back in the crate where they were collecting it.] "Your research will now take other directions. Something new where you can't do any more damage."

"What do you mean, damage? Like stopping these storms? Have you any idea what they are really like? Why don't we wait out here and see?" He turned to the captain. "What was the last one? Eleven or twelve? That'll be a twelve out there, coming this way. Let's stick around and show him what hurricanes our new climate can do."

The boat suddenly lurched and stopped dead in the water. They ran forward and looked down to see what it was. All they could see was a mass of brown fibrous fragments welling up from under the bow. The captain ran to the wheelhouse and the engine note changed as they went astern.

The first waves of the storm were hitting them as the engines raced.

"Why isn't it moving?" The dean shouted back at Paul.

"Take a look." Paul pointed down. As the boat struggled backwards a vast clump was appearing from underneath. As it came up it was rolling over. The top was brown but below it was green and sticking fast to the hull.

The crew were ready and within minutes they were dragging an oil barrel up the deck. Setting up a pump they tried to spray it but the wind was building and it blew back on them.

The captain shouted out of the wheelhouse to say he had called the plane back.

A large wave hit and threw the pump man back against the rail. The barrel skidded across the deck. Paul and the dean ran to get away. A second wave smashed it against the capstan for the anchor chain, flooding the deck with oil.

The plane had circled round and was heading straight for them, oil already streaming out below it.

Running back the dean slipped in the oil and Paul grabbed his life jacket to drag him towards the wheelhouse. But the plane was overhead. He crouched down and pulled his collar up to keep the oil off. But there was none. A strong gust carried it away, he could see it landing like rain fifty yards away.

[suddenly] A single massive wave broke right over them. Paul hung onto a stanchion with one hand, the dean did nothing so he held him with his other hand.

Suddenly the deck was clear of oil as it washed over the side. Seeing the chance he jumped up and dragged the protesting dean into the wheelhouse.

“That did it.” The captain shouted as they felt the boat finally pull clear and the dean was hauled into a chair.

“That’s enough.” The dean said. “This weed is a danger to shipping [and could cripple our economy]. You’re very very lucky not to lose your job for this. It has already cost us tens of thousands of pounds.”

Paul’s memory of that interview was much happier than the first one on the dock side. In the dean’s office he could see that the security forces had told the man not to let him go under any circumstances. He would be paid to do nothing if necessary.

“So what’s your plan to stop the storms?” He asked.

[The dean turned to face him.] “You’ve see the reports in the news. This was a dangerous experiment by a misguided and poorly informed rogue researcher that went wrong and it was only the quick response from the University and then the air force that prevented a global disaster.”

The captain saw Paul looking at him and said quietly. “He really doesn’t like you does he?”

“Well if the weed soaked up all the carbon dioxide we wouldn’t just have some spare oil tankers. There might be a few professors of low carbon technologies going spare as well.”

The Lottery Ticket

It was a problem with wrought iron in the masts. Hollow, they were, but still so much heavier than timber. She had laid over. When the tide rose they would dip right down into it and as the water covered the decks she would be just another wreck in the fog on the Labrador banks.

The port side rail was so low in the water that the captain could have easily stepped across into the cutter floating alongside.

"It's flooded to the number three bulkhead. The doors won't open. The only way in is from the deck hatches." The mate was barely up to the captain's shoulder but he still managed to look him straight in the eye from under his sou'wester.

"The man who goes down with the diving helmet can have the biggest rock. The size of an egg it is, clear as sunlight on the morning dew. I saw it in the manifest and had the chest opened to see it." He looked up at the men above him clutching onto hatch combings and a windlass. None moved. None even looked at him.

"And if nobody goes down, nobody gets anything. Without those stones there is nothing, no money, no pay, nothing."

Still there was no movement from the men.

Taking off his hat he tore pages out of his notebook, folded them and put them in it. He then reached up to the gear on the windlass and ran his finger through the black grease. Smearing a fine film across the one gold button on a cuff of his jacket he used it to make a clear imprint on one last page before ripping off the button and throwing it over the rail. The print showed an anchor with rope wound around and five mermaids with flowing hair and smooth forked fish-tails.

The first one forward was the cabin boy, thin frail and scared, reaching into the hat with his eyes closed and fumbling the folds to reveal a blank page before scrambling back up to a hatch lid. Nobody followed so the mate took his turn, as a powerful man they knew he had a chance of coming out alive with the chest, but his page was blank. He took the hat and shook it as the captain made his draw.

"A fine manor house with a farm. Think of it." They could see now, his page was blank. He was looking first at the stokers, all showing the easy strength and balance won from shovelling coal for twelve hour shifts in the North Atlantic storms. Then the deck crew, not so fit but tanned wind-blown. These came as a group following a leading seaman they climbed down and took their lots quickly, one after another, calling out at each blank page.

He tried to hold the gaze of a stoker but none would face him. These men lived and died together and knew their own law. The fog was thickening and coming down, the hat felt damp as he held it out. One big man had come forward, walking down the sloping deck as easily as easily as a finely paved city promenade. Still he would not look the master in the eye but he reached into the hat with a hand stained with coal dust. Glancing at his page he said nothing, walking back to his comrades. Then they saw him folding a long whale-skin wallet over and over so the oils in the brown, un-tanned leather would make a perfect seal.

The oldest stepped forward. Even the dust could not conceal the grey of his beard. "Go with God. Have faith or the devil will take your soul."

The diving helmet was green with corrosion and the vulcanised rubber in the canvas below it was cracked with age. Taking a length of the air hose he pulled gently

on it and seemed surprised as much as relieved when it held. First he fixed the weights around his waist before strapping on the helmet and signalling to the men on the pump that the air was coming through. He never flinched, stepping into the water, grasping the rails of the ladder leading down into the darkness, pulling the rope and the hose with him.

“A man can take five minutes among the sea-ice.” The captain was holding a silver fob with the engraved lid open. “A strong man ten and a fool might try for more. The cargo will have moved and the iron bound chest will be hard to uncover and fix to the rope.”

Ten minutes came and went. The men on the pump said nothing, just keeping up the steady rhythm and watching, always watching for bubbles rising at the hatch. It was fully fifteen minutes when they saw them. “Man on the companionway ladder” they shouted, pulling as they dared on the hose to ease the climb. [needs more here].

The corrugated iron roof of the desolate cannery port building dripped as the fog blew in each time the door opened, overpowering the stove in the far wall. Men from windjammers down from the Greenland sea, reeking of rotting fish, were crowding in to see. The captain and his crew sat on low benches, hunched down in exhaustion. The storm that they had out-run was gathering outside, howling through the eaves and rattling the windows. They had carried in the iron bound chest and placed it on the stone floor in front of them. The locks were broken with cold chisels and the lid raised to reveal a solid iron strong box within. When lifted clear this revealed the markings of the Pacific Railroad company.

“We cannot open it. The railroad agent will have a key”. The captain was looking at the fishermen beyond rather than risk the gaze of his own crew.

“But will he honour this?” The man now standing was scarcely recognisable as the tall stoker of a week before. The voyage from the banks in the open cutter had been bad enough for all the crew but he had set out frozen, wet and exhausted. The fingers that held out the ticket were black down to the first knuckle as the frostbite set in. Gangrene would follow and the fingers would be lost by spring. His proud back was now bent, his voice harsh and faint.

He placed the ticket on the chest. The whaleskin wallet had kept it dry and clean and the five mermaids were still clearly to be seen, attending to the anchor. One of the fishermen came forward to look at it. “The telegraph was sent. He will soon be on the track from the railhead, here by dusk. He was told the price that was paid when his treasure was lost, and the payment offered.”

As the dull winter light was fading into night, a carriage arrived, bumping across the harbour front, with bright pressure lanterns reflecting off the glistening sheds. The agent pulled his cloak around him to protect his immaculate uniform and was taken directly into the building, followed by two guards with brightly polished brown holsters for their revolvers.

He shook the damaged hand with care not to hurt the blackened fingers. “I do not carry the key. You must come with us. Your deed was heroic, far more than most men could achieve. The big diamond will certainly be found inside when it is opened at our treasury.”

The strong box was loaded on the back of the carriage and secured with broad leather straps. The big man was helped to sit inside between the guards. More hands

were shaken and congratulations offered as the horses sought purchase on the smooth stones to pull the carriage back to the track.

Many minutes passed and the men were on their way back to their normal duties when a faint shot was heard drifting in on the rising wind.

“They must have found a bear” one of them said, but nobody believed him.

The ticket lay on the remains of the chest, drips of water landing on the mermaids, diffusing them into the anchor, hiding their shame at their deadly deception.

Henry's Gold

The island was a gem in the vastness of the deep blue sea. There was a long beach with golden sand fringed with palm trees which swayed gently in the soft breeze. Further inshore the land rose to a low hill from which a small stream ran down bubbling out to the sea shore. In common with all the best islands in the East Caribbean in the late eighteenth century, it also had pirate treasure. This could be seen in the form of a large pile of gold bars neatly stacked, glistening in the sunlight beside the stream where it emerged from the forest.

The captain stood speechless with his fine brass telescope focussed on the gold.

"Is there a problem?" Henry asked. "We seem to have plenty of depth".

A strong mane of brown hair hung down over his powerful shoulders but, unlike all those around him, his face was clean shaven. Two pistols and a curved blade hung at jaunty angles from his belt almost in caricature of the descriptions of pirates in the penny handbills. The weapons were so heavily decorated with gems, ivory and mother of pearl as to cast doubt on the existence of any parent metal beneath.

Just as he spoke the call came from the bow. "Two fathoms onto sand"; followed by the splash as the plumb line was thrown in again.

The captain silently passed the telescope to Henry. "Look there. At the top of the beach. God knows."

"I'm sure He does." Henry replied. "Ah yes, there it is, just as old salt said it would be."

"Who?" He stopped. "May I?" Henry passed the telescope back. "Who did you say?" He stared intently.

"One fathom and falling"

"Pardon the intrusion sir but should we heave to and anchor?". The first mate was walking towards them across the poop deck.

"Yes. Yes do. Please, yes. Old salt did you say?"

The mate looked briefly confused but called out a string of orders to the crew. Just behind them on the deck two men pulled hard on the ship's wheel turning it into the wind. Halliards were released from the blocks letting the sails hand limp in the breeze and men raced up the ratlines and out onto the spars to furl them in and secure them with the ties that hung down ready.

"Yes, old salt." Henry replied, watching the men at their work. "You must have seen him in the anchor tavern on the pier side."

"You mean that old drunk?" He stopped. He himself had banned the word "drunk" on the ship when the vast number of cases of wine they had stowed in the forward hold were seen to be depleting at a spectacular rate as Henry worked his way through them.

"Yes the old gentleman. He said there was treasure here. I know he enjoys his drink but a few glasses of claret and a pipe or two of opium never did me any harm."

The mate called out "anchor away" and the winch spun as the heavy hawser was paid out.

"I remember him. He used to say he would tell you where the treasure was if you bought him a drink, but if you got the drink he would just say it was in the Caribbean and demand a gold sovereign to tell you more. Most people just let it go.

Some hit him, hence his crooked nose. Are you saying you gave him a whole gold sovereign?"

"Yes and he told me to sail South by south west for 100 leagues from Saint Lucia leaving the tall mountain directly astern."

"And you". The words "believed him" came out as a whisper as he turned the telescope to remain fixed on the gleaming pile as the ship swung round.

"Yes, so I got father to lend me this ship. Dear papa, he's so generous with my allowance and I'm sure he doesn't think I work hard enough so I do really want to make a contribution."

"I didn't know that you did work."

"Yes, that could be the problem. Please launch the long boat so we can have a look."

The captain issued all the men with muskets and cutlasses. Two were sent aloft to watch and twenty more were to wait fully armed on the deck. The long boat could hold thirty and these were posted around the pile in a cordon.

Close up they could see that the bars were perfectly positioned like bricks in a wall to form a precise square block complete with little towers formed of four bars each at the corners.

Henry picked up one of the bars. "Feels about the right weight".

Thirty pairs of eyes looked at him incredulously.

"Yes I have lifted a gold bar before."

"One of your father's?" The captain enquired.

"No, my grandfather's. Did you bring my chest?"

The massive iron bound chest was lifted out of the long boat and man-handled up the beach. Henry produced a large key and opened it.

"If you put it in that we won't be able to lift it."

"No, of course not." He reached into the chest and lifted out a large bundle wrapped in oil cloth, which he carefully folded back to reveal a gleaming set of scales. "Now I need a good flat surface to set these on to measure the density."

The men rushed off and returned with a boulder with a flat surface which was propped up on smaller stones to make it level. Henry set his balance on it and carefully weighed the bar. Reaching deeper into the trunk he withdrew a copper bowl and had it filled with water and he then weighed the bar again, this time suspended immersed in the water. Noting down the values he sat down and started to calculate.

"You couldn't check my subtraction could you? I never had the patience to get it right and I keep getting different answers."

He handed the captain his notebook full of scrawled calculations. While his work was corrected he found a small, well thumbed, book and quickly found the page he was looking for. The captain passed the notebook back.

"Yes that's it. Exactly the value it should be."

The men cheered.

"Can we load it onto the ship now?"

"No. After lunch I must assay it. We'd look utterly foolish if we loaded it and it wasn't gold wouldn't we. It could be a mixture of metals to give the right density."

"Lunch?"

"Yes. Aren't you hungry?"

The long boat was sent back for a table and chairs, dried meat and bottles of wine. Small armed patrols were sent into the forest to gather tropical fruits. The captain and the mate joined Henry at the table right next to the gold but seemingly ignoring it for a leisureed meal. The men stood in groups around them snatching mouthfuls of food without diverting their gaze as if staring at the pile would somehow keep it fixed in place. Every time the captain looked down at his food they shuffled forwards, slowly edging closer to the gold, then hurrying back to their places whenever he looked up.

After the meal Henry gave them detailed instructions on building a fire for the assay. In order to develop enough heat to melt the metal it had to be built up on a ring of rocks to help it draw. Building this and then getting a strong blaze in the driftwood they had gathered from the beach took several hours so by the time the bar was melting in a stone crucible the light was fading. Henry stirred it and clouds of smoke swirled around him as they rose into the dark sky. He had arranged numerous sealed glass jars in the sand behind him.

“This is alchemy! Where did you learn it?”

“No. It’s this new science called chemistry. My science tutor taught me all about it.”

“What’s in the glass jars? What are they for?”

“This one is soda.” He picked it up and poured it in. “If there are base metals it will react with them and make them sink”

“What about the others?”

“I’m not sure what they do. I think I fell asleep at that point. You see we had this fabulous party the night before and the tutor was so boring. But my friend was there and he made notes about how to add them.” He leafed through the pages and found a loose slip of paper.

It was midnight by the time two men lifted the crucible with long iron tongs and poured the gleaming metal into a mould. Two empty wine bottles and a third of brandy, embattled but still in combat, stood next to the carefully re-sealed jars of reagents. There was no residue from the melt.

The captain appeared with a bar from the pile. “What’s this mark?” He asked, looking at an indistinct pattern stamped into the metal.

“That’s the emblem of the owner. The king of Spain. It’s a double headed eagle, he’s a Hapsburg you know. The other one, the P, means it came from one of his mines in Peru, they’re in the mountains in the north east. Not very well done.”

“What’s not well done?”

“The stamps. You should hold the die perfectly straight and hit it just once but firmly. That will give a clear and distinct image.”

“Did your chemistry tutor tell you that as well?”

“No. My father’s goldsmith told me.”

There was a pause. “You’re not planning to tell the king of Spain about his gold are you?”

Several of the men looked at Henry.

“No, of course not, horrible smelly old man. Very rude.”

“How do you know he’s rude?”

“He wouldn’t talk to me.”

“What? Talk to you? The king of Spain?”

“My uncle took me with him. We went to see him in his palace. I know I was only six and he is a king but he smelled of some ghastly perfume wouldn’t even look at my favourite model boat.”

Rising at first light they were soon back on the island. The pile had shrunk, the four turrets had gone and at least one layer from the block.

“This is very silly. Who took it?”

“We checked all the men as they arrived at the long boat.” The captain replied.

“So they must have taken it away and buried it. Tell them to dig it up again and bring it back.”

The captain leaned closer to him. “I fear a mutiny. The sight of gold has a terrible effect on men. I fear the men may take the ship and all the treasure.”

“I don’t.” The captain never even saw him whip the pistol out of his belt. By the time he looked round the shot had rung out and the sword flashed into the other hand, slicing the head off a bird with bright green feathers as it fell at his feet.

The captain looked down at the blood oozing out from the severed neck. “Did your chemistry tutor show you how to do that.”

Henry was expertly re-loading and priming his pistol. “No, of course not. It was my father’s master at arms. You can cover the pile with some sail cloth if you want.”

Henry returned to the ship while the men were left to put the gold back on the pile. However, he had no sooner come alongside than the lookout called out that he could see sails. First one ship then three.

He raced up the rigging to join him, pulling his bulky frame up with amazing ease through the maze of ropes and spars.

“It’s Nigel”. He shouted out as soon as he could see the ships bearing down on them.

“Who’s Nigel.”

“My cousin.”

“How do you know it’s him when you can only see the tops of the masts?”

“Because he’s the only captain in the navy who’s dumb enough to fly his flags the wrong way up. Nobody dares tell him.”

He watched as the vessels came into sight. With full sail in the light breeze that were making good speed, bow waves creaming under their prows. The larger ship had three enormous masts to carry the mass of pale grey sails. Along the side of the hull he counted thirty gun ports on each of three decks. The escort frigates each had just one gun deck but they still showed twenty gun ports. Henry climbed down as quickly as he had ascended.

A string of signal flags appeared on the mizzen mast of the flagship.

“He wants to know what we are doing.” The first mate called out.

“Tell him ‘collecting the treasure’” Henry replied.

The mate hurried to the locker and pulled out handfuls of brightly coloured flags.

“No, I said collecting it, not looking for it. We didn’t have to look for it”

The mate glanced nervously at the captain who just shrugged his shoulders. Some of the flags were quickly replaced before they were all hoisted.

“More ships, behind the island.” The lookout shouted. “French flags.”

The next message from the flagship was brief. Henry smiled broadly. It said “drunken fool”

“Tell him. “Better than a sober fool”. Quickly, I want those flags flying before he sees the French.”

“Two big ships but no escorts.” The lookout called.

“Not as big as Nigel’s.” Henry observed.

The British ships were now close enough to see the island. However, all they saw was a few men half-heartedly digging holes and what looked like a small shelter covered in sail cloth. Then they saw the French, rounding the island heading straight towards them.

“We can’t escape the battle.” The captain said. “We’re trapped in this bay.”

“I wouldn’t call it trapped.” Henry replied. “Get your men to fetch me a chair, and possibly one for yourself, the mate may also care to join us, and something to eat and a bottle or two of red with some decent brandy.” The men hurried up with the table and chairs and rigged a sailcloth awning to shade it from the powerful mid-day sun.

The warships closed in. Gunports were opened and guns rolled out. The big British ship was so close that they could see a man in full dress uniform standing upright on the poop deck looking out at the French.

“That’s my Nigel.” Henry raised his glass just as the man looked around. He shook his fist before quickly looking back.

Great flashes emerged from the guns, followed by a rolling crescendo that thundered around the bay making hundreds of birds fly up in alarm.

Henry swirled his wine around the glass to enjoy the aroma before drinking it. “Nicely done, all in time but quite ridiculous. They’re out of range.” As he said this great showers of spray were thrown up from a point a good hundred yards short of the approaching French.

The guns were soon rolled out again. This time they caught the French just as they were turning to bring theirs to bear. The roar of the guns was followed by terrifying crashes as the balls struck home.

“It looks like the game may last for an hour or two. Could somebody be so kind as to fetch another bottle.” The crew had gathered at the rail, mesmerised by the battle, but one of them ran to the companionway.

One of the French ships was now able to fire their first broadside at Nigel’s, but soon found a Frigate moving across it’s stern. The Frigate fired. Several shots crashed into the vulnerable transom but others missed and flew past, screaming along the side of the hull and out into the bay. Henry watched them fly towards him with what looked like amused interest. They ploughed into the water just fifty yards away.

“That was careless.” Henry said. “Waste of shot, couldn’t possibly hit with numbers one, two and three.”

All five ships were now engaged at close range. The thick of the battle was over a mile away but cannon balls still flew out in their direction. The captain ordered the long boat launched to bring the ship around so it was bow-on to the fight to reduce the chances of a hit. Henry had to move and take up a new position by the forward

rail. Several shots landed close and one flew overhead, narrowly missing a mast but he took little notice.

“Heat your shot Nigel, you silly man. You’ll never sink him like that.” The mate just heard him over the continual booming of the guns.

“Would you like to signal?”

“I don’t think we’ll need to. He must have woken up at last. Se he’s held back numbers eight and nine this time and I don’t think they’ve been hit.”

In the next broadside guns eight and nine fired slightly after the others leaving a cloud of steam behind them from the damp wadding that was used to stop the heated shot from igniting the charge. The French ship was soon on fire. Flames could be seen pouring out of the hatches and up into the rigging.

“Time for Nigel to get moving.” Henry had stood up, placing his glass on the rail as he watched.

All the other ships suddenly set full sail to move away from the fire. They were just under way when the magazine exploded throwing debris high in the air. They all swayed crazily as the force of the blast hit them. Henry quickly took hold of his glass and the only remaining bottle that was not empty.

“His friend’s got away, chase him Nigel, get a move on.” The second French ship was moving away fast. The British ship turned to follow with its frigates falling into line behind it.

They sat and watched the ships sail away in a line.

“Let’s have a look at what’s left”. Henry said as the long boat drew alongside.

They rowed out towards the mass of debris that floated in the gentle swell. Blackened beams were fixed to fragments of shattered planks, wooden buckets, mops and fragments of uniform. Suddenly they saw movement, a man was waving. He was sitting on a small intact section of decking, still wearing his uniform. They approached and Henry addressed him in fluent French.

“Dear me. Your ship is rather diminished. Would you care for a glass of wine? Come along and see what we’ve found.”

The air conditioning was struggling to keep up with the heat from the sunlight on the plate glass window which looked out at the shining tower that housed the head office of the bank. Jane stood up from her immaculately polished chrome desk and walked across the office, her four inch heels sinking into the deep pile carpet.

“What is it?”

In the part of his high resolution screen that was visible above the mountain of crisp packets and a large donut box with two remaining, both covered with lurid pink icing, there was a scan of a handwritten document written with elegant flowing script.

“Over fed pinstripe emailed it to me”.

“You call my cousin over fed?” She picked up a glossy magazine from a nearby table and, leaning across while making sure her dress made no contact with the desk, used it to sweep the crisp packets out of the way and reveal the rest of the screen. They all landed neatly in the strategically placed stainless steel waste bin and were joined by the donuts and the magazine.

Richard ignored the departure of his lunch. “It’s out of the vault. He wants me to set up a couple of pages for the corporate area of his site. A sort of official record of how it all started.”

“No, don’t scroll. I’m reading it. He admits that the French guy, Phillipe, did all the work setting up the bank doesn’t he. Any idea what happened to him?”

“Henry skewered him. Says it was a duel, all above board. But there’s loads of other letters in there, far more credible, saying it was a set up. But what this one says is that it was Phillipe who organised all the investments in the rifle factories that made all the money. None of the others disagree with that.”

Jane wiped the mouse with a tissue and scrolled down.

“Typical frog. Sees Napoleon getting troublesome and invests a load of money in guns to fight against his own people. Looks like that’s why nobody missed him when Henry got him. That’s my Henry, my favourite ancestor. You’re going to have to be a bit creative with what you put on your pages. You can’t seriously put that lot on line.” She closed the window and opened another scan from the directory. It was another hand written account.

“Have you read all of these?”

“Yep. That last one was the only interesting one. None of the others say much at all about Frenchie. The one they found in the middle of the pile of gold telling them to put it all back is interesting.”

“Have you got a scan of that? The family curse. Saying all his descendants would be born vampires if he took it. Didn’t work very well did it?”

“I’m not sure about that. I’ve always wondered about Pinstripe. Look at this, I found some images to go on the page, whatever it’s going to say.”

He clicked an icon on the task bar, his movement dislodging a beer bottle which teetered on the edge of the desk before joining the donuts in the bin. A picture of a ship under full sail appeared.

“That’s a Roman galley, you idiot.”

“Isn’t that close enough? It was the only one I could find where we hopefully wouldn’t get done for pinching the copyright. Some clueless shareholder will write in and complain whatever we put so we might as well make life easy for them in finding something to whinge about. I could develop them a nice little game so they don’t notice it. Find the gold on the tropical island. Plenty of animation and traps and things. Wouldn’t take long.”

“That’s more like it. So the story goes that he searched for weeks, no months, for the gold and when his last supplies of food and water were running out he managed to find it. Then he started the bank with it and made all the money. A fine upstanding sober pillar of society.

What do we say about the battle?”

“Gallantly rescued some English sailors. No frogs in sight.”

“OK. Leave it with me.”

Dubai

She always came near the end of the middle watch, long after midnight. Nearer home there might have been the first light of dawn showing on the horizon; but in the stinking tropics it was as dark as the moon and stars would let it be. She came down the ratlines from wherever it was among the topsail spars on the mizzen that she seemed to come into being; her matted grey hair hanging limp to her waist. Her smile, revealing few remaining yellow teeth, spoke of friendship, but the deck crew met her a volley of musket fire echoing out across the black water before they turned and fled below, barring the hatches behind them. Only the First Mate remained, standing erect at the wheel when they last saw him, ignoring her, responding only to wind and wave to set the helm to bear onto a swell or off a gust.

In the gloom they speculated, knowing that the man would be there unmoved and unmoving, saying nothing when they reclaimed the deck at first light. There was talk of the macabre and even the licentious, but no man dared to risk his soul to bear witness to the encounter. The captain's day-cabin had a small port that looked out over the main deck, but he swore on the bible that nothing could be seen. Man and witch remained above on the quarterdeck invisible to all.

The hands were Lascars, all from the Indies except one, a tall Bedouin known to all as Ali who emerged as their leader.

"Let us have the Mate. Let us deal with him our way. She is his familiar, she only comes to see him and with him gone she will leave for ever."

The Captain had listened to them. "You are good men, but these are evil times and what if she does not leave? What if she comes again? Will one of you stay with her and take the helm to see us safely through the night?"

Sailing into the dusty Arab port they passed dhows standing about half a mile off the sandy shore. They could see the black African pearl divers who would disappear beneath the surface for minutes at a time, emerging with large baskets full of shining oysters for the crew to prize open.

The port was a small cluster of mud-brick houses perched between desert and sea, guarded by a small square fort with arrow slits as windows. With his ship made fast to the crumbling stone jetty, the captain entered through the shaded courtyard with a bag of Spanish gold to trade for pearls and provisions. His crew enjoyed fresh fruit and meat in the town as the sun set. Darkness came quickly and the flaming torches cast flickering shadows in the alleyways. Their talk was of the mate who had not been seen since early afternoon.

"His cabin door has been shut. He must be inside. The watchman will see if he comes out."

"If poor Jack survives his watch." Ali replied. "What if he summons her? Jack could do nothing."

"He could fire his musket. It was primed and cocked, and the powder was dry. We checked it ourselves. He should shoot her as soon as he sees her."

The ate in silence, watching the shadows deepen. Women in black robes served them. Their faces were veiled but the men could see from their hands that they were old. Maybe as old as the hag. They studied the gnarled and weathered hands.

“She could be hiding amongst them.” Ali said. “Concealed by the veil. Come ashore to claim others for her terrible work. We must watch and keep our knives ready.”

The way back to the dock was narrow. They had to go in single file, following a single torch, peering into the blackness to either side. The ship loomed ahead. A safe haven. Lights in the window of the captain’s cabin, none in the Mate’s. They listened. There was no sound. They wanted to break down the door, but the captain forbade it.

“He has gone.” Ali said. “He must have gone to leave us with his evil creation.”

But he was there in the morning, saying nothing, supervising the cargo loading, all in good order for them to sail at noon.

That night the wind freshened, suddenly building up to a tropical cyclone as they passed through the narrows at Hormuz. Rounding the point, they met the full force of the Indian Ocean driving them towards the rocks of the Persian shore. All hands were on deck or aloft. The Mate at the wheel desperate to keep her head out to sea. Ali was sent up to reef the topsail on the mizzen mast. Climbing up he kept his knife at the ready. Reaching the spar, he had to put it in his belt before climbing out to his station. Soon he was struggling to control the wet canvas. Out of the corner of his eye he thought he saw grey hair blown horizontal in the gale. He reached for his knife. His hand slipped for a vital second and he found himself falling towards the foaming waves. Then, suddenly, a hand caught him. Old and deformed but strong as iron it carried him safely to the deck.