

THE SKYSAILOR'S TALE

Michael Swanwick

Of all the many things that this life has stolen from me, the one which bothers me most is that I cannot remember burying my father.

Give that log a poke. Stir up the embers. Winter's upon us -- hear how the wind howls and prowls about the rooftops, as restless as a cat! -- and I, for one, could use some light and a little more warmth. There'll be snow by morning for sure. Scoot your chair a bit closer to the fire. Is your mother asleep? Good. We'll keep our voices low. There are parts of this tale she would not approve of. Things that I must say which she thinks you'd be better off not knowing.

She's right, no doubt. Women usually are. But what of that? You're of an age to realize that your parents were never perfect, and that in their youths they may have done some things which ... well. Right or wrong, I'm going to tell you everything.

Where was I?

My father's burial.

I was almost a man when he finally died -- old enough, by all rights, to keep that memory to my dying day. But after the wreck of the Empire, I lay feverish and raving, so they tell me, for six weeks. During that time I was an exile in my own mind, lost in the burning deserts of delirium, wandering lands that rose and fell with each labored breath. Searching for a way back to the moment when I stood before my father's open grave and felt its cool breath upon my face. I was convinced that if I could only find it, all would be well.

So I searched and did not find, and forgot I had searched, and began again, returning always to the same memories, like a moth relentlessly batting itself against a lantern. Sometimes the pain rose up within me so that I screamed and thrashed and convulsed within my bed. Other times (all this they told me later), when the pain ebbed, I spoke long and lucidly on a variety of matters, sang strange songs, and told stranger tales, all with an intensity my auditors found alarming. My thoughts were never still.

Always I sought my father.

By the time I finally recovered, most of my life had been burnt to ashes and those ashes swept into the ash pit of history. The Atlantis of my past was sunk; all that remained were a few mountain tops sticking up out of the waters of forgetfulness like a scattered archipelago of disconnected islands. I remembered clambering upon the rusted ruins of a failed and demented steam dredging device its now forgotten inventor had dubbed the "Orukter Amphibolus," a brickyard battle fought alongside my fellow river rats with a gang of German boys who properly hated us for living by the wharves, a furtive kiss in the dark (with whom, alas, I cannot say), a race across the treacherously rolling logs afloat in the dock fronting the blockmaker's shop, and the catfish-and-waffles supper in a Wissahickon inn at which my mother announced to the family that she was to have a fifth child. But neither logic nor history unites these events; they might as well have happened to five separate people.

There are, too, odd things lacking in what remains: The face of my youngest sister. The body of equations making up the Calculus. All recollection whatsoever of my brother save his name alone. My father I can remember well only by contrast. All I know of him could be told in an hour.

I do not mourn the loss of his funeral. I've attended enough to know how it went. Words were surely spoken that were nothing like the words that should have been said. The air was heavy with incense and

candle-wax. The corpse looked both like and unlike the deceased. There were pallbearers, and perhaps I was one. Everybody was brave and formal. Then, after too long a service, they all left, feeling not one whit better than before.

A burial is a different matter. The first clods of dirt rattle down from the grave diggers' shovels onto the roof of the coffin, making a sound like rain. The earth is drawn up over it like a thick, warm blanket. The trees wave in the breeze overhead, as if all the world were a cradle endlessly rocking. The mourners' sobs are as quiet as a mother's bedtime murmurs. And so a man passes, by imperceptible degrees, to his final sleep. There is some comfort in knowing that a burial came off right.

So I trod the labyrinth of my fevered brain, dancing with the black goddess of pain, she of the bright eyes laughing and clutching me tight with fingers like hot iron, and I swirling and spinning and always circling in upon that sad event. Yet never quite arriving.

Dreaming of fire.

Often I came within minutes of my goal -- so close that it seemed impossible that my next attempt would not bring me to it. One thought deeper, a single step further, I believed, and there it would be. I was tormented with hope.

Time and again, in particular, I encountered two memories bright as sunlight in my mind, guarding the passage to and from that dark omphalos. One was of the voyage out to the Catholic cemetery on Treaty Island in the Delaware. First came the boat carrying my father's coffin and the priest. Father Murphy sat perched in the bow, holding his hat down with one hand and with the other gripping the gunwale for all he was worth. He was a lean old hound of a man with wispy white hair, who bobbed and dipped most comically with every stroke of the oars and wore the unhappy expression of the habitually seasick.

I sat in the second dory of the procession with my mother and sisters, all in their best bonnets. Jack must have been there as well. Seeing Father Murphy's distress, we couldn't help but be amused. One of us wondered aloud if he was going to throw up, and we all laughed.

Our hired doryman turned to glare at us over his shoulder. He did not understand what a release my father's death was for all of us. The truth was that everything that had gone into making John Keely the man he was -- his upright character, his innkeeper's warmth, his quiet strength, his bluff good will -- had died years before, with the dwindling and extinction of his mind. We were only burying his body that day.

When he was fully himself, however, a better or godlier man did not exist in all the Americas -- no, not in a thousand continents. I never saw him truly angry but once. That was the day my elder sister Patricia, who had been sent out to the back alley for firewood, returned empty-handed and said, "Father, there is a black girl in the shed, crying."

My parents threw on their roquelaures and put up the hoods, for the weather was foul as only a Philadelphia winter downpour can be, and went outside to investigate. They came back in with a girl so slight, in a dress so drenched, that she looked to my young eyes like a half-drowned squirrel.

They all three went into the parlor and closed the doors. From the hall Patricia and I -- Mary was then but an infant -- tried to eavesdrop, but could hear only the murmur of voices punctuated by occasional sobs. After a while, the tears stopped. The talk continued for a very long time.

Midway through the consultation, my mother swept out of the room to retrieve the day's copy of the Democratic Press, and returned so preoccupied that she didn't chase us away from the door. I know now, as I did not then, that the object of her concern was an advertisement on the front page of the paper. Patricia, always the practical and foresightful member of the family, cut out and saved the

advertisement, and so I can now give it to you exactly as it appeared:

* * * *

SIX CENTS REWARD

RANAWAY on the 14th inst., from the subscriber,
one TACEY BROWN, a mulatto girl of thirteen years
age, with upwards of five years to serve on her
indenture. She is five feet, one inch in height,
pitted with the Small Pox, pert and quick spoken,
took with her one plain brown dress of coarse cloth.
In personality she is insolent, lazy, and disagreeable.
The above reward and no thanks will be given to any
person who will take her up and return her to

Thos. Cuttington

No. 81, Pine street, Philadelphia

* * * *

This at a time, mind you, when the reward for a runaway apprentice often ran as high as ten dollars! Mr. Thomas Cuttington obviously thought himself a man grievously ill-served.

At last my father emerged from the parlor with the newspaper in his hand. He closed the door behind him. His look then was so dark and stormy that I shrank away from him, and neither my sister nor I dared uncork any of the questions bubbling up within us. Grimly, he fetched his wallet and then, putting on his coat, strode out into the rain.

Two hours later he returned with one Horace Potter, a clerk from Flintham's counting house, and Tacey's indenture papers. The parlor doors were thrown wide and all the family, and our boarders as well, called in as witnesses. Tacey had by then been clothed by my mother in one of Patricia's outgrown dresses, and since my sister was of average size for a girl her age, Tacey looked quite lost in it. She had washed her face, but her expression was tense and unreadable.

In a calm and steady voice, my father read the papers through aloud, so that Tacey, who could neither read nor write, might be assured they were truly her deed of service. Whenever he came to a legal term with which she might not be familiar, he carefully explained it to the child, with Mr. Potter -- who stood by the hearth, warming his hands -- listening intently and then nodding with judicious approval. Then he showed her the signature of her former master, and her own mark as well.

Finally, he placed the paper on the fire.

When the indenture went up in flame, the girl made a sound unlike anything I have ever heard before or since, a kind of wail or shriek, the sort of noise a wild thing makes. Then she knelt down before my father and, to his intense embarrassment, seized and kissed his hand.

So it was that Tacey came to live with us. She immediately became like another sister to me. Which was to say that she was a harsh, intemperate termagant who would take not a word of direction, however reasonably I phrased it, and indeed ordered me about as if it were I who was her servant! She was the scourge of my existence. When she was seventeen -- and against my mother's horrified advice -- she married a man twice her age and considerably darker-skinned, who made a living waiting upon the festivities of the wealthy. Julius Nash was a grave man. People said of him that even his smile was stern. Once, when he was courting her and stood waiting below-stairs, I, smarting from a recent scolding, angrily blurted out, "How can you put up with such a shrew?"

That solemn man studied me for a moment, and then in a voice so deep it had often been compared to a funerary bell replied, "Mistress Tacey is a woman of considerable strength of character and that, I have found, is far to be preferred over a guileful and flattering tongue."

I had not been looking to be taken seriously, but only venting boyish spleen. Now I stood abashed and humbled by this Negro gentleman's thoughtful reply -- and doubly humiliated, I must admit, by the source of my mortification. Then Tacey came stepping down the stairs, with a tight, triumphant smirk and was gone, to reappear in my tale only twice more.

Yet if this seems to you an unlikely thing that my father would be so generous to a mulatto girl he did not know and who could do him no conceivable benefit, then I can only say that you did not know this good man. Moreover, I am convinced by the high regard in which he was held by all who knew him that this was but one of many comparable deeds, and notable only in that by its circumstances we were made aware of it.

How changed was my poor father's condition when last I saw him alive! That was the time my mother took me to the insane ward at Pennsylvania Hospital to visit him.

It was a beautiful, blue-skyed day in June.

I was fifteen years old.

* * * *

Philadelphia was a wonderful place in which to be young, though I did not half appreciate it at that time. Ships arrived in the harbor every day with silk and camphor from Canton, hides from Valparaiso, and opium from Smyrna, and departed to Batavia and Malacca for tin, the Malabar coast for sandalwood and pepper, and around the Cape Horn with crates of knives and blankets to barter with credulous natives for bales of sea otter skins. Barbarously tattooed sailors were forever staggering from the groggeries singing oddly cadenced chanteys and pitching headlong into the river, or telling in vivid detail of a season lived naked among cannibals, married to a woman whose teeth had been filed down to points, all the while and with excruciating exactitude slowly unwrapping an oilcloth packet unearthed from the bottom of a sea-chest to reveal at the climax of the yarn: a mummified human ear. The harbor was a constant source of discontent for me.

As were the grain wagons which came down the turnpike from Lancaster and returned west laden with pioneers and missionaries bound for the continental interior to battle savage Indians or save their souls for Christ, each according to his inclination. Those who stayed behind received packages from their distant relations containing feathered head-pieces, cunningly woven baskets, beadwork cradleboards, and the occasional human scalp. Every frontiersman who headed up the pike took a piece of my soul with him.

Our hotel was located in that narrow slice of streets by the Delaware which respectable folk called the wharflands, but which, because a brick wall two stories high with an iron fence atop it separated Water street from Front street, (the two ran together; but Water street served the slow-moving wagon trade of

the wharves, and Front street the dashing gigs and coaches of the social aristocracy), we merchants' brats thought of as the Walled City. Our streets were narrow and damp, our houses and stores a bit ramshackle, our lives richly thronged with provincial joys.

Philadelphia proper, by contrast, was the sort of place where much was made of how wide and clean and grid-like the streets were, and a Frenchman's casual gallant reference to it as "the Athens of America" would be quoted and re-quoted until Doomsday. Yet, within its limits, it was surprisingly cosmopolitan.

The European wars had filled the city with exiles -- the vicomte de Noailles, the duc d'Orleans, a hundred more. The former Empress Iturbide of Mexico could be seen hurrying by in her ludicrously splendid carriage. In the restaurants and bookshops could be found General Moreau, a pair of Murats, and a brace of Napoleons, were one to seek them out. The count de Survilliers, who had been King of Spain, had his own pew in St. Joseph's Church off Willing's alley. We often saw him on the way there of a Sunday, though we ourselves went to St. Mary's, half a block away, for our family had sided with the trustees in the church fight which had resulted in the bishop being locked out of his own cathedral. Charles Lucien Bonaparte, who was a naturalist, could be encountered stalking the marshes at the edge of town or along the river, in forlorn search of a new species of plover or gull to name after himself.

Still, and despite its museums and circuses, its (one) theater and (one) library and (three) wax-works, the city was to a young river rat little more than an endless series of enticements to leave. Everything of any interest at all to me had either come from elsewhere or was outward bound.

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But I seem to have lost the thread of my tale. Well, who can blame me? This is no easy thing to speak of. Still, I set out to tell you of my final memory -- would to God it were not! -- of my father when he was alive.

And so I shall.

My mother and I walked to the hospital together. She led, concentrated and brisk, while I struggled not to lag behind. Several times she glared me back to her side.

For most of that mile-and-some walk from our boarding-house, I managed not to ask the question most vexing my mind, for fear it would make me sound lacking in a proper filial piety. Leaving the shelter of the Walled City at Market street, we went first south on Front then up Black Horse alley, while I distracted myself by computing the area between two curves, and then turning down Second past the malt houses and breweries to Chestnut and so west past the Philadelphia Dispensary, where I tried to recall the method Father Tourneaux had taught me for determining the volume of tapering cylindrical solids. South again on Third street, past the tannery and the soap-boiler's shop and chandlery, I thought about Patricia's husband, Aaron, who was in the China trade. Somebody -- could it have been Jack? -- had recently asked him if he planned someday to employ me as a navigator on one of his ships, and he had laughed in a way that said neither yea nor nay. Which gave me much to ponder. We cut through Willing's alley, my mother being a great believer that distances could be shortened through cunning navigation (I ducked my head and made the sign of the cross as we passed St. Joseph's), and jogged briefly on Fourth. One block up Prune street, a tawny redhead winked at me and ducked down Bingham's court before I could decide whether she were real or just a rogue memory. But I was like the man commanded not to think about a rhinoceros, who found he could think of nothing else. At last, the pressures of curiosity and resentment grew so great that the membrane of my resolve ruptured and burst.

"I do not fully understand," I said, striving for a mature and measured tone but succeeding only in

sounding petulant, "exactly what is expected of me." I had not been to see my father -- it had been made clear that I was not to see him -- since the day he entered the hospital. That same day my littlest sister had fled the house in terror, while this gentlest of men overturned furniture and shouted defiance at unseen demons. The day it was decided he could no longer be cared for at home. "Is today special for any reason? What ought I to do when I see him?"

I did not ask "Why?" but that was what I meant, and the question my mother answered.

"I have my reasons," she said curtly. "Just as I have good and sufficient reason for not informing you as to their exact nature just yet." We had arrived at the hospital grounds, and the gatekeeper had let us in.

My mother led me down the walk under the buttonwood trees to the west wing. A soft southern breeze alleviated the heat. The hospital buildings were situated within a tract of farmland which had been preserved within the city limits so that the afflicted could refresh themselves with simple chores. Closing my eyes, I can still smell fresh-mown hay, and hear the whir of a spinning wheel. Sunflowers grew by the windows, exactly like that sunflower which had appeared like a miracle one spring between the cobbles of our back alley and lasted into the autumn without being trampled or torn down, drawing goldfinches and sentimental young women. You could not wish for a more pleasant place in which to find your father imprisoned as a lunatic.

The cell-keeper's wife came to the door and smiled a greeting.

My mother thrust a banana into my hand. "Here. You may give him this." Which was the first intimation I had that she was not to accompany me.

She turned and crunched off, down the gravel path.

The cell-keeper's wife led me through the ward to a room reserved for visitors. I cannot recall its furniture. The walls were whitewashed. A horsefly buzzed about in the high corners, irritably seeking a passage into the outer world.

"Wait here," the woman said. "I'll summon an attendant to bring him."

She left.

For a long still time I stood, waiting. Eventually I sat down and stared blindly about. Seeing nothing and thinking less. Hating the horsefly.

The banana was warm and brownish-yellow in my hand.

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Aeons passed. Sometimes there were noises in the hall. Footsteps would approach, and then recede. They were never those of the man I fearfully awaited.

Finally, however, the door opened. There was my father, being led by the arm by a burly young attendant. He shuffled into the room. The attendant placed him in a chair and left, locking the door behind him.

My father, who had always been a rather plump man, with a merchant's prosperous stomach, was now gaunt and lean. His flesh hung loosely about him; where his face had been round, loose jowls now hung.

"Hello, Father," I said.

He did not respond. Nor would he meet my eyes. Instead, his gaze moved with a slow restlessness back and forth across the floor, as if he had misplaced something and were trying to find it.

Miserably, I tried to make conversation.

"Mary finished making her new dress yesterday. It's all of green velvet. The exact same color as that of the cushions and sofa and drapes in Mr. Barclay's parlor. When Mother saw the cloth she had chosen, she said, 'Well, I know one place you won't be wearing that.'"

I laughed. My father did not.

"Oh, and you recall Stephen Girard, of course. He had a cargo of salt at his wharf last summer which Simpson refused to buy -- trying to cheapen it to his own price, you see. Well, he said to his porter, 'Tom, why can't you buy that cargo?' and Tom replied, 'Why, sir, how can I? I have no money.' But 'Never mind,' said Girard, 'I'll advance you the cost. Take it and sell it by the load, and pay me as you can.' That was last summer, as I said, and now the porter is well on his way to being Simpson's chief rival in the salt trade."

When this anecdote failed to rouse my father -- who had avidly followed the least pulsation in the fortunes of our merchant neighbors, and loved best to hear of sudden success combined with honest labor -- I knew that nothing I could hope to say would serve to involve him.

"Father, do you know who I am?" I had not meant to ask -- the question just burst out of me.

This roused some spirit in the man at last. "Of course I know. Why wouldn't I know?" He was almost belligerent, but there was no true anger behind his words. They were all bluff and empty bluster and he still would not meet my eyes. "It's as clear as ... as clear as two plus two is four. That's ... that's logic, isn't it? Two plus two is four. That's logic."

On his face was the terrible look of a man who had failed his family and knew it. He might not know the exact nature of his sin, but the awareness of his guilt clearly ate away at him. My presence, the presence of someone he ought to know, only made matters worse.

"I'm your son," I said. "Your son, William."

Still he would not meet my eye.

How many hours I languished in the Purgatory of his presence I do not know. I continued to talk for as long as I could, though he obviously could make no sense of my words, because the only alternative to speech was silence -- and such silence as was unbearable to think upon. A silence that would swallow me whole.

All the time I spoke, I clutched the banana. There was no place I could set it down. Sometimes I shifted it from one hand to the other. Once or twice I let it lie uncomfortably in my lap. I was constantly aware of it. As my throat went dry and I ran out of things to say, my mind focused itself more and more on that damnable fruit.

My mother always brought some small treat with her when she visited her husband. She would not be pleased if I returned with it. This I knew. But neither did I relish the thought of emphasizing the cruel reversal in our roles, his abject helplessness and my relative ascendancy, by feeding him a trifle exactly as he had so often fed me in my infancy.

In an anguish, I considered my choices. All terrible. All unacceptable.

Finally, more to rid myself of the obligation than because I thought it the right thing to do, I offered the loathsome thing to my father.

He took it.

Eyes averted, he unhurriedly peeled the banana. Without enthusiasm, he bit into it. With animal sadness he ate it.

That is the one memory that, try as I might, I cannot nor ever will be able to forgive myself for: That I saw this once-splendid man, now so sad and diminished, eating a banana like a Barbary ape.

* * * *

But there's a worse thing I must tell you: For when at last I fell silent, time itself congealed about me, extending itself so breathlessly that it seemed to have ceased altogether. Years passed while the sunlight remained motionless on the whitewashed wall. The horsefly's buzzing ceased, yet I knew that if I raised my head I would see it still hanging in the air above me. I stared at my poor ruined father in helpless horror, convinced that I would never leave that room, that instant, that sorrow. Finally, I squeezed my eyes tight shut and imagined the attendant coming at last to lead my father away and restore me again to my mother.

In my imagination, I burst into tears. It was some time before I could speak again. When I could, I said, "Dear God, Mother! How could you do this to me?"

"I required," she said, "your best estimation of his condition."

"You visit him every day." One of my hands twisted and rose up imploringly, like that of a man slowly drowning. "You must know how he is."

She did not grip my hand. She offered no comfort. She did not apologize. "I have stood by your father through sickness and health," she said, "and will continue to do so for as long as he gains the least comfort from my visits. But I have for some time suspected he no longer recognizes me. So I brought you. Now you must tell me whether I should continue to come here."

There was steel in my mother, and never more so than at that moment. She was not sorry for what she had done to me. Nor was she wrong to have done it.

Even then I knew that.

"Stay away," I said, "and let your conscience be at ease. Father is gone from us forever."

But I could not stop crying. I could not stop crying. I could not stop crying. Back down the streets of Philadelphia I walked, for all to see and marvel at, bawling like an infant, hating this horrible life and hating myself even more for my own selfish resentment of my parents, who were each going through so much worse than I. Yet even as I did so, I was acutely aware that still I sat in that timeless room and that all I was experiencing was but a projection of my imagination. Nor has that sense ever gone entirely away. Even now, if I still my thoughts to nothing, this world begins to fade and I sense myself to still be sitting in my father's absence.

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From this terrible moment I fled, and found myself back upon the dory, returning from my father's burial. Our hearts were all light and gay. We chattered as the doryman, head down, plied his oars.

My baby sister Barbara was trailing a hand in the water, a blaze of light where her face should have been, hoping to touch a fish.

"Will," said Mary in a wondering voice. "Look." And I followed her pointing finger upward. I turned toward the east, to the darkening horizon above Treaty Island and the New Jersey shore, where late afternoon thunderheads were gathering.

Scudding before the storm and moving straight our way was a structure of such incredible complexity that the eye could make no sense of it. It filled the sky. Larger than human mind could accept, it bore down upon us like an aerial city out of the Arabian Nights, an uncountable number of hulls and platforms dependent from a hundred or more balloons.

Once, years before, I had seen a balloon ascent. Gently the craft had severed its link with the earth, gracefully ascending into the sky, a floating island, a speck of terrestriality taken up into the kingdom of the air. Like a schooner it sailed, dwindling, and away. It disappeared before it came anywhere near the horizon.

If that one balloon was a schooner, than this was an Armada. Where that earlier ship had been an islet, a mote of wind-borne land carried into the howling wilderness of the air, what confronted me now was a mighty continent of artifice.

It was a monstrous sight, made doubly so by the scurrying specks which swarmed the shrouds and decks of the craft and which, once recognized as men, magnified the true size of the thing beyond believing.

The wind shifted, and the thunder of its engines filled the universe.

That was my first glimpse of the mighty airship Empire.

* * * *

The world turned under my restless mind, dispelling sunshine and opening onto rain. Two days casually disappeared into the fold. I was lurching up Chestnut street, water splashing underfoot, arms aching, almost running. Mary trotted alongside me, holding an umbrella over the twenty-quart pot I carried, and still the rain contrived to run down the back of my neck.

"Not so fast!" Mary fretted. "Don't lurch about like that. You'll trip and spill."

"We can't afford to dawdle. Why in heaven's name did Mother have to leave the pot so long over the fire?"

"It's obvious you'll never be a cook. The juices required time to addle; otherwise the stew would be cold and nasty upon arrival."

"Oh, there'll be no lack of heat where we're going, I assure you. Tacey will make it hot enough and then some."

"Get on with you. She won't."

"She will. Tacey is a despot in the kitchen, Napoleon reborn, reduced in stature but expanded in self-conceit. She is a Tiberius Claudius Nero in parvum when she has a spoon in her hand. Never since Xanthippe was such a peppery tongue married to such a gingery spirit. A lifetime of kitchen fires have in the kettle of her being combined -- "

Mary laughed, and begged me to stop. "You make my sides ache!" she cried. And so of course I

continued.

" -- to make of her a human pepper pot, a snapper soup seasoned with vinegar, a simmering melange of Hindoo spices whose effect is to make not one's tongue but one's ears burn. She -- "

"Stop, stop, stop!"

Parties were being held all over town in honor of the officers and crew of the Empire, and the first aerial crossing of the Atlantic. There were nearly a thousand crewmen all told, which was far too many to be feted within a single building. Mary and I were bound for a lesser gathering at the Library Company, presided over by a minor Biddle and catered by Julius Nash and his crew of colored waiters.

We were within sight of our destination when I looked up and saw my future.

Looming above the Walnut Street Prison yard, tethered by a hundred lines, was the Empire, barely visible through the grey sheets of rain. It dwarfed the buildings beneath. Gusts of wind tugged and shoved at the colorless balloons, so that they moved slightly, darkness within darkness, like an uneasy dream shifting within a sleeper's mind.

I gaped, and stepped in a puddle so deep the water went over my boot. Stumbling, I crashed to one knee. Mary shrieked.

Then I was up and hobbling-running again, as fast I could. My trousers were soaked with ice-cold water, and my knee blazed with pain, but at least the pot was untouched.

It was no easy life, being the eldest son in a family dependent upon a failing boarding-house. Constant labor was my lot. Not that I minded labor -- work was the common lot of everyone along the docks, and cheerily enough submitted to. It was the closing of prospects that clenched my soul like an iron fist.

In those days I wanted to fly to the Sun and build a palace on the Moon. I wanted to tunnel to the dark heart of the Earth and discover rubies and emeralds as large as my father's hotel. I wanted to stride across the land in seven-league boots, devise a submersible boat and with it discover a mermaid nation under the sea, climb mountains in Africa and find leopards at their snowy peaks, descend Icelandic volcanos to fight fire-monsters and giant lizards, be marked down in the history books as the first man to stand naked at the North Pole. Rumors that the Empire would be signing replacements for those airmen who had died during the flight from London ate at my soul like a canker.

Father Tourneaux had had great hopes that I might one day be called to the priesthood, preferably as a Jesuit, and when I was younger my mother had encouraged this ambition in me with tales of martyrdom by Iroquois torture and the unimaginable splendors of the Vatican state. But, like so much else, that dream had died a slow death with the dwindling and wasting away of my father.

In prosperous times, a port city offered work enough and opportunity in plenty for any ambitious young man. But Philadelphia had not yet recovered from the blockades of the recent war. The posting my brother-in-law had as good as promised me had vanished along with two ships of his nascent fleet, sacrificed to the avarice of British power. The tantalizing possibility that there might be money found to send me to the University of Paris to study mathematics had turned to pebbles and mist as well. My prospects were nonexistent.

Mary grabbed my arm and dragged me around. "Will -- you're dreaming again! You've walked right past the doorway."

* * * *

Tacey Nash saw us come in. Eyes round with outrage, she directed at me a glare that would have stunned a starling, had one been unlucky enough to fly through its beam. "Where have you been?"

I set the pot down on a table, and proceeded to unwrap layers of newspapers and old blanket scraps from its circumference. "Mother insisted that -- "

"Don't talk back." She lifted the lid and with it wafted the steam from the stewed oysters toward her nostrils. They flared as the scent of ginger reached them. "Ah." Briefly her face softened. "Your mother still knows how to cook."

One of the waiters placed the pot over a warming stove. Mary briskly tied on an apron -- with Patricia married and out of the house, she'd assumed the role of the practical sister and, lacking Patty's organizational genius, tried to compensate with energy -- and with a long spoon gave the pot a good stir. Another waiter brought up tureens, and she began filling them.

"Well?" Tacey said to me. "Are you so helpless that you cannot find any work to do?"

So the stew had come in time, after all! Relieved, I glanced over my shoulder and favored my sister with a grin. She smiled back at me, and for one warm instant, all was well.

"Where shall I start?" I asked.

* * * *

Why was I so unhappy in those days? There was a girl and I had loved her in my way, and thought she loved me too. One of us tired of the other, and so we quarreled and separated, to the eternal misery of both. Or so I assume -- I retain not a jot of this hypothetical affair, but considering my age, it seems inevitable. Yet it was not a romantic malaise I suffered from, but a disease more all-encompassing.

I was miserable with something far worse than love.

I had a hunger within me for something I could neither define nor delimit. And yet at the same time I suffered the queasy fullness of a man who has been at the table one hour too many. I felt as if I had swallowed several live cats which were now proceeding to fight a slow, sick, unending war within me. If I could, I would have vomited up everything -- cats, girl, wharves, boarding-house, city, world, my entire history to date -- and only felt the better for being rid of them. Every step I took seemed subtly off-balance. Every word I said sounded exactly wrong. Everything about me -- my soul, mind, thought, and physical being -- was in my estimation thoroughly detestable.

I had no idea then what was wrong with me.

Now I know that I was simply young.

I suppose I should describe that makeshift kitchen, set up within the Loganian Annex of the Library. The warming pans steaming. The elegant black men with their spotless white gloves bustling out with tureens of stew and returning with bowls newly emptied of punch. How, for the body of the meal, the waiters stood behind the airmen (who, though dressed in their finest, were still a raffish lot), refilling their plates and goblets, to the intense embarrassment of everyone save the officers, who were of course accustomed to such service, and how Julius himself stood by the dignitaries' table, presiding over all, with here a quiet signal to top up an alderman's glass, and there a solemn pleasantry as he spooned cranberries onto the plate of the ranking officer.

Yet that is mere conjecture. What I retain of that dinner is, first, the order of service, and second, the extraordinary speech that was made at its conclusion, most of which I missed from being involved in a

conversation of my own, and its even more extraordinary aftermath. No more. The kitchen, for all of me, may as well not have existed at all.

The menu was as follows:

To begin, _fish-house_ punch, drunk with much merriment.

Then, _oyster stew_, my mother's, eaten to take the edge off of appetites and quickly cleared away.

Finally, the dinner itself, in two courses, the first of which was:

roasted turkey stuffed with bread, suet, eggs, sweet herbs

tongue pie made with apples and raisins chicken smothered in oysters with parsley sauce served with:

boiled onions cranberries mangoes pickled beans celery pickled beets conserve of rose petals braised lambs quarters

red quince preserves

Followed by the second course of:

trout poached in white wine and vinegar

stew pie made of veal

alamode round of beef, corned and stuffed with beef, pork, bread, butter, salt, pepper, savory and cayenne; braised served with:

french beans parsnips purple spotted lettuce and salad herbs pickled cucumbers spinach roasted potatoes summer pears white, yellow, and red quince preserves

Finally, after the table had been cleared and deserted:

soft gingerbread

Indian pudding pumpkin pie cookies, both almond and cinnamon

* * * *

Each course of which was, in the manner of the times, served up all at once in a multitude of dishes, so as to fill the tables complete and impress the diners with an overwhelming sense of opulence and plenty. Many a hungry time in my later adventures I would talk myself to sleep by repeating each dish several times over in my mind, recollecting its individual flavor, and imagining myself so thoroughly fed that I turned dishes away untasted.

Thus do we waste our time and fill our minds with trivialities, while all the time the great world is falling rapidly into the past, carrying our loved ones and all we most value away from us at the rate of sixty seconds per minute, sixty minutes per hour, eight thousand seven hundred sixty-six hours per year!

So much for the food. Let me now describe the speech.

The connection between the Logonian and the main library was through a wide upper-level archway with stairs descending to the floor on either side of the librarian's desk. It was a striking, if inefficient, arrangement which coincidentally allowed us to easily spy upon the proceedings below.

When the final sweets and savories had been placed upon the tables, the waiters processed up the twin stairs, and passed through the Loganian to a small adjacent room for a quiet meal of leftovers. I went to the archway to draw the curtain shut, and stayed within its shadows, looking down upon the scene.

The tables were laid so that they filled the free space on the floor below, with two shoved together on the eastern side of the room for the officers and such city dignitaries -- selectmen and flour merchants, mostly -- who could not aspire to the celebration in Carpenter's Hall. All was motion and animation. I chanced to see one ruffian reach out to remove a volume from the shelves and, seeing a steelpoint engraving he admired, slide the book under the table, rip the page free, and place it, folded, within the confines of his jacket. Yet that was but one moment in such a menagerie of incident as would have challenged the hand of a Hogarth to record.

Somebody stood -- Biddle, I presume -- and struck an oratorical stance. From my angle, I could see only his back. Forks struck goblets for silence, so that the room was briefly filled with the song of dozens of glass crickets.

The curtains stirred, and Socrates joined me, plate in hand and gloves stuffed neatly into his sash. "Have I missed anything?" he whispered.

I knew Socrates only slightly, as one who was in normal conditions the perfect opposite of his master, Julius: the most garrulous of men, a fellow of strange fancies and sudden laughter. But he looked sober enough now. I shook my head, and we both directed our attention downward.

"...the late unpleasantness between our two great nations," the speaker was saying. "With its resolution, let the admiration the American people have always held for our British kindred resume again its rightful place in the hearts of us all."

Now the curtains stirred a second time, and Tacey appeared. Her countenance was as stormy as ever. Quietly, she said, "What is this nonsense Mary tells me about you going up Wissahickon to work in a mill?"

There was an odd stirring among the airmen, a puzzled exchange of glances.

Turning away from the speaker, I said, "I intended to say good-bye to you before I left."

"You've been intending to say good-bye to me since the day we met. So you do mean it, then?"

"I'm serious," I admitted.

Those dark, alert eyes flicked my way, and then back. "Oh, yes, you would do well in the mills -- I don't think."

"Tacey, I have little choice. There is no work to be had on the wharves. If I stay at home, I burden Mother with the expense of my upkeep, and yet my utmost labor cannot increase her income by a single boarder. She'll be better off with my room empty and put out to let."

"Will Keely, you are a fool. What future can there be for you performing manual labor in a factory? There are no promotions. The mill owners all have five sons apiece -- if a position of authority arises, they have somebody close at hand and dear to their hearts to fill it. They own, as well, every dwelling within an hour's walk of the mills. You must borrow from your family to buy your house from them. For years you scrimp, never tasting meat from month to month, working from dawn to dusk, burying pennies in the dirt beneath your bed, with never a hope of earning enough to attract a decent wife. Then the owners declare that there is no longer a market for their goods, and turn out most of their employees. There is no work

nearby, so the laborers must sell their houses. Nobody will buy them, however low the price may be, save the mill owners. Who do, for a pittance, because six months later they will begin hiring a new batch of fools, who will squander their savings on the house you just lost."

"Tacey -- "

"Oh, I can see the happy crowds now, when you return to the wharves in five years. Look, they will cry, here comes the famous factory boy! See how his silver buttons shine. What a handsome coach he drives -- General Washington himself never owned so finely matched a sextet of white horses. Behold his kindly smile. He could buy half of New York city with his gold, yet it has not spoiled him at all. All the girls wish to marry him. They can see at a glance that he is an excellent dancer. They tat his profile into lace doilies and sleep with them under their pillows at night. It makes them sigh."

So, bickering as usual, we missed most of Biddle's speech. It ended to half-drunken applause and uncertain laughter. The British airmen, oddly enough, did not look so much pleased as bewildered.

After a certain amount of whispering and jostling at the head table, as if no one there cared to commit himself to public speech, a thin and spindly man stood. He was a comical fellow in an old-fashioned powdered wig so badly fitting it must surely have been borrowed, and he tittered nervously before he said, "Well. I thank our esteemed host for that most, ah, unusual -- damn me if I don't say peculiar -- speech. Two great nations indeed! Yes, perhaps, someday. Yet I hope not. Whimsical, perhaps, is the better word. I shall confine myself to a simple account of our historic passage..."

So the speech progressed, and if the American's speech had puzzled the British officer, it was not half so bewildering as those things he said in return.

He began by applauding Tobias Whitpain, he of world-spanning renown, for the contributions made through his genius to the success of the first trans-Atlantic aerial crossing were matched only by the foresight of Queen Titania herself for funding and provisioning the airship. Isabella was now dethroned, he said, from that heavenly seat reserved for the muse of exploration and science.

"Whitpain?" I wondered. "Queen Titania?"

"What is that you are playing with?" Tacey hissed sharply.

I looked up guiltily. But the question was directed not at me but toward Socrates, who yet stood to my other side.

"Ma'am?" he said, the picture of innocence, as he shoved something into my hand, which from reflexive habit, I slid quickly into a pocket.

"Show me your hands," she said, and then, "Why are you not working? Get to work"

Socrates was marched briskly off. I waited until both were out of sight before digging out his toy.

It was a small mirror in a cheap, gaudy frame, such as conjure women from the Indies peer into before predicting love and health and thirteen children for gullible young ladies. I held it up and looked into it.

I saw myself.

* * * *

I saw myself standing in the square below the great stepped ziggurat at the center of Nicnotezpocoatl. Which grand metropolis, serving twice over the population of London herself, my shipmates inevitably

called Nignog City. Dear old Fuzzleton was perched on a folding stool, sketching and talking, while I held a fringed umbrella over him, to keep off the sun. He cut a ludicrous figure, so thin was he and so prissily did he sit. But, oh, what a fine mind he had!

We were always talking, Fuzzleton and I. With my new posting, I was in the strange position of being simultaneously both his tutor and student, as well as serving as his bootblack, his confidant, and his potential successor.

"The Empire is not safe anchored where it is," he said in a low voice, lest we be overheard by our Aztec warrior guardians. "Fire arrows could be shot into the balloons from the top of the ziggurat. These people are not fools! They've nosed out our weaknesses as effectively as we have theirs. Come the day they fear us more than they covet our airship, we are all dead. Yet Captain Winterjude refuses to listen to me."

"But Lieutenant Blacken promised -- " I began.

"Yes, yes, promises. Blacken has ambitions, and plans of his own, as well. We -- "

He stopped. His face turned pale and his mouth gaped wide. The stool clattered onto the paving stones, and he cried, "Look!"

I followed his pointing finger and saw an enormous Negro hand cover the sky, eclipsing the sun and plunging the world into darkness.

* * * *

"Thank you," Socrates said. His face twisted up into a grotesque wink, and he was gone.

I returned my attention to the scene below.

The speaker -- old Fuzzleton himself, I realized with a start -- was winding up his remarks. He finished by raising a glass high in the air, and crying loudly: "To America! -- Her Majesty's most treasured possession."

At those words, every American started to his feet. Hands were clapped to empty belts. Gentlemen searched their coats for sidearms they had of course not brought. There were still men alive who had fought in the War of Independence, and even if there had not been such, memory of the recent war with its burning of Washington and, closer to home, the economically disastrous blockade of American ports was still fresh in the minds of all. Nobody was eager to return to the embrace of a foreign despot, whether king or queen, George or Titania, made no difference. Our freedoms were young enough that all were aware how precariously we held them.

The British, for their part, were fighting men, and recognized hostility when confronted with it. They came to their feet as well, in a very Babel of accusation and denial.

It was at that instant, when all was confusion, and violence hovered in the air, that a messenger burst into the room.

* * * *

Is that poker hot yet? Then plunge it in the wine and let the spices mull. Good. Hand me that. 'Twill help with the telling.

It was the madness of an instant that led me to join the airshipmen's number. Had I taken the time to

think, I would not have done it. But ambition was my undoing. I flung my towel away, darted into the kitchen to give my sister a quick hug and a peck on her cheek, and was down the stairs in a bound and a clatter.

In the library, all was confusion, with the British heading in a rush for the doorway, and the Americans holding back out of uncertainty, and fear as well of their sudden ferocity.

I joined the crush for the door.

Out in the cobbled street, we formed up into a loose group. I was jostled and roughly shoved, and I regretted my rashness immediately. The men about me were vague grey shapes, like figures in a dream. In the distance I heard the sound of angry voices.

A mob.

I was standing near the officers and overheard one argue, "It is unwise to leave thus quickly. It puts us in the position of looking as though we had reason to flee. 'Tis like the man seen climbing out his host's bedroom window. Nothing he says will make him look innocent again."

"There is no foe I fear half so much as King Mob," Fuzzleton replied. "March them out."

The officer saluted, spun about, and shouted, "To the ship -- double-time, on the mark!" Clapping his horny hands together, he beat out the rhythm for a sailor's quick-march, such as I had played at a thousand times as a lad.

Rapidly the airmen began to move away.

Perforce I went with them.

By luck or good planning, we reached the prison yard without encountering any rioters. Our group, which had seemed so large, was but a drop of water to the enormous swirling mass of humanity that had congregated below the airship.

All about me, airmen were climbing rope ladders, or else being yanked into the sky. For every man thus eliminated, a new rope suddenly appeared, bounced, and was seized by another. Meanwhile, lines from the Whitpain engines were being disconnected from the tubs of purified river water, where they had been generating hydrogen.

Somebody slipped a loose loop around me and under my arms and with a sudden lurch I went soaring up into the darkness.

* * * *

Oh, that was a happy time for me. The halcyon weeks ran one into another, long and languid while we sailed over the American wilderness. Sometimes over seas of forest, other times over seas of plains. There were occasional Indian tribes which...

Eh? You want to know what happened when I was discovered? Well, so would I. As well ask, though, what words Paris used to woo Helen. So much that we wish to know, we never shall! I retain, however, one memory more precious to me than all the rest, of an evening during the crossing of the shallow sea that covers the interior of at least one American continent.

Our shifts done, Hob and I went to the starboard aft with no particular end but to talk. "Sit here and watch the sunset," she said, patting the rail. She leaned against me as we watched, and I was acutely

aware of her body and its closeness. My eyes were half-closed with a desire I thought entirely secret when I felt her hand undoing the buttons on my trousers.

"What are you doing?" I whispered in alarm.

"Nothing they don't expect young lads to do with each other now and then. Trust me. So long as you're discreet, they'll none of them remark on't."

Then she had me out and with a little laugh squeezed the shaft. I was by then too overcome with desire to raise any objections to her remarkable behavior.

Side by side we sat on the taffrail, as her hand moved first slowly and then with increasing vigor up and down upon my yard. Her mouth turned up on one side in a demi-smile. She was enjoying herself.

Finally I spurted. Drops of semen fell, silent in the moonlight, to mingle their saltiness with that of the water far below. She bent to swiftly kiss the tip of my yard and then tucked it neatly back into my trousers. "There," she said. "Now we're sweethearts."

My mind follows them now, those fugitive drops of possibility on their long and futile, yet hopeful, flight to the sea. I feel her hand clenching me so casually and yet profoundly. She could not have known how much it meant to me, who had never fired off my gun by a woman's direct intervention before. Yet inwardly I blessed her for it, and felt a new era had opened for me, and swore I would never forget her nor dishonor her in my mind for the sake of what she had done for me.

Little knowing how soon my traitor heart would turn away from her.

But for then I knew only that I no longer desired to return home. I wanted to go on with my Hob to the end of the voyage and back to her thronged and unimaginable London with its Whitpain engines and electrified lighting and surely a place for an emigre from a nonexistent nation who knew (as none of them did) the Calculus.

* * * *

Somewhere around here, I have a folded and water-damped sheet of foolscap, upon which I apparently wrote down a short list of things I most wished never to forget. I may have lost it, but no matter. I've read it since a hundred times over. It begins with a heading in my uncertain Latin.

* * * *

Ne Obliviscaris

1. My father's burial
2. The Aztec Emperor in his golden armor
3. Hob's hair in the sunset
4. The flying men
5. Winterjude's death & what became of his Lady
6. The air-serpents
7. The sound of icebergs calving

8. Hunting buffalo with the Apache

9. Being flogged

10. The night we solved the Whitpain Calculus

* * * *

Which solution of course is gone forever -- else so much would be different now! We'd live in a mansion as grand as the President's, and savants from across the world would come a-calling upon your old father, just so they could tell their grandchildren they'd met the Philadelphia Kepler, the American Archimedes. Yet here we are.

So it is savage irony that I remember that night vividly -- the small lantern swinging lightly in the gloom above the table covered with sheet after sheet of increasingly fervid computation -- Calculus in my hand and Whitpain equations in Fuzzleton's, and then on one miraculous and almost unreadable sheet, both of our hands dashing down formula upon formula in newly invented symbols, sometimes overlapping in the excitement of our reconciliation of the two geniuses.

"D'ye see what this means, boy?" Fuzzleton's face was rapturous. "Hundreds of worlds! Thousands! An infinitude of 'em! This is how the Empire was lost and why your capital city and mine are strangers to each other -- it explains everything!"

We grabbed each other and danced a clumsy little jig. I remember that I hit my head upon a rafter, but what did I care? There would be statues of us in a myriad Londons and countless Philadelphias. We were going to live forever in the mind of Mankind.

* * * *

My brother-in-law once told me that in China they believe that for every good thing there is an ill. For every kiss, a blow. For every dream a nightmare. So perhaps it was because of my great happiness that we shortly thereafter took on board a party of near-naked savages, men and women in equal numbers, to question about the gold ornaments they all wore in profusion about their necks and wrists and ankles.

Captain Winterjude stood watching, his lady by his side and every bit as impassive as he, as the men were questioned by Lieutenant Blacken. They refused to give sensible answers. They claimed to have no knowledge of where the gold came from. They insisted that they didn't know what we were talking about. When the ornaments were ripped from their bodies and shaken in their faces, they denied the gewgaws even existed.

Finally, losing patience, Blacken lined the natives up against the starboard rail. He conferred with the captain, received a curt nod, and ordered two airshipmen to seize the first Indian and throw him overboard.

The man fell to his death in complete silence.

His comrades watched stoically. Blacken repeated his questions. Again he learned nothing.

A second Indian went over the rail.

And so it went until every male was gone, and it was obvious we would learn nothing.

The women, out of compassion I thought at the time, were spared. The next morning, however, it was found that by night all had disappeared. They had slipped over the side, apparently, after their mates. The

crew were much discontented with this discovery, and I discovered from their grumbles and complaints that their intentions for these poor wretches had been far from innocent.

Inevitably, we turned south, in search of El Dorado. From that moment on, however, our voyage was a thing abhorrent to me. It seemed to me that we had made the air itself into one vast grave and that, having plunged into it, the Empire was now engaged in an unholy pilgrimage through and toward Death itself.

* * * *

When the Aztecs had been defeated at last and their city was ours, the officers held a banquet to celebrate and to accept the fealty of the vassal chieftains. Hob was chosen to be a serving-boy. But, because the clothes of a servitor were tight and thus revealing of gender, she perforce faked an injury, and I took her place instead.

It was thus that I caught the eye of Lady Winterjude.

The widow was a handsome, well-made woman with a black pony-tail tied up in a bow. She wore her late husband's military jacket, in assertion of her rights, and it was well known that she was Captain Blacken's chief advisor. As I waited on her I felt her eye upon me at odd moments, and once saw her looking at me with a shocking directness.

She took me, as her unwritten perquisite, into her bed. Thereby and instantly turning Hob into my bitterest enemy, with Captain Blacken not all that far behind.

Forgive me. No, I hadn't fallen asleep. I was just thinking on things. This and that. Nothing that need concern you.

At the time I thought of Lady Winterjude as a monster of evil, an incubus or lamia to whom I was nevertheless drawn by the weakness of my flesh. But of course she was nothing of the kind. Had I made an effort to see her as a fellow human, things might well have turned out differently. For I now believe that it was my very naivete, the transparency with which I was both attracted to and repelled by her, that was my chief attraction for the lady. Had I but the wit to comprehend this then, she would have quickly set me aside. Lady Winterjude was no woman to allow her weaknesses to be understood by a subordinate.

I was young, though, and she was a woman of appetites.

Which is all I remember of that world, save that we were driven out from it. Before we left, however, we dropped a Union Jack, weighted at the two bottom corners, over the side and into the ocean, claiming the sea and all continents it touched for Britain and Queen Titania.

Only an orca was there to witness the ceremony, and whether it took any notice I greatly doubt.

* * * *

The Empire crashed less than a month after we encountered the air-serpents. They lived among the Aurora Borealis, high above the Arctic mountains. It was frigid beyond belief when we first saw them looping amid the Northern Lights, over and over in circles or cartwheels, very much like the Oriental pictures of dragons. Everybody crowded the rails to watch. We had no idea that they were alive, much less hostile.

The creatures were electrical in nature. They crackled with power. Yet when they came zigzagging toward us, we suspected nothing until two balloons were on fire, and the men had to labor mightily to cut them away before they could touch off the others.

We fought back not with cannons -- the recoil of which would have been disastrous to our fragile shells -- but with rockets. Their trails crisscrossed the sky, to no effect at first. Then, finally, a rocket trailing a metal chain passed through an air-dragon and the creature discharged in the form of a great lightning-bolt, down to the ground. For an instant we were dazzled, and then, when we could see again, it was no more.

Amid the pandemonium and cheers, I could have heard no sound to alert me. So it was either a premonition or merest chance that caused me to turn at that moment, just in time to see Hob, her face as hate-filled as any demon's, plunge a knife down upon me.

* * * *

Eh? Oh, I'm sure she did. Your mother was never one for halfway gestures. I could show the scar if you required it. Still, I'm alive, eh? It's all water under the bridge. She had her reasons, to be sure, just as I had mine. Anyway, I didn't set out to explain the ways of women to you, but to tell of how the voyage ended.

We were caught in a storm greater than anything we had encountered so far. I think perhaps we were trapped between worlds. Witch-fires danced on the ropes and rails. Balloons went up in flames. So dire was our situation and sure our peril that I could not hold it in my mind. A wild kind of exaltation filled me, an almost Satanic glee in the chaos that was breaking the airship apart.

As Hob came scuttling across my path, I swept her into my arms and, unheeding of her panicked protests, kissed her! She stared, shocked, into my eyes, and I laughed. "Caroline," I cried, "you are the woman or lass or lad or whatever you might be for me. I'd kiss you on the lip of Hell itself, and if you slipped and fell in, I'd jump right after you."

Briefly I was the man she had once thought me and I had so often wished I could be.

Hob looked at me with large and unblinking eyes. "You'll never be free of me now," she said at last, and then jerked away and was gone, back to her duty.

* * * *

For more than a month I wandered the fever-lands, while the Society for the Relief of Shipwrecked Sailors attended to my needs. Of the crash itself, I remember nothing. Only that hours before it, I arrived at the bridge to discover that poor dear old Fuzzleton was dead.

Captain Blacken, in his madness, had destroyed the only man who might conceivably have returned him to his own port of origin.

"Can you navigate?" he demanded fiercely. "Can you bring us back to London?"

I gathered up the equations that Fuzzleton and I had spent so many nights working up. In their incomplete state, they would bring us back to Philadelphia -- if we were lucky -- but no further. With anything less than perfect luck, however, they would smear us across a thousand worlds.

"Yes," I lied. "I can."

I set a course for home.

* * * *

And so at last, I came upon my father's grave. It was a crisp black rectangle in the earth, as dark and daunting as oblivion itself. Without any hesitation, I stepped through that lightless doorway. And my eyes

opened.

I looked up into the black face of a disapproving angel.

"Tacey?" I said wonderingly.

"That's Mrs. Nash to you," she snapped. But I understood her ways now, and when I gratefully clasped her hand, and touched my lips to it, she had to look away, lest I think she had changed in her opinion of me.

Tacey Nash was still one of the tiniest women I had ever seen, and easily the most vigorous. The doctor, when he came, said it would be weeks before I was able to leave the bed. But Tacey had me nagged and scolded onto my feet in two days, walking in three, and hobbling about the public streets on a cane in four. Then, on the fifth day, she returned to her husband, brood, and anonymity, vanishing from my life forever, as do so many people in this world to whom we owe so much more than will ever be repaid.

* * * *

When word got out that I was well enough to receive visitors, the first thing I learned was that my brother was dead. Jack had drowned in a boating accident several years after I left. A girl whose face was entirely unknown to me told me this -- my mother, there also, could not shush her in time -- and told me as well that she was my baby sister Barbara.

I should have felt nothing. The loss of a brother one does not know is, after all, no loss at all. But I was filled with a sadness wholly inexplicable but felt from the marrow outward, so that every bone, joint, and muscle ached with the pain of loss. I burst into tears.

Crying, it came to me then, all in an instant, that the voyage was over.

The voyage was over and Caroline had not survived it. The one true love of my life was lost to me forever.

* * * *

So I came here. I could no longer bear to live in Philadelphia. The gems in my pocket, small though they might be compared to those I'd left behind, were enough to buy me this house and set me up as a merchant. I was known in the village as a melancholy man. Indeed, melancholy I was. I had been through what would have been the best adventure in the world, were it not ruined by its ending -- by the loss of the Empire and all its hands, and above all the loss of my own dear and irreplaceable Hob.

Perhaps in some other, and better, world she yet survived. But not in mine.

Yet my past was not done with me yet.

On a cold, wet evening in November, a tramp came to my door. He was a wretched, fantastical creature, more kobold than human, all draped in wet rags and hooded so that only a fragment of nose poked out into the meager light from my doorway.

Imploringly, the phantasm held out a hand and croaked, "Food!"

I had not the least thought that any danger might arise from so miserable a source, and if I had, what would I have cared? A violent end to a violent life -- I would not have objected. "Come inside," I said to the poor fellow, "out of the rain. There's a fire in the parlor. Go sit there, while I warm something up."

As the beggar gratefully climbed the stairs, I noticed that he had a distinct limp, as if a leg had been broken and imperfectly healed.

I had a kettle steaming in the kitchen. It was the work of a minute to brew the tea. I prepared a tray with milk and sugar and ginger, and carried it back to the front of the house.

In the doorway to the parlor I stopped, frozen with amazement. There, in that darkened room, a hand went up and moved the hood down. All the world reversed itself.

I stumbled inside, unable to speak, unable to think.

The fire caught itself in her red hair. She turned up her cheek toward me with that same impish smile I loved so well.

"Well, mate," she said. "Ain't you going to kiss me?"

* * * *

The fire is all but done. No, don't bother with another log. Let it die. There's nothing there but ashes anyway.

You look at your mother and you see someone I do not -- a woman who is old and wrinkled, who has put on some weight, perhaps, who could never have been an adventurer, a rogue, a scamp. Oh, I see her exterior well enough, too. But I also see deeper.

I love her in a way you can't possibly understand, nor ever will understand unless some day many years hence you have the good fortune to come to feel the same way yourself. I love her as an old and comfortable shoe loves its mate. I could never find her equal.

And so ends my tale. I can vouch for none of it. Since the fever, I have not been sure which memories are true and which are fantasy. Perhaps only half of what I have said actually happened. Perhaps none of it did. At any rate, I have told you it all.

Save for one thing.

Not many years later, and for the best of reasons, I sent for the midwife. My darling Caroline was in labor. First she threw up, and then the water broke. Then the Quaker midwife came and chased me from the room. I sat in the parlor with my hands clasped between my knees and waited.

Surely hours passed while I stewed and worried. But all I recall is that somehow I found myself standing at the foot of my wife's child-bed. Caroline lay pale with exhaustion. She smiled wanly as the midwife held up my son for me to see.

I looked down upon that tiny creature's face and burst into tears. The tears coursed down my face like rain, and I felt such an intensity of emotion as I can scarce describe to you now. It was raining outside, they tell me now, but that is not how I recall it. To me the world was flooded with sunshine, brighter than any I had ever seen before.

The midwife said something, I paid her no mind. I gazed upon my son.

In that moment I felt closer to my father than ever I had before. I felt that finally I understood him and knew what words he would have said to me if he could. I looked down on you with such absolute and undeviating love as we in our more hopeful moments pray that God feels toward us, and silently I spoke to you.

Someday, my son, I thought, you will be a man. You will grow up and by so doing turn me old, and then I will die and be forgotten. But that's all right. I don't mind. It's a small price to pay for your existence.

Then the midwife put you into my arms, and all debts and grudges I ever held were canceled forever.

There's so much more I wish I could tell you. But it's late, and I lack the words. Anyway, your trunk is packed and waiting by the door. In the morning you'll be gone. You're a man yourself, and about to set off on adventures of your own. Adventures I cannot imagine, and which afterwards you will no more be able to explain to others than I could explain mine to you. Live them well. I know you will.

And now it's time I was abed. Time, and then some, that I slept.