

The English language is full of hidden words and phrases that originated in the vernacular of those who spent their lives at sea. Many phrases which have been adopted into the English language originate from seafaring and in particular from the days of sail. What's more you probably use them more than you realise. So from the dialect of a crew of pirate ships and global explorers of the 1700's you'll be surprised to learn there are many words and phrases still in everyday use.

In this short story I have used some of them as chapter headings or scene breaks. If you're interested you can find out what they mean at the end of the story.

True Colours

Jane Fenwick

At Loggerheads

Eleanor was angry, very angry and it was all Meddling Madison's fault. The woman was infuriating. Gabriel had requested that she, Eleanor, engage a man to do odd jobs on a permanent basis. Odd jobs that, according to her husband, didn't seem to be getting done in the ordinary way of things. The type of work he meant, he explained were those which fell between inside work, which the maids, footman and butler took care of and outside work that was the domain of the stable lads, grooms and gardener. Someone was needed he said who could clear gutters, haul barrels into the cellar, mend items that were broken and generally maintain Westshore.

To this end Eleanor had let it be known she was looking to engage such a person and in due course a man presented himself who said he could fulfil the role. It was fair to say he wasn't in the first flush of youth but he was able bodied and strongly built. Indeed he looked like a man mountain to Eleanor. He stood before her cap in hand.

'What work have you done before Mr Smelt?'

'A bin at sea all ma life, but A think it time to try a different tack.'

Eleanor thought this answer a little evasive so sought to delve deeper. 'Who was your last captain, on which ship did you sail?'

'A were aboard the Bountiful under Cap'n Broad out er Newcastle fer the last five year ma'am.'

'And were you a general deck hand or did you have a trade?'

The man moved from foot to foot and looked about him shiftily. He had a sallow complexion, bushy eyebrows that met in the middle and an earring in his left ear. Tattoos marked his fingers and he wore a red neckerchief tied about his bull neck. He looked every inch a sailor.

He replied looking at the floor. 'A can turn ma hand to most jobs ma'am. A'm good with ma hands, can fettle most jobs an' A'm not scared er hard work.'

Eleanor thought she had heard all she was going to hear. What else was there to ask? 'One of the cottages on our land has a roof in need of repairing. If you think you can mend it to a reasonable standard then I'm sure we would keep you on. My husband thinks the work will take less than a week. If at the end of the week we suit each other then we can agree terms. How does that sound?'

'Thank you ma'am. A can start straight away.'

With that Eleanor sent Smelt to find a groom to show him where to go.

Three days later the odd job man was brought to her attention by Mrs Madison. They had just agreed the week's menus and the cook was about to leave the morning room when she drew herself to her full, unprepossessing height. 'That man Smelt - is he being kept on?'

Eleanor was piqued and immediately on her guard. Mrs M was forever having opinions about matters which were of no concern to her. What had it to do with *her* if Smelt was to become caretaker at Westshore? Eleanor bit her tongue knowing the woman would take umbrage at the slightest remark. She hated having to kowtow to the wretched woman but Gabriel would be annoyed, no furious, if the woman threatened to leave which she seemed to do on a regular basis.

Eleanor took a steadying breath. 'My husband has overseen Smelt's work and is of a mind to offer him a permanent position. Now if that's everything Mrs Madison I have errands to run.'

'In that case perhaps I can speak to you later ma'am. I'm not happy, not happy at all.'

Eleanor sighed in frustration. She may as well get the interview over with, she'd not have a minute's peace otherwise. 'What is it that concerns you about Smelt? He seems capable and hard working, had he not been my husband would have sent him on his way.'

For the next ten minutes Mrs Madison railed against the man. She listed the many faults, which in her opinion, Smelt possessed. Most of the list Eleanor thought was comprised of petty, groundless views or worse were a matter of opinion, Meddling Madison's opinions that is. What Eleanor deduced from her cook's tirade was that the man's greatest defect was to be a private man who kept himself to himself. Mrs M could not, it seemed, get the man to divulge his life story and so she had decided, in her infinite wisdom, he must have some deep, dark and possibly deathly secret to hide.

Eleanor admired Mrs Madison's cooking but disliked the woman herself. She was small minded and petty at times. It was true she was a good cook, an exceptional cook Eleanor was forced to admit, but she was also a self opinionated busybody who liked nothing better than bossing the other staff about.

'If you wish to raise the matter further with Mr Reynolds then please do, but I'm already late. Thank you Mrs Madison, I'm sure you have work to be getting on with, don't let me keep you from your kitchen any longer.'

Later when Gabriel came home to dine he got the full force of Eleanor's discontent.

'That woman is a bigot, a hypocrite and a nosy beggar to boot.'

'You say so often, and I don't disagree but what do you want me to do about it? The housekeeping and staff are your domain are they not?'

'You said Smelt's work was satisfactory and we should take him on, and I think I agree but does he seem above board to you? It pains me to agree with the woman but it's true what Mrs M says, we don't know much about the man.'

'Now who's being nosy? What do you want to know? Labourers like him don't usually come with references. Of course it would have been preferable if you'd hired a local man then we would have known about his background, at least sought verbal references, but he's from Newcastle as I understand it so there is no one to ask.'

'So it's my fault! You didn't say to hire a local man, you should have said. How was I to know?'

'As I said hiring and firing is your job my love. I only got involved because I needed to see what sort of job Smelt had made of the work, I didn't think you'd want to go clambering up on the roof.' He smiled but got only a scowl in return. 'Having inspected it and noted he'd also mended the paddock gate that's been hanging off its hinges since the back end of winter I thought him worth hiring.'

'So the paddock gate is my fault too is it?'

'Eleanor do you think you're over reacting? I'm not blaming you.'

'How patronising you are! Have you told him to stay on? Have you agreed terms?'

'Well, yes as a matter of fact, as I was impressed with the work I thought him worth keeping on so - '

'Yet you just said it's my role to hire staff! Make your mind up Gabriel who's doing the hiring.'

Eleanor pushed her plate away, glowered at her husband and stormed out of the room slamming the door behind her.

Gripe

Gabriel sat back in his chair and sighed. Sometimes Eleanor's temper flared so unexpectedly it surprised him. He knew she disliked Meddling Madison and in truth so did he but she was first class at her job and good cooks were hard to find. It wasn't that he had much to do with

the woman but he knew how she tried his wife's patience which, it had to be said, wasn't good at the best of times. His wife sometimes had a short fuse. Eleanor lived up to the old adage about redheads and their tempers he thought. She could be hot headed at times but thankfully she hardly ever stayed that way for long.

He knew Mrs M would be on the warpath now she had failed to get satisfaction from Eleanor. He thought to avoid coming through the kitchen for the next day or two until she'd moved on to another gripe. Then he smiled as he remembered he was going to be away on business overnight tomorrow. He knew it was the coward's way out but anything for an easy life he thought as he downed the rest of his claret before heading back to the bay. He hoped by the time he returned his wife would have calmed down.

She hadn't.

On his return he looked in on Eleanor in her dressing room. Her face, always easy to read, gave her bad mood away; she was tight lipped and glowering. She was dressed and almost ready to go down for supper. She dismissed Charity who raised her eyes to him as if in warning.

Luckily for him he'd remembered they were giving a supper party for a dozen or so business associates. Had he been late she would have added this to her list of grievances against him. Not that she was cross with him exactly. He knew she was annoyed with the cook but as she was unable to best her she was taking it out on him. He could weather the storm. It would all blow over, it always did. The thought of a supper party also wouldn't have improved Eleanor's frame of mind. He knew she often found business suppers boring, but she always put on a good front knowing they were important to him.

'Have you spoken to Mrs Madison?' He'd hardly got through the door before she harangued him.

'I'll speak to her on the morrow.' He thought it expedient to go and change so made for the door. He'd almost made his escape when she said: 'I thought you were away to Seahouses early in the morning?'

'Ah, yes, I'd forgotten,' he fibbed letting out a long breath. 'Eleanor let it be, you're making a mountain out of a mole hill. In the meantime I think I'll ignore you in the hope your good sense prevails and you regain some of your usual sweetness.' The speech was meant as a light aside but the minute the words left his lips he wished he could have snatched them back. She glared at him through the mirror but made no reply. Gabriel knew Eleanor's silences were often more deadly than her outbursts. 'I'll go to the kitchen and see if I can sort this matter out, then I'd better change or I'll not be ready to greet our guests.' His words were met with a stony silence.

Slipping out of the room he headed for the kitchen where he found Smelt sitting by the fire sharpening an axe. He stood deferentially until Gabriel bid him sit then pouring two glasses of rum, handing one to the labourer Gabriel said: 'Did you finish clearing the ditch?'

'Aye, tomorrow A'll start on the scullery roof; Mrs Madison says it's sprung a leak.'

'Where is Mrs M?'

'Pantry A think.'

'You're a Newcastle man I hear.' Gabriel watched as the man's huge fingers moved deftly passing the edge over the whetstone.

'A'm a local man originally, from the other side of the estuary. We had a farm, then A went to sea.'

'I see.' Gabriel thought his new caretaker a man of few words. They sat in silence the only sound the crackling of the kitchen fire and the swish of the axe. Gabriel headed for the pantry where he found the cook up a ladder replacing a jar of preserves on the top shelf.

‘My wife tells me you’ve taken against the new man.’ The cook climbed down slowly. She should have got Smelt to put the jar back Gabriel mused, he wouldn’t have needed a ladder.

‘I have. He’s a closed book Mr Gabriel and far too big to be in my kitchen, cluttering up the place. He’s too tall, he’ll scare the maids to death.’

The man was no more than a head taller than Gabriel but it was true he was massively built. ‘Have any of them said anything? Have they reason to be afraid of Smelt?’

‘Who knows? Where’s he from? That’s what I’d like to know. Says he’s from Newcastle but could be anywhere for all we know. You be away tomorrow night leaving us poor women with him - I tell you Mr Gabriel I don’t like it, I don’t like it at all.’

Gabriel sighed. ‘I take my responsibilities seriously as I’m sure you know Mrs Madison. Do you think I would leave a man about the place I didn’t trust? As it happens he’s a local man so I shall endeavour to find out more. I hear your concerns and will look into the matter.’

‘It’ll be too late if you return to find us all dead in our beds!’

Gabriel felt exasperated but realised perhaps she did have a legitimate concern. ‘As I said I’ll look into it - and before I leave in the morning. He seems perfectly civil to my mind.’

His cook huffed. ‘Well he would. You’re a man, it’s us women that need to worry, we’re defenceless.’

Gabriel looked at the woman. She was as wide as she was tall. Her biceps were rock hard from years of kneading bread and churning butter. Any man taking her on, even Smelt, would do well to think twice.

As he returned to the kitchen Smelt was ducking his head to go into the yard. He really was a mountain of a man.

After supper, which was a success, Eleanor once more sat before her looking glass. It was clear she too was in an uncommunicative mood. When Gabriel made an idle comment about a wreck that had been washed up the night before she listened but made no comment. Her face was pinched, her mood taciturn.

‘Don’t sulk Eleanor, I’m away on the morrow, I hate to leave on bad terms.’

‘You should have thought of that before you sought to undermine my authority.’

Gabriel held back a sigh as he moved to stand behind her. He put his hands on her shoulders. ‘Some husbands would put an unruly wife such as you across their knee and spank them.’

Eleanor laughed loudly despite herself. ‘I’d like to see you try.’

He grinned back knowing he’d broken through her defences. ‘Would you indeed, in that case I’ll have to see what I can do.’

Clean Bill of Health

Early the next morning Gabriel headed for the bay. Mrs Madison’s complaints had resonated with him; he had to concede he could see how the maids may be intimidated by this colossus of a man. He knocked on Nat Pearson’s door and was invited in by Sarah. The maid looked startled by such an early caller.

‘Mornin’. Is summat up?’ Nat asked as he came into the kitchen fastening his waistcoat.

‘Good morning. Not with the shipping but I wanted to ask if you knew the name of Smelt.’ Gabriel was keen to set off on his business trip so dispensed with the formalities and got straight to the point. ‘They had a farm over by the estuary or so I’m told. Unusually I’ve not heard of the family, have you?’

Nat rubbed his unshaven chin. ‘Aye, Robert Smelt was a tenant farmer, ran sheep an’ goats over at Wooden but he died and the tenancy were lost. He had three sons and as A

remember it they all went to sea. Yer pa would've known the family. A were at school with the middle lad, Pedar.'

'Pedar?'

'Aye Robert, the father, married a Norwegian woman. He were a sailor afore he started farming. He could even have done a trip or two for your pa back in the day.' He threw his short, bandy legs over the bench and sat at the kitchen table and beckoned Gabriel to do the same. 'When it were busy times on the farm Pedar din't go to school, none of the boys did. Never went when it were lambing time. He never really made friends, yer know what lads are like - 'cause he weren't allus at school he weren't part of our gang. Din't seem to bother him, he were allus one to keep his own counsel.'

'So this Pedar is the same age as you? Were the family decent people?'

'Pedar would have forty summers mebbe, but all of 'em were respectable an' hard working. Why are yer asking?'

Gabriel explained.

'A seen him an' his brothers in Newcastle from time to time over the years but not to talk to. They're all built like brick -'

'That's part of the problem. My cook has taken a dislike to the man. It may be Pedar, I don't even know the man's Christian name, never thought to ask him. She's taken against him primarily on account of his size and also because he has a quiet demeanour.' Gabriel rolled his eyes. 'Having said that she did get me thinking, and I didn't want to leave for Seahouses without trying to find out more about him.'

'Think he married a Geordie lass but A could be misremembering.' Nat poured tea for them both. 'Ma brain doesn't warm up till A've had a brew.' He slurped his tea. 'All the family were tall, even the mother, they tek after their grandpa. Think he's alright is Pedar, he's what you might call a gentle giant. Never known 'em to be brawlers.' He laughed. 'Not many would tek any one er the brothers on, A know A'd give 'em a wide berth.'

Gabriel was reassured. The man sounded trustworthy and had he been of average size he knew he wouldn't have given the matter a moment's thought. He hurried home and joined Eleanor at the breakfast table. He told her what he'd been about.

'I talked to the maids and none of them seem unduly worried by his presence. They said he keeps himself to himself and as he sleeps out I can't see it's a problem. As you say if he was a smaller man we wouldn't have given it a second thought. Stop worrying Gabriel. Aren't you already late?'

Gabriel agreed he was and swallowed the last of his coffee. Eleanor was following him into the hall when he heard her use a choice word. He turned to see her standing lopsided. She bent to pick up her shoe.

'My heel's broken.' She held the shoe in one hand and the flared, square heel in the other. He took them from her.

'I'm not surprised, they have seen better days have they not?'

'I know but they're so comfortable. You know how it is - they're worn in, they fit like a glove. You're just the same, the new boots you bought in January are still standing in the hall, you always favour your old riding boots.'

'I'll drop these in at the cobbler in Alnwick on my way through and collect them on the way home tomorrow.'

'Thank you my love, I don't deserve you.'

'No you do not,' he dropped a kiss on the top of her head, 'I may take up with another woman while I'm away, a less temperamental one, one who isn't a redhead with a vile temper.'

Close Quarters

After her ride Eleanor noticed Smelt sitting beside a makeshift fire in the yard. Over it was a pot of bubbling liquid.

‘What are you doing?’ She gagged as the smell from the pot drifted in her direction.

He stood and doffed his tricorn. ‘Mekin’ glue from rabbit bones ma’am.’

‘It smells revolting. What will it stick?’

‘Anything yer like more er less. Mrs Madison gave me a jar to put it in. Wi’ a lid on it’ll keep for a good while.’ He sat down again and began to stir the pot.

‘Would it stick a heel to a shoe?’

‘Easily, do you want me to try ma’am?’

Eleanor explained her husband had taken the shoes to the cobblers but added: ‘I’ll know for next time and let you have a go first.’

‘It’ll stick soles an’all.’ He leaned forward and with his large, sausage like fingers, showed her how the sole of his boot had parted company from the upper. ‘When this has cooled down it’ll stick these back together as good as new.’

Eleanor doubted the truth of the matter. The boots, which looked the size of small boats, looked weather beaten, much like their owner. ‘Is your christian name Pedar?’

‘That’s my younger brother ma’am. I’m Nils.’

So Nat had got the brother’s mixed up Eleanor thought. ‘And your third brother, does he have Norwegian name too?’

‘He’s Jakob.’

Eleanor noticed how the man wasn’t curious how she knew nor did he elaborate. He wasn’t surly just not very talkative. She headed for the house but Mrs Madison had obviously been watching the exchange and intercepted her before she could escape. Eleanor swore under her breath.

‘*He’s* making a right stink with that glue. I told him he couldn’t make it in my kitchen.’

‘Did he ask if he could?’

‘Well, no but it would have stunk the house out.’

‘What is it you want Mrs M?’ Eleanor could feel her temper rising. She was impatient to get away.

‘Just to say that with the master away tonight, I’ll lock up early so that some who might be wandering about get the message.’

‘As you wish Mrs M now if you’ll excuse me.’

‘I’m surprised you got two words from him,’ she jerked her thumb in Smelt’s direction, ‘he’s not one for talking. Barely said good morning earlier.’

‘We don’t pay him to gossip, you should follow suit Mrs Madison.’ Eleanor swept into the house before she said more than she ought.

For the rest of the day Eleanor was busy with her affairs. After dinner she took a stroll on the beach as it was fine and dry. She wandered towards the bay and when she got there noticed Nat supervising the loading of the Alnmouth Boy.

When greetings had been exchanged she said: ‘The man Smelt who’s now our caretaker is called Nils, not Pedar, you got the wrong brother.’

‘A’m not surprised. The master called that early A’d not time to recognise maself let alone someone from when A were a lad. Nils is it? He were the eldest, that much A do remember. The men folk all look alike, tall and well built but not good looking. A allus imagine Scandinavians to be fair and handsome, like Vikings, but the Smelts are all dark, heavy set.’ He turned his gaze from the ship. ‘A’ve about finished here, A’ll walk back to Westshore with yer an’ introduce maself to Nils if yer don’t mind. Not seen nor heard of him fer years.’

‘Only if you can spare the time Nat. I’d be grateful. If Mrs M sees you talking to him it may calm her nerves. Perhaps seeing you being friendly toward him will stop my annoying cook from stirring up the rest of the staff. Before I know it they’ll all have given notice. I don’t know what all the fuss is about, after all there are other men working at Westshore, we’re perfectly safe.’

On reaching Westshore Eleanor saw Smelt. ‘There he is repairing the scullery roof. I’ll make myself scarce in case he thinks I’m checking up on him. When you’re ready come in and take a drink.’

A quarter of the hour later Nat sat opposite Eleanor cradling a glass of rum.

‘What news have you to impart, am I to lock up the family silver along with the maids?’

‘A don’t think so. Nils is just as A remember all the brothers, quiet. He’s not much to say fer himself but he’s right enough. He’s bin in Newcastle fer the last twenty years and more. He never married an’ now he’s decided to give up the sea an’ is well pleased to be workin’ here at Westshore. A telled him he’s fallen on his feet but he said as how he knew that. A think he’ll do a good job fer yer, sounds like he can turn his hand to most things. And as fer him being a danger there’s more trouble to be had from that there Scrabble. He bit one er the lads yesterday, went fer a rope an’ missed. Think he’s goin’ blind... or daft.’

Eleanor laughed. She was reassured. ‘Poor Scrabble. Thank you Nat, you knowing him puts him in a different light, although there’s nothing more to tell my cook, no amount of information would satisfy her when she’s in a meddlesome mood.’

‘A just passed the time er day with her an’ said as how A’d just bin havin’ a word with ma old mate. She seemed more content when A said A went to school wi’ him, although as A told your husband they seldom attended.’

‘Thank you Nat, you’re one of the few people Mrs M likes so hopefully that will have gone some way to pacifying her. Fingers crossed.’

Mainstay

Gabriel wasn’t expected back until early evening so as she often did, Eleanor decided to spend the day with her Aunt and Uncle Brown in Warkworth. Her cousin was away from home visiting her in-laws so after dining it was just the three of them who walked by the River Coquet. It was a beautiful late spring afternoon and the blossom hung heavily on the trees that lined the river. Birds were busy nest building. Eleanor loved the spring; there was a sense of renewal and hope in the air.

‘It’s so nice to have family close by,’ Eleanor said stopping to watch a heron spear a fish. ‘I do miss my Whitby family so it’s a comfort to have you two nearby.’

‘You know we both enjoy having you in the neighbourhood too my dear,’ her mama’s twin brother said. ‘You must not be lonely when Gabriel is away, you are always welcome to come and stay if you would like. When the days are short you could spend the night if that would suit.’

‘Thank you Uncle but Gabriel is rarely away for more than a night or two. I don’t get lonely as I’m always busy but an overnight stay in winter may be pleasant.’

They reached St Lawrence’s church where they could see people gathered in the church yard. ‘Oh look,’ Eleanor’s aunt said, ‘a wedding. I wonder if it is anyone we know.’

On closer inspection they could see the happy couple were wearing their Sunday best but because they were possibly workers on a local estate they and their guests were still plainly attired, except that is for the bride; she wore a pale blue silk cloak over her simple dimity dress. Possibly her employer had loaned it to her. The bride, a young girl who looked no older than seventeen summers, blushed becomingly as half a dozen family and friends gathered around the newlyweds.

‘I love a wedding.’ Eleanor peered over the fence by the lych-gate. The gates, as was customary at a wedding at St Lawrence’s, were locked. It was tradition that the groom threw coins to the waiting children and then they would be released.

‘The bride’s bouquet is pretty.’ Eleanor looked to her aunt who nodded agreement. ‘Narcissi and primroses, it will smell delightful too.’ As one or two small coins were thrown by the groom, whom Eleanor saw was a handsome youth, the wedding party were released. As they passed by all smiles Eleanor noticed her uncle slip the young man a large coin, possibly a guinea. The couple thanked him profusely before going on their way. Eleanor loved her uncle, he was always so thoughtful. It was just like him to think of the kind gesture, it would mean a lot to the young couple.

‘Do you recognise them my dear?’ her aunt asked her husband.

‘Not at all, but they look so young and full of hope. I’ll wager they will be back in harness within the hour so I just wanted to add to their happiness on this their wedding day. If they are one quarter as happy as we have been then they will be truly blessed.’

‘We take so much for granted, do we not?’ Eleanor watched as the couple and their guests made their way up the hill towards Warkworth Castle. ‘Imagine being in love, getting married then going home, changing out of one’s finery and going straight back to work when all you want to do is be together.’ She sighed. Eleanor had always been a romantic.

‘It did look like someone had a thought for them. The bride’s cloak was obviously her something borrowed... and her something blue,’ Eleanor’s aunt said. ‘Perhaps they are well thought of by their employers and will be given the rest of the day off for a honeymoon, who knows?’

‘I do hope so. If we ever have staff who marry I’ll make sure they have a happy wedding day.’ Eleanor giggled. ‘If Gabriel’s valet ever marries I should give him a week off. He’s a rake and no mistake so the chance of him ever tying the knot is unlikely. On the other hand my maid Charity is walking out with someone. Selfishly I hope it comes to nought for I should hate to lose her but if she does decide to marry I shall give her such a good send off.’

Eleanor pondered losing Charity and shrugged to throw off the thought. It didn’t bear contemplating. She wasn’t just her maid she was a dear friend.

On her return to Westshore, Smelt was waiting to see her. ‘A finished all the jobs the master left for me to do. What do you want me to do next mistress?’

Eleanor had no idea. She realised had she not been in a strop yesterday she would have asked Gabriel. She improvised. ‘Why not make a list of the jobs that need doing and I’ll take a look, decide which I think looks most urgent.’ She turned to go in. The man stood stock still. ‘Ask one of the maids to give you paper.’ She presumed that’s why he still stood there looking not unlike the side of a house.

‘A don’t read an’ write well ma’am, never had much schooling.’

‘I’m sorry, I should have thought. In that case tell Mrs Madison what needs to go on the list and have her write it out for you.’ She smiled to herself as she headed indoors. The notion of the cook doing the labourer’s bidding was a cheering thought.

Toe the Line

Gabriel, carrying his saddle bag, went to his study to file away the contract he’d signed the day before which meant Reynolds Shipping had the job of transporting coal to London. It was a deal he’d been after securing for a while now. He was pleased with the arrangement which meant the Alnmouth Boy would have steady work plying the coast for the next two years.

Eleanor came to join him. ‘I’ve missed you,’ she said before reaching up and kissing him long and hard.

‘And I you my love. Has all been well in my absence? You haven’t sacked Meddling Madison have you?’

Eleanor scowled. ‘I haven’t but don’t tempt me. Her fears it seems were groundless as we expected.’ She told him of Nat’s visit and how he’d sought to calm troubled waters. It was only now that Gabriel recognized that perhaps Eleanor too had been a little worried about Smelt, he hadn’t realised. Why else would she have sought out Nat? He would never have left her had he known.

‘Were my shoes ready? Where have you put them? Have you sent them up to my dressing room?’

Gabriel hit his head with the heel of his hand. ‘Damn it! I took the shoes to be mended and the cobbler said they’d be ready to pick up today but I forgot to return for them. My mind was elsewhere.’

‘Obviously! Was it a woman? One without a vile temper?’ She grinned. ‘Never mind I’ll write and have the cobbler send them on.’

‘I have to go to Alnwick later in the week, I’ll pick them up then - it’s the least I can do. I’m sorry my love.’

‘It’s of no matter, it’s not like they’re my only pair.’ Eleanor loved shoes, she had quite a collection.

‘How’s Rose? Has she gone to bed?’

‘She’s well but I put her to bed an hour ago. She was over tired and fractious.’

‘I’ll go and see her shortly, put my head around the nursery door.’

As Eleanor went to change for supper Gabriel sat behind his desk. He was in a thoughtful mood. He pulled the bell and asked his cook be summoned.

Mrs Madison, looking hot and bothered stood before him. He realised, too late, she would be in the middle of preparing his supper.

‘When I left on my business trip I remember you saying you were unhappy Mrs Madison. I think my wife thought you meant to give notice as you were upset about the recent appointment of the new man, Smelt. With this in mind I put out feelers and fortunately for us and indeed for you, it seems Sir Percy has a cook looking for a position. If you are still minded to leave us I will let the woman know she can start work. If she is able, as I’m led to believe is the case, she can start with immediate effect. There will be no reason for you to serve notice under the circumstances. Of course we will be sad to see you go; you know how my wife and I hold your cooking in the highest regard. We will of course provide you with a glowing reference and pay you until the end of the month.’

During his speech, which was a tissue of lies, Gabriel watched as the colour ebbed from his interfering cook’s face.

‘But I don’t want to leave. It was only that -’

‘You thought to stir up bad feeling amongst the staff?’

For once his cook was rendered speechless but she quickly recovered herself. He should have known she would.

‘I’m sorry Mr Gabriel, truly I am. I over stepped the mark, I never meant to leave; I’d be honoured to stay on if you will allow it sir. It was just well, the man seemed devious.’

Gabriel tapped a quill on the blotter. ‘Devious? How so? In what way did he seek to deceive anyone?’ She began to splutter a reply but Gabriel held up his hand to silence her. He was tired and wanted this business over and done with.

‘Very well then stay. In part I agree with you Mrs Madison, perhaps I didn’t know much of the man’s background but I do now and I’m convinced neither my family or the staff are in the slightest danger from him working here. It’s not that I don’t value your opinion, what I take exception to is the way you seek to foist your views on my wife. You seem to think it

obligatory, each time you have a grievance, to threaten to leave. From henceforth you will not hold us to ransom Mrs Madison, I won't tolerate it. Do you understand?'

'Yes sir.'

'Good. You may go and I hope when you see Nils Smelt you will treat him fairly, with some semblance of humility if not respect. We all have to try to get along, I won't have disharmony, intolerance.' The cook dropped a curtsy then bustled from the room.

Gabriel knew he should have left this task to Eleanor but he knew she felt her hands were tied. It was partly his fault, he had to admit. That's why he'd interceded. On more than one occasion he joked that if the cook left he'd blame Eleanor. He knew she walked on eggshells with the woman least she took umbrage and walked out. They both suspected it was all bravado but it didn't hurt to let Meddling Madison know they knew her game. She wouldn't call their bluff again he hoped... well not for a while at any rate.

Chock-a-Block

Eleanor put down her knife and fork dramatically. 'What if she's poisoned our food?' she said grinning.

'Too late now, I should have mentioned my talk with Mrs Madison before we'd eaten three courses.'

Their plates were cleared and deserts brought in. Gabriel laughed loudly when they were alone again. 'Well would you believe it - if I'm not mistaken I would say that's my favourite pudding. He cut into the Sussex Pond Pudding and licked his lips as the whole lemon inside was revealed. He cut a slice then laced it with cream. 'Currying favour,' he said when he'd devoured the sweet, yet tangy pudding.

'And there's also my much loved rhubarb crumble. She certainly has pushed the boat out.'

'You don't mind that I interfered Eleanor? You know why I took matters into my own hands?'

'I suppose so but as you said the other day, the housekeeping and staff are my responsibility.'

'Of course, but I feel answerable because I said if she left I'd blame you.'

'I knew you were in jest but I also knew if she walked out we'd find it hard to replace her. Cooks of her calibre don't grow on trees.'

Gabriel cut another slice of the suet pudding and smiled as Eleanor raised an eyebrow. 'The thought of Mrs M hanging from a tree...' He laughed then set about smothering his second helping of pudding with more cream.

'Why are you not fat?'

'Because I get plenty of exercise, I need fuel to keep me going. However, after this I don't think I'll be moving very far this evening, in fact I don't think I can stand.'

Eleanor giggled. 'That's a pity,' she said, 'I had plans for you. But no matter the plan I had doesn't involve you standing.'

'Eleanor, you're a shameless hussy. Give me an hour, and then I think I'll be able to rise to the occasion.'

Sailing Close to the Wind

As Eleanor and Charity strolled along the path which ran alongside Long Paddock they saw a man, a stranger. He was trying to climb the dry stone wall which ran the length of the field. He appeared to be struggling even though he looked a young man. He saw them watching him and slid down then limped and dodged behind the old elm tree. The limp possibly

explained why he was finding it hard to get over the wall. There was mud, or was it dried blood, on his white breeches.

‘This is private land,’ Eleanor called, ‘you’re trespassing.’

The man, she thought, was wearing a naval uniform, but he stayed hidden. Eleanor looked at Charity and scowled. ‘I wonder what he’s up to?’

‘No good for certain. He doesn’t look very old.’

‘I can’t ever remember seeing an intruder on our land before. Perhaps he’s poaching?’ Eleanor knew there was unrest all along the east coast. Last year’s failed harvest had affected many. Yet he didn’t look like a local, not a labourer or a farm worker. In fact she was sure he was a sailor even though he appeared bedraggled and his uniform looked dirty and worn. ‘I’ll mention the man to Gabriel when he comes home.’

‘I’ll remind you if you forget, we don’t want prowlers. Who knows what he might get up to; he could be planning a burglary.’

Eleanor agreed. ‘I’ll ask Smelt to keep an eye out.’

‘That should put any intruder off; he’s enough to terrify anyone.’

‘Does he worry you? Have you reason to be frightened of him?’

Charity laughed. ‘Just the reverse, it’s a comfort to know he’s at Westshore protecting us all. He’s hard to get to know though. At mealtimes he’s the last to table and the first to leave. If anyone speaks to him he’s civil enough, just not one for chitchat. Scrabble is his new best friend, follows him everywhere. He’d been chasing rabbits and got a thorn stuck in his paw. Smelt got it out for him. To my mind that dog is a good judge of character so if he’s befriended Smelt I don’t think there’s anything to worry about.’

Eleanor and Charity made their way to Alnmouth. It was Wednesday, market day. Eleanor was on the lookout for a young boy she’d noticed the week before. A young dark skinned boy with tight shorn hair and a soulful gaze. As they floated about the stalls Eleanor hardly noticed what was being hawked from the barrows. She was looking for the second hand clothes barrow; the boy had been beside it last week. He seemed friendly with the woman who sold old clothes. Then Eleanor spotted him sitting on an upturned crate, his wares spread out on a grimy sheet on the ground. He looked no older than seven.

‘Eleanor what are you going to do? Come every week and buy up his entire stock?’ Charity tutted.

‘Entire stock, you exaggerate.’ Eleanor felt embarrassed, her maid knew her so well. ‘Of course not, although the workmanship is exceptional, but he should be at school not hawking scrimshaw. Where are his parents I wonder?’

The boy looked up at her, his gaze as soft as butter. His dark eyes danced, his thick lips curled into an easy smile, assuredly he remembered she’d bought several bone tools last week *and* paid more than the asking price. She picked up a piece of whalebone carved into the shape of a heart. It was engraved with a rambling rose.

‘Look Charity, how sweet, I must have this for Rose. How fortuitous. When she’s older she’ll adore it I’m sure.’

Charity grinned and shook her head. Turning away from her mistress she addressed the boy. ‘How much for the heart, and don’t go inflating the price because my mistress looks a soft touch. If it’s a fair price she’ll take it otherwise we’ll be on our way.’

Eleanor glared at her maid. The boy named a price in his lilting, high voice.

‘We’ll pay a shilling and not a penny more.’ Charity looked at her mistress with a challenge in her eye. They both knew the lad was chancing his arm with the price he’d named. He shrugged and handed the heart to her, then held his pale palm up towards her waiting for payment.

‘Who makes the wares you sell?’ Eleanor asked handing over a coin then pocketing the heart.

‘My pa.’

‘Why does he not come to market and sell his work himself? ‘Is your father a whaler? Is he at sea? Eleanor knew that men on whaling missions often spent their spare time making scrimshaw tools or decorative tokens. The by-products of their trade from sperm whales was readily available and was put to good use, nothing was wasted. Teeth, cartilage, bone, walrus tusks, all were a source of income as well as being a hobby. Carving scrimshaw helped pass the time and sometimes the men sold the pieces or made love tokens for their sweethearts. Eleanor always found it incongruous that these burly, rough living men made delicate, beautiful mementos for their wives and girlfriends. The boy was staring at her. ‘Or does your father have a workshop, where is he now?’

Charity frowned, then laughed. ‘Eleanor, the poor lad can’t keep track of your endless questions!’

‘I’m sorry, I’m just curious by nature.’ She smiled at the boy.

‘Some might say nosy,’ Charity muttered giggling.

He stood and stretched his legs. He was long legged and bare footed. ‘He’s not a whaler, he gets his materials from the bone merchant.’

In most seafaring towns there was at least one whalebone merchant. In Alnmouth the shop was sandwiched between Blimps coffee house and the grocer’s shop. In Whitby there were half a dozen such shops up on Well Close Square. She often window shopped when she went home, yet rarely saw anything to tempt her to buy.

‘My pa can’t walk and besides there’s Cherry to look after, she’s my baby sister. We live in Foxtan’s Yard.’

‘Where’s your mother? Does she not look after the child?’

‘She left us, a year back.’

‘Left you!’ Eleanor, horrified, flashed a look at Charity who had a look on her face that said *don’t get involved*. She may as well have saved herself the bother. ‘Foxtan’s Yard... He works from home?’

Charity was examining a red velvet cloak on the second hand clothes stall as the woman squeezed her large bulk from behind her barrow. ‘Alfie love, keep yer eye, while I just nip to the pie man.’ She headed across the market square without waiting for an answer.

‘That’s me,’ the boy bowed theatrically, ‘Alfred Lacey at your service.’

‘Eleanor Reynolds,’ she said, ‘and this is my maid Charity.’

‘We live and work at the top left hand corner of Foxtan’s - ground floor on account of my pa can’t get upstairs. You’ll find other wares to purchase there if you’re so inclined.’

His cheeks glowed, his eyes danced. Eleanor couldn’t help but like him.

‘Thank you. Good day to you Alfred, or do you prefer Alfie?’

‘Makes no difference to me what I’m called, but you can call me Alfred, like my ma used to do.’ His mouth turned down.

Eleanor exchanged a pitying look with Charity who rolled her eyes. ‘Eleanor you’re being played,’ the maid scoffed. ‘He’ll pick the purse from your pocket as easy as wink!’

‘You’re as hard as nails Charity Jenkins,’ Eleanor admonished over her shoulder as Charity raced to keep up. ‘Poor Alfred is motherless and you talk about him as if he’s a conniving rogue, a wastrel, a thief.’ Eleanor spun around and waving goodbye to her new friend headed in the direction of the many yards that lined the east side of the bay. They were crammed together as tight as pilchards in a barrel. The buildings leaned in on one another, toppling in on themselves lopsidedly and blocking out the sun. Some workshops made sails, some were rope makers some tanned leather but all had some connection to the sea.

‘You’re such an easy mark - what are we going to Foxtan’s Yard for?’

‘To see Alfred’s father.’

‘But why, what’s he to do with us?’

‘He may have something to tempt me, I’m just interested.’

‘Interested! You’re on one of your mercy missions I know you. You can’t save every orphan in the world Eleanor.’

‘I know, I know but I just want to... oh leave me be. Go home if you’re going to snap and snarl... and keep frowning like that and you’ll get wrinkles.’

They soon arrived at Pearse’s Yard which was reached by a grimy ginnel that smelled of vomit and boiled cabbage. Something scuttled away in the shadows making both women jump.

Foxton’s Yard was the third one along tucked beside Clancy’s on one side and a gin shop on the other. The workshops doubled up as housing for some of the workers. A common looking slattern leaned against an open door; it was clear what her profession was Eleanor thought.

‘Seen enough?’ the whore called cynically.

‘More than enough,’ Charity spat back.

Eleanor strode across the cobbles to the top left hand corner where she could see the door was open. She stood at the entrance and glanced in at the gloomy interior. It was a bright sunny day but the sun wouldn’t shine on this particular corner of the yard until much later in the day.

‘Mr Lacey?’ Eleanor asked her eyes gradually becoming accustomed to the dark. A man’s eyes looked at her cautiously, the whites of his eyes the only visible feature of his face. ‘May I come in? I’m an admirer of your scrimshaw; your son Alfred told me where to find you.’

‘You’ll excuse me ma’am if I don’t get up, but I’ve lost the use of my legs.’

The man’s voice was deep and resonant. Eleanor saw a wild haired child sitting on a grubby blanket by the fire playing with a toy. The little girl was shaking a ring of whale bone vigorously and giggling at the sound it made. Eleanor imagined the toy, made by her father undoubtedly, also doubled as a teething ring. She bent to talk to the little girl who gabbled back animatedly in a language only the child understood.

Eleanor wondered how Lacey worked in such dim light. The man sat on a three legged stool where he’d been whittling a piece of bone. On a table close by was a huge walrus tusk, it was intricately and expertly carved. The man was truly talented. Eleanor’s father had a carved walrus tusk on the sideboard in his study, but it wasn’t as fine as the one here today.

‘May I see the tusk Mr Lacey?’ He nodded as she bent to inspect it closely. She wondered if Gabriel would like it. Just then the child, presumably Alfred’s sister Cherry, tired of the toy and threw it against the wall where it clattered to the floor.

The man slithered to the floor then took hold of the seat of the stool with both hands. Tilting two of the stool legs at an angle he lifted it and dragged himself across the floor using the stool as a kind of lever to propel him forward. He retrieved the whalebone ring, and flashing white teeth at the child returned the toy. When Cherry had it in her fat fist, he again used the stool to haul himself back to his work bench, his useless legs dragging behind him across the bare earth floor. The two women stood open mouthed.

Eleanor shook herself. ‘How much are you asking for the tusk Mr Lacey?’

‘I’m sorry ma’am it’s not for sale. I make to order, sometimes for whalers and sometimes for the whalebone merchant on Northumberland Street. That particular tusk is for a whaler, he brought it in for me to carve as it’s the biggest one he’s ever seen and didn’t want to spoil it himself. He’s to collect it later in the week before he sets sail.’

‘I’m sorry, I was presumptuous. He will be pleased with it I’m sure; it’s remarkable both in size and in design.’

‘Thank you ma’am, it’s kind of you to say so.’

‘I have a daughter who would love a toy. Do you have any more whalebone rings?’

The man pointed to a drawer. 'Choose one of those, if you've a mind, there's probably half a dozen to pick from.'

With Charity's help she chose one that had a carved tooth at either end. When the transaction was made Eleanor turned to leave thanking the man for his time.

On the walk home Eleanor was quiet. She was counting her blessings but she was also wondering how a man with such talent was only barely managing to scrape a living.

As they walked up the garden path to Westshore Mrs Madison lay in wait. 'What now,' Eleanor muttered under her breath.

'Can I have a word?' Eleanor nodded. 'I have to report a ham has gone missing Mistress Reynolds.' The woman stood as if spoiling for a fight, not actually accusing anyone in particular of stealing it but the inference was quite clear. She suspected Smelt.

'From where has it gone missing? Surely there are people about the kitchen at all hours of the day. A ham can hardly be concealed in one's pocket.'

'From the smoke house. I took it up myself a month back. The master likes smoked ham so when the pig was killed I decided to smoke some, but when I went to get it today it's gone, disappeared, been pinched.'

'I see.' Eleanor was annoyed. 'I saw a man by Long Paddock earlier. He was trespassing, trying to climb over the wall. It seemed like he was heading toward Alnmouth. Perhaps he's the thief?'

'Was he carrying a ham?'

'Well no, he appeared injured. He looked like a naval man.'

Mrs Madison sniffed dismissively. 'We've never had things go missing all the time I've been here. We never had light fingered staff here at Westshore, until now.'

Eleanor was tempted to pass the book to her husband when he came home but knew she couldn't. Hadn't she made a fuss thinking he was interfering in household matters. 'Leave it with me Mrs Madison and I'll look into it. Have you something to use for supper in the ham's stead?'

'Of course, but that's not the point.'

'I realise that. Have you mentioned this to the rest of the staff?'

'I thought to tell you first mistress.'

'Good. Send Smelt to me please Mrs Madison but don't mention the missing ham.'

Eleanor paced the morning room. She didn't want to believe Smelt was responsible for the theft but it did seem odd. Never before had they suffered thieves, not since she came to Westshore at any rate. Eleanor didn't like to think badly of anyone, especially not of staff, but it was suspicious him just coming to work at Westshore and a whole ham going missing. She imagined a man his size would have quite an appetite, but the staff were well fed, she insisted on it. Would the man steal when he'd only just been taken on? He was a fool if he did.

'Where have you been working today Smelt?' The man held his hat in his long fingers and showed due deference by looking down... or was it guilt he was concealing?

'In the cellar ma'am. A bin clearing out the old lumber that Mr Gabriel did want shifting.'

'And did you come up for your dinner?'

'No, A were just about to have it when cook said yer had need of me.'

Eleanor couldn't find it in her to accuse the man, after all there was no proof and she couldn't help but like him. She wasn't sure why, it was just a feeling she had, instinct. He was like a diamond in the rough, a loner. She thought to try another tack.

'This morning I was by Long Paddock and saw what I thought was a sailor, an injured sailor by the looks of him, on our land. Have you seen anyone trespassing?'

'No Mrs Reynolds but now A know A'll keep my eyes open. A'll go and have a walk about now, see if A can see anybody.'

‘Have your dinner first, then go and look. He seemed as if was heading to the bay, across the fields. He was limping.’

‘If he’s limping mebbe he din’t get far. A might be able to tell if it looks like anybody’s been sleeping in an outbuilding or in the fields close by. He could have built a fire, the nights are still blithering.’

‘I hope there haven’t been fires, fires could be dangerous, it’s been a dry spring for a change.’

‘A’ll make sure on ma rounds tonight to take especial care ma’am.’

‘Thank you Smelt. Let me know if you find anything.’

During dinner Eleanor thought the matter over. On reflection, Smelt didn’t appear guilty but then again, he wouldn’t would he. Perhaps he thought he’d got away with the theft? Perhaps he would implicate the trespasser, use him as a scapegoat. Would they ever be the wiser if he did? She was about to go and look over her accounts when Smelt asked to see her. He asked she meet him by Long Paddock.

‘What is it? Have you found something?’

He pointed over the dry stone wall to the corner of the field that abutted Long Paddock. ‘Somebody’s med a fire an’ the grass is flattened where somebody’s slept or at least laid. Mebbe he were resting if you say he were injured. There’s eggshells an’ all.’

‘Eggshells?’

‘He’s bin in the henhouse an’ helped his sen to a few eggs.’

‘Anything else?’

‘Not that A can tell. A’ll make regular rounds from now on, if he sees we’re on to him mebbe it’ll scare him off.’

Eleanor almost smiled. It would scare her off if she saw a man the size of Smelt was on her tail.

‘Good, we don’t want trespassers stealing from us. My husband wouldn’t like that one bit.’ She looked Smelt in the eye, but he looked down furtively. Was that culpability or what she’d come to think of as deference?

The Cut of his Jib

The next day after her ride Eleanor led Jet back to his stable and bent to look at the right rear fetlock of her beloved horse. There was a ragged tear and blood dripping onto his hoof. Gabriel came up behind her. Eleanor hadn’t heard him approach. She jumped.

‘What is it my love? Have you had a fall?’ He looked her up and down for signs she’d been unseated.

‘No, but Jet’s picked up an injury. As the tide was in I thought to ride on the coastal path towards Boulmer. We jumped the gorse at the lowest point as we always do.’ She waited as Gabriel nodded signalling he knew where she meant. ‘Jet must have trailed his leg because he pulled up on landing and I saw he was hurt. I walked him back - luckily it’s not far.’ She turned back to the horse and patted his flank and whispered endearments. ‘I’ve checked it over and I don’t think he’s picked up a thorn. The gorse is prickly, that’s why we jump it at the smallest end, it’s not high for Jet, he usually clears it easily. It’s more than a scratch, it looks deep.’

‘Perhaps he was already a little lame? In any case you need to send for the farrier.’ He ran his hand down Jet’s hind leg then lifted the hoof. Jet flinched and tried to shy away but he trusted Gabriel and didn’t kick out. ‘There could still be a thorn in there; it’s hard to see with the blood. I have a meeting but I can call at the farrier on my way, ask him to come and take a look.’ After patting the horse they bolted the stable door behind them.

Smelt was waiting in the stableyard. ‘Sir, ma’am, A could have a look at the horse fer yer. A lived on a farm an’ used to see to the animals when they were sick or injured.’

Eleanor looked at Gabriel; she was unsure what to say. Jet was hardly a cart horse, which was probably all Smelt was used to dealing with, apart from sheep of course. And Jet could be temperamental with strangers, especially if he was in pain.

Gabriel shrugged. ‘It can’t hurt.’

‘A think the best thing to do would be to lead him down to the sea. The salt water’ll do it good an’ A can get a better look at it when it’s clean.’

‘I’ll leave you to it Eleanor, I’ll be late. Shall I still send the farrier?’ Gabriel mounted Copper.

Smelt answered. ‘Begging yer pardon master, if A can’t see what’s wrong A’ll fetch him maself, let me have a good look first.’

When Gabriel had set off Eleanor led Jet down to the water’s edge and began to guide him into the sea. ‘Let me lead him in ma’am, you’ll wet your shoes an’ frock.’

‘It’s of no matter; he’s sometimes a bit skittish.’

Smelt took the horse’s halter and stroked Jet’s muzzle. The horse shook his head but made no move to rear or bolt. The labourer led the horse into the sea until the water washed higher than the wound. The horse stood quiet, compliant.

‘Mebbe the cold water is soothing?’ Smelt said. ‘He seems docile enough.’

Eleanor had to agree. She remembered a time when she had cause to send for the farrier a couple of years ago. Jet had nearly knocked the poor man into the middle of the following week when he’d tried to lift his hoof. Now, back on the beach Jet stood calmly as Smelt inspected the wound closely. He took a penknife from his pocket and opened it out to reveal a pincher type tool.

‘A think A can see a prickle. If you could hold his head mistress A’ll have a go at gettin’ it out.’

‘Very well but be careful, he won’t like it.’

Smelt stroked Jet’s flanks then knelt to remove the barb. Before Eleanor had time to reassure Jet the job was done. Smelt held the thorn in the palm of his plate like palm.

‘Goodness, it’s quite big - no wonder it’s made such a tear.’

Smelt lead Jet back into the sea and walked him up and down. ‘A think it needs a poultice.’ He looked uneasy. ‘A can get most er what A need from the hedgerow but A’ll need goose fat. The cook hasn’t taken to me so -’

‘Don’t worry about her Smelt, I’ll make sure you have everything you need.’

Later back in the stable Eleanor handed Smelt clean bandages cut from an old shirt of Gabriel’s.

‘The poultice is just warm,’ he informed her. Once he’d applied the green paste he covered the injury with the bandage. Jet stood placidly throughout. ‘If in a day or two it’s still no better then you can fetch the farrier mistress, but A think it will mend just fine.’

‘Thank you Smelt, you seem to a have a way with Jet. He’s not always the easiest horse to handle, especially when he’s in pain.’

‘A get on well wi’ animals generally, better than wi’ some people if truth be told.’ The beginnings of a smile touched his lips. Eleanor hadn’t seen the man smile before, he looked all the better for it. More kindly, less intimidating.

‘Tell me have you seen anything of the trespasser, the naval man?’

‘There’s no sign he’s bin back, no new fires an’ A don’t think he’s bin using the outbuildings.’

‘Good, that’s a relief. I’m pleased to hear it but please continue to be vigilant.’

The man’s face turned grave once more. ‘A’ll do that ma’am, don’t you fear.’

Shot Across the Bows

Smelt, waiting for his master in the stableyard, removed his tricorne as Gabriel handed Copper to a groom. He wondered what the man wanted.

‘Can A have a word Master Reynolds?’

‘Is something amiss?’

‘The other day the mistress said as she’d seen a trespasser by Long Paddock. Since then A bin keeping my eyes peeled.’

‘Yes, she told me but I thought there hadn’t been sight nor sound of him since the first sighting, at least that’s what you led my wife to believe.’ It was all well and good the man being reserved but Gabriel wished he would get to the point. It was dinnertime and he was hungry.

‘Ah well, see the thing is A din’t want to alarm Mrs Reynolds but he’s bin back - if he ever went away in the first place which A don’t think he did. A thought if she knew she’d fret so A telled her all were well. That’s why A’m telling you master, so as not to worry her.’

‘Spit it out man, have you apprehended him?’

The man picked his words carefully and answered indirectly. ‘The derelict cottage beyond the smokehouse is where he’s bin sleeping. Bin there all along A reckon. There’s plenty er other buildings that are watertight so A thought he’d hide out in one er them but it seems he’s more canny than that. A searched all the other buildings but din’t think as he’d set up camp in a roofless old cottage. Then this mornin’ A saw him an’ left him in no doubt he weren’t welcome.’

‘You didn’t harm the man? Even though he was trespassing I can’t condone violence, especially if he is a naval man. We don’t know his circumstances.’

The man smiled a lopsided smile. ‘A don’t usually have to resort to fisticuffs; ma size usually sends men runnin’. A saw him off the property an’ A don’t think he’ll be back any time soon. A just wanted you to know he’d gone.’

‘Good I’m glad to hear it.’ Gabriel saw it was a shrewd move of his wife’s hiring a man the size of Smelt. It was good to know he was about the place when he had to be away. Knowing his family and staff were being watched over by such a man was comforting to know.

Dead in the Water

‘You seem quiet my love, have you something on your mind? Is something bothering you?’

‘Not especially bothering me but something I’m concerned about, well *someone* to be precise.’ She held her hands together in her lap. ‘You remember me telling you about the little Jamaican boy selling scrimshaw on the market? Gabriel nodded and put his newspaper aside to listen.

‘What of him? You aren’t thinking of setting the father up in his own shop are you?’ he smiled thinking of the time she’d done just that helping her friend Eva with a hat shop in Whitby. ‘Talisman wouldn’t like that.’ He mentioned the name of the whalebone merchant in Alnmouth.

‘No... it’s as Charity says I can’t rescue every orphan in the world. It’s just I worry for his safety. One hears such tales these days. Tales of men selling anything they can get their hands on. Stories of boys like him being kidnapped.’

‘Kidnapped? You’re worried some rich, spoilt lady will want him for her pet and pay someone to abduct him?’ Gabriel shrugged. ‘Were we living in London I’d share your concerns my love, society ladies in the capital do, as you say, collect boys such as him, but I think the ladies in the North East have more sense. Here in Alnmouth I think he’s quite safe.’

‘But is he? As we were saying only yesterday there are desperate men about, never before have we had trespassers.’

‘I’m sure we must have at some time but I take your point.’

‘Gabriel, who’s to say he won’t get bundled up and shipped to London then sold to the highest bidder either to some misguided lady or worse sold into slavery?’

‘His father is aware of the risks I expect but what could *we* do to safeguard the boy?’

‘There’s a sister too, Cherry.’ Eleanor bit her lip. ‘His father is hardly able to protect himself let alone his children. He’s a cripple. I told you how he gets about - by dragging himself along with the aid of a stool! His upper body strength must be immense but that wouldn’t help in a crisis.’

Gabriel sighed. Eleanor was forever presenting him with conundrums. He applauded her social conscience but sometimes the problems she presented to him didn’t always have easy solutions. ‘They need Smelt watching over them, that would do the trick.’

‘Yes they do... What was the old building the trespasser was found in used for, before it became a ruin that is?’

Gabriel furrowed his brow. ‘I’m not sure; I think it was a cottage back in my grandfather’s day, or a workshop - possibly both. Because it’s behind the little copse and out of sight I’d forgotten about it. Perhaps I could get Smelt to demolish it... or have it rebuilt. I may look into it.’

They both sat thinking then Eleanor said: ‘What if -’

‘Man alive, I think this is going to cost me. I think I see which way your mind is working. Are you thinking the derelict building would make a home and a workshop for the Lacey family?’

‘Sometimes I resent that I’m so transparent to you Gabriel but in this case I’m glad. That’s exactly what I was thinking. If they moved to Westshore, they would have more space and have our protection, well Smelt’s protection at any rate.’

‘I agree in principal but of course Mr Lacey may oppose the plan, he may not want some interfering busybody organising his life, besides which it will take time to get the building ship shape.’

‘Are you calling me a busybody?’ Eleanor pretended to look hurt. ‘I can at least approach him; see what he thinks of the plan. I’m sure he’ll be keen to leave the hovel he’s living in. When I explain about how his children would be safer I’m sure he’ll see sense.’

‘It could be presented to him as a business transaction. I expect like most men he wouldn’t want to take a hand out. Even poor men have their pride. He could pay a reasonable rent for the place; I take it he makes money from selling scrimshaw?’

‘He does, he sells some pieces on the market and the larger pieces to Talisman. It’s very fine work. But them living here doesn’t stop Alfred being abducted on market day. Someone could accompany him I suppose.’

‘Like who Eleanor? Surely you don’t expect me to hire a bodyguard for the boy.’

‘No of course not.’ Eleanor’s brow was knitted together thinking around the problem.

‘What if they *both* went to market, in the pony and trap?’

‘How will that help? You said Lacey would find it hard to protect his children himself because he has no use in his legs.’

‘I need to think about this... something will come to mind. For every problem there is a solution. If only I can think of it.’

Gabriel picked up his newspaper. ‘In the meantime there is something we can do for Mr Lacey.’ Eleanor looked puzzled. ‘I’ll talk to Wilson tomorrow, ask him about crutches. I’m sure he’ll be able to organise a pair for the poor man.’

‘Then there’s the missing ham.’ Gabriel was taken aback by the sudden change of subject.

‘What ham?’

‘A ham was in the smoke house and now it’s gone. Mrs M hasn’t exactly accused Smelt but she may as well have done.’

‘So my smoked ham has gone. I like smoked ham.’

‘Yes I know but I told Mrs M to order another from the butcher. Do you think me a poor manager?’

‘Terrible, were you an employee I’d sack you.’ He grinned. ‘It’s hardly your fault the ham was stolen. My guess is it was the trespasser.’

‘Of course that’s the obvious conclusion unless you’re Meddling Madison. She’s the only one who needs convincing.’

All at Sea

Two days later Eleanor was back at the market looking up and down the stalls for Alfred. When she was certain he wasn’t there she decided to make her way to Foxton’s Yard, after all it was his father with whom she needed to speak.

She picked her way across the yard gingerly then noticed the door of Mr Lacey’s workshop was closed - closed and padlocked. Though she saw it was useless Eleanor knocked and waited. The slattern she’d seen on her last visit watched from her own doorstep, a surly look on her face. When, after a minute or so, there was no reply Eleanor walked towards the woman. ‘Do you know where the Laceys are?’

‘Who?’ The whore held out her open palm. Eleanor put a small coin in her grimy hand. ‘Gone, did a moonlight flit. A saw ’em go, A were between customers yer understand.’

‘Do you know where they went?’

‘None er my business, last A saw of ’em they were being driven away on a pony an’ trap.’

‘Did they look like they were being coerced? Were they being forced to leave, were they evicted?’

‘Evicted!’ the woman shrugged showing even more cleavage as her shift slipped from her shoulder. ‘In my opinion they were doing a runner, afore they got banged up.’

Eleanor looked puzzled. ‘But Mr Lacey seemed to be earning a living, why would he be evicted?’

‘Cause he din’t pay his rent, why else. If yer want more facts it’ll cost yer.’

A small child toddled to the door and hung onto her mother’s skirt. ‘Thank you but I don’t think there’s anything more you can tell me if you don’t know where they went.’ Eleanor smiled at the little girl who had plopped down on the ground at her mother’s feet. She gave the woman another coin. ‘Here take this and feed your child.’

‘Ta missus.’ The woman scratched her armpit. ‘Mebbe the reason they moved on is the landlord put the rent up. Some, not me yer understand, complained when he let the room to the likes of... well let’s just say some din’t like it, their sort er allus trouble he said.’

Eleanor was about to remonstrate with the woman but saw it would be a waste of time. It was the landlord who was at fault not this poor woman. She thanked her again then made her way to Reynolds Shipping.

‘So the landlord put the rent up knowing Lacey couldn’t pay it forcing the family to move on.’ Gabriel poured Eleanor a cordial.

‘That’s what it looks like. I just wish I knew where they’d gone and that they were safe. Poor Alfred and poor Cherry.’

‘At least we did do them one good turn, or rather Wilson did.’

‘Oh, what was that - did he get Mr Lacey a pair of crutches?’

‘He did, he took them only yesterday.’

Eleanor let a long breath escape her lungs. 'At least before they were driven out someone had a thought for them. If only I had gone to see them yesterday, I could have told Mr Lacey of our plan to help them.'

'Oh well you tried my love, there's nothing more to be done.'

Eleanor was downcast. 'Shall you still rebuild the old cottage?' she asked.

'Perhaps. It may come in useful in the future. It's only a matter of time before you find other waifs and strays to rescue. Can you not begin looking until it's rebuilt?'

Eleanor ignored his attempt at humour. She wasn't in a laughing mood. She was sad she wouldn't see Alfred again. 'I wonder if they went by sea or road.'

'We have no way of knowing, let it go my love, there's nothing more either of us can do.'

'I know but... Alfred was such a handsome boy and his father so talented. Poor Cherry will never know a mother's love.'

'And as you said only the other day, you cannot rescue every motherless child in the world.'

'But it won't stop me from trying,' she said with a sigh. 'There's a whore and her child living at Foxton's Yard who could do with a good turn -'

'Gabriel was amused at his wife's unwitting turn of phrase. 'No Eleanor,' Gabriel grinned. 'don't even think about it.'

Back at the Helm

The next evening on his return from Alnwick Gabriel entered the bedchamber carrying a shoe box. His wife, wearing her dressing robe, looked up from inspecting her nails. 'Ah, you remembered. Well done.' She took the box from his hands and placed it on the seat beside her. 'Thank you my love. Did you have a good meeting?'

He told her about his day and asked about hers. 'Jet can put his weight on his hoof and all thanks to Smelt. I can see the man is going to be worth his weight in gold.' She laughed at the thought. 'Imagine how much gold that would be - a ton I'd imagine.'

'Not quite but a lot. I must say I'm pleased you hired him, next time I have to be away I'll feel safe in the knowledge he's about the place.'

'And I. Charity has been trying to coax him out of his shell. She says it's like trying to get a clam from its shell.' She continued examining her nails. 'He's definitely worth keeping on, already he's proved himself. He's a good, quick worker. He's helped with Jet's injury and Scramble's too, seen off an intruder - that should satisfy Mrs M. Although she still suspects Smelt of stealing the ham.'

Gabriel shook his head. 'It's as plain as the nose on her face it must have been the sailor who stole it, he was practically living next door to the smoke house. She'll have me to answer to if I hear her besmirching Smelt's name. I wonder what happened to the sailor.'

'We will never know. I doubt she'd dare now you've read her the riot act.' Eleanor grinned. 'I love it when you're masterful Gabriel.'

'Aren't you going to open it?' He nodded towards the shoe box.

'Why would I? I'm sure they'll be fine.' She chatted on. 'Smelt has another string to his bow, he can make glue. Had I known he could have mended my shoe without need of a cobbler.' She looked thoughtful. 'He may be good with his hands, but he can't read or write. Imagine that, he must have more than forty summers and can't write his own name.'

'Not all can afford an education yet he's clearly far from dim witted.' Gabriel stood before his wife and looked pointedly at the shoe box. 'I think you should check they're to your satisfaction, my love.' He put the box on her knee. Eleanor looked up at him her brows knitted together.

‘If you insist,’ she said. As she lifted the lid Eleanor saw the box was packed with tissue paper. ‘Anyone would think they were new.’ She smiled as she lifted out a shoe. ‘Gabriel! These aren’t my old shoes! They’re so beautiful.’

She turned the shoe around in her hand. The upper was made of scarlet brocade with an intricate black embroidered pattern. It had a silky satin bow and a huge heel. She looked up at him. ‘My goodness I don’t think I’ll be able to walk in them,’ she said taking the other shoe carefully from the box. ‘I adore them my love, thank you so much. Are they not like a work of art? They put all my other shoes in the shade.’

Gabriel knelt down and lifting her robe carefully slipped first one shoe and then the other onto her dainty feet. He stroked her smooth calf, her silky soft thigh. ‘Scarlet shoes for a scarlet lady.’ He gave her a look that left her in no doubt what was on his mind. He held both her hands as she stood and looked him in the eye. She wobbled a little but he held her tight.

‘I’m so tall!’ She began to walk about the room tentatively holding the robe from the floor. She had good legs, he thought. He was glad only he ever got to see them. When she reached the window she appeared to gain confidence and turned on her heel theatrically. ‘I’m almost as tall as Smelt,’ she said as she arrived back before him.

‘Not quite, my love.’ He smiled as he held her hands. ‘And you’re infinitely better looking. When I dropped your shoes off to be mended I saw these and knew you’d like them, so I asked the shoemaker to make them in your size and as he has your last we knew they’d fit.’ He kissed her hands. ‘Your old shoes are in the hall, I didn’t forget them this time.’

‘Let me thank you properly.’ She put her arms around him and kissed him. He pulled the silky belt of her robe so it fell open to reveal she was, as he’d hoped, naked beneath. He slid the robe from her shoulders. She stood wearing only the shoes and a wry smile. She led him to the bed.

‘One of us is overdressed.’ She giggled. ‘Come on Gabriel don’t keep a lady waiting.’

He lifted her onto the bed still wearing the red shoes.

‘You’re no lady... What long legs you have Mrs Reynolds.’ He smiled as she looked up at him. ‘I have a confession. I didn’t buy the shoes for you to walk in.’ He was soon undressed.

The End

Nautical Terms

True colours: dates back to 1700's. It refers to the colour of the flag which every ship is required to fly at sea. Pirates used to deceive other ships by sailing under false flags so that they would not excite suspicion.

At loggerheads: An iron ball attached to a long handle was a loggerhead. When heated it was used to seal the pitch in deck seams. It was sometimes a handy weapon for quarrelling crewmen.

Gripe: A sailing vessel gripes when, by poor design or imbalance of the sail, it tends to end up with its bow into the wind when sailing close-hauled. The sails flap around, forward progress is halted and she is very hard to steer. On land, the term means to complain.

Clean bill of health: A certificate signed by a port authority attesting that no contagious disease existed in the port of departure and none of the crew was infected with a disease at the time of sailing.

Close quarters: In the 17th century the barriers that sailors laid across a ship's decks in order to provide a safe haven from the enemy were called close-fights. By mid 18th century that confined defensive space became called "close quarters", i.e. close dwellings. This eventually came to mean "near enough to be able to fight hand to hand".

Mainstay: A stay that extends from the maintop to the foot of the foremast of a sailing ship. Currently a thing upon which something is based or depends.

Toe the line: Members of the Royal navy were required to stand barefoot for inspection. While at attention they lined up along the seams of the planks of the deck with their toes touching the line. It became known as 'toeing' the line. Today means to conform to the policies of a group.

Chock-a-bloc: A block and tackle is a pulley system used on sailing ships to hoist sails. The phrase describes what occurs when the system is raised to its fullest extent – when there is no more rope free and the blocks jam tightly together. Predictably this leads to its current meaning crammed so tightly together to prevent movement or full to the brim.

Sailing too close to the wind: Figuratively used since the 1800's but literally means there is danger to be incurred if one sails too close to the wind (that is, in the direction of).

The cut of his jib: A jib is a type of sail. At one time countries would display their own unique jibs, allowing outsiders to instantly know the ship's origin, and form an impression of it by "the cut of its jib". Nowadays used to describe a person's general appearance.

Shot across the bows: A shot fired close to and in front of a moving vessel to warn her to stop, often for boarding

Dead in the water: Not moving. (Used only when a vessel is afloat and neither tied up nor anchored.) Often used to indicate that a pirate ship has been immobilised.

All at sea: This dates to the time when accurate navigational aids weren't available. Any ship that was out of sight of land was in an uncertain position and in danger of becoming lost.

Back at the helm: In the past meaning in a position to steer a ship but currently meaning to be in charge.