

CHAPTER 1

The winter of 1794-5 was bloody cold. Damme but it was! 'Tis true that I spent it all wrapped up snug in London, largely thanks to their Lordships of the Admiralty expecting to me to wait upon their good graces day after day, but still the snow was thick in the streets, and even old Father Thames froze solid. And the fog - damp as a freshly swabbed deck and cold as ice almost every night! Why, even allowing for the new oil lamps, anyone brave, or foolhardy, enough to venture abroad after sunset was obliged to carry a glim just to see their way clear. It was a long winter too. The cold and frost continued through to spring, with the thermometer rarely above twenty below zero of Fahrenheit, causing extreme distress to all, and especially to the poor and labouring classes who had already been hit by the catastrophic effect of the previous year's devilish bad harvest. Coal, when it could be obtained, fetched more than three guineas a chaldron and water-pipes were all frozen, so that many perished that year through a fearful lack of fuel and water.

For sure, Billy Pitt and his cronies did little to help. The unshakeable belief of a Tory Government wildly out of touch with the common people was that a strong economy was ever the key to victory in the war old England was waging, in concert with the Austrians, Prussians, Sardinians, Dutch, and even the despicable Dons, against the newly emergent French Republic. Consequently, the Treasury had committed to a punitive fiscal policy that was set to ruin all but the rich through the imposition of unconscionable taxes on essential goods and services. Westminster steadfastly ignored the plight of the poor and any form of relief was fobbed off on to the Justices, or else left to common charity. Collections were regularly made by the clergy and others and public kitchens had begun to spring up all around town. I remember *The Times* carried a long parry-garrick extolling the virtues of forgoing any sort of food that was deemed essential to the poor and confining one's diet solely to the consumption of fish. And so, in order to make sure that I could not be accused of failing in my duty, I oft found myself alone in my modest rooms at the Bell Tavern in King Street sitting down to a meagre and

depressing meal of boiled trout or water souchy.

Mark you, I was no stranger to such privation, having served the last twelve years of my life on several of His Britannic Majesty's ships, oftentimes sailing some most inhospitable waters. But I will confess that I was glad to see winter turn to spring and with it the return of some, albeit feeble, sunshine in April, when I joined a small and slightly disinterested crowd outside St. James's Palace to try to catch a glimpse of Prince George and his bride to be, prior to their wedding. Like most royal weddings this one was a private affair to be held in the Chapel Royal, and especially so, some said, because the Prince considered his future queen to be a somewhat unsavoury creature. But, all things considered, I thought that it might be worth a shot and sure enough, after some degree of idle loitering, I was rewarded with a brief sighting of the couple in the Palace grounds. Sadly, however, the spectacle was somewhat less than edifying.

The Prince, dressed in a brown coat covered all over with overblown embroidery and other such fripperies, was clearly as drunk as Davy's sow, and Princess Caroline looked for all the world like a lewd Dutch doll in her gauzy, almost bare bosomed, silver dress and velvet robe. A pretty pair they made indeed - neither of them no better than they should be, and especially so our noble Prince of Wales. It was common knowledge that the Prince had only agreed to the marriage in order that the King might pay off his debts and that, before consenting to marry Caroline, Prinny had been carrying on a liaison with that arch tart Maria Fitzherbert for over ten years past. Why, it was even said that at one time they went through a distasteful, clandestine, and ultimately illegal form of marriage, with the supposedly sacred rites actually taking place in as unhallowed a setting as Mrs Fitzherbert's own drawing room!

I declare though that I was not at all surprised by all this, for it was in no way out of the ordinary. During my time in our fair Capital I had become all too aware of the inherently self-centred, sinful nature of the city and it's proliferation of such moral vices as duelling, suicide, gambling, and debauchery. Indeed, the Londoner's wanton desire to engage in three to one permeated all levels of society and could be seen everywhere, from the ubiquitous presence of draggle tail harlots in the streets at night and the regular staging of common balum rancums attended by various rakehells, libertines, whores, and painted Cyprians, to the execrable excesses of *roués* like Old Q, the Duke of Queensbury. Ever present in society, Old Q was the epitome of London licentiousness and had seemingly dedicated his life to seduction and swiving. It was even rumoured that he once re-enacted *The*

Judgement of Paris with three of the most beautiful and respected women of the town exhibiting themselves before him, as bare as nature intended; simply in order to compete for the spurious prize of a golden apple!

I will confess that it can be said that my own experience of these matters at the age of twenty-four was by no means great. My mother died when I was but a babe and I could only boast one female childhood friend. Her name was Elizabeth Saunders and she was a pretty little thing, with auburn hair falling in loose ringlets around her face, a radiant and ready smile, and an insatiable propensity for all kinds of mischief. But, although we resided in close proximity, I did not really see very much of her, save at church, and any contact was completely lost after I entered the Navy. Even when at sea I was seldom part of the atmosphere of wine, women, and song that permeated the wardroom, and most certainly never party to any of the hugger-mugger Miss Molly antics sometimes practiced by members of the more undisciplined of ship's companies!

I had joined my first ship at the age of twelve as a gentleman volunteer - servant to Captain Gardiner of the old *Demetra*, 74. My family has always been of the middling sort and when I was a boy my father, God rest his soul, worked as a gunsmith in our home village of Canewdon, an isolated place set deep within the Essex marshes. The old man was an ambitious fellow, both on his own part and on behalf of his family, and, after I had plainly failed to show any aptitude whatsoever for the gun maker's art, he conceived that the Navy should be the place for me. He knew right well that high rank within the Sea Service was not solely the prerogative of the titled and the wealthy and that, given a good measure of talent and wit, and no small amount of luck, success, fame, and fortune was open to a much wider class of 'gentlemen', wherein he was happy to categorise his only son. Obviously, with such humble origins and lack of influence in high places I was unable to enter the Service at the rate of midshipman, but Captain Gardiner, a local man, had apparently been an old friend of my mother's before I was even born, and so was kind enough to take me aboard as part of his following.

So it was that under the assiduous tutelage of the Captain, and by dint of my own hard work and exceptional diligence, I was rated midshipman at the age of sixteen, consequently serving as such on a number of ships for another four years before I entered and passed the examination for lieutenant. It was at this point that my sad lack of connections fully hit home. Notwithstanding that I had passed the exam at my first attempt, it proved singularly difficult for me to secure my promotion and I found myself continually passed over in

favour of the milksop sons of the aristocracy or the snotty relatives of high ranking officers. Then, at the outbreak of the current hostilities, I had a stroke of uncommon good fortune. I was at that time serving in the *Dione*, 32, under Captain Thomas Horne when we took the French frigate *Amazon* off Cape Finisterre, following a long chase and a sharp action which culminated in my having the honour to lead a party on to the very decks of the Frenchie and, by and by, to personally haul down her flag. It was on account of this singular feat that I finally gained my commission, and very proud I was too. Lieutenant Roger Alexander Ellis, Royal Navy - how grand it sounded - and I were sure that this was but my first step on the road to glory.

The following year, however, *Dione* suffered a mort of damage in the great fleet action of the First of June and, subsequently being paid off, was brought into Chatham for an extensive refit. I therefore found myself dumped somewhat unceremoniously on shore with a small amount of prize money from the sale of the *Amazon* and showing the flag of distress with a modicum of half pay. Thereafter, in common with scores of my fellow officers, I was obliged to petition the Admiralty Board for a new berth.

At first I was ever hopeful. Having good qualifications and a record of gallantry, I was sure of finding a new ship right speedily. But, notwithstanding this, as the months wore on the spectre of my bourgeois upbringing once more raised its ugly head and my lack of access to the high and mighty began to tell against me. In those days the supply of sea officers was rapidly outstripping demand and it seemed to me that, without interest, I might remain in my sorry situation some thirty or forty years without once having any notice taken of me! At times, I even began to envy the Frenchman, against whom we were currently pitted. Johnny Crapaud appeared to fully espouse the enlightened ideas of egalitarian and meritocratic advancement in his military establishment, and indeed, since the revolution, the country seemed to have totally adopted the true philosophies of enlightenment - particularly the excellent concept of reason as the primary source of authority, the sweet ideals of liberty, freedom, and equality, and the laudable acknowledgement of the importance of religious toleration.

But, just as one had come to expect, the damned Jacobins once more went too far and, having bravely elevated the concept of reason itself to the status of religion, proceeded to tarnish the whole idea by holding a series of obscene Rabelisian festivals dedicated solely to anarchy and the wanton pursuit of free will and pleasure. It was reported that in Paris, for example, that damn fool Hébert, who famously decried the actions of the bishop of Rome in excommunicating

all the French by declaiming ‘fuck the court of Rome, its cardinals and its bishops’, presided over an indecent, so called ‘Festival of Reason’ at Notre Dame. By all accounts, after that venerable church had been thoroughly plundered by the *sans culottes*, it became the stage for a blasphemous and orgiastic public affair in which a seductively dressed young strumpet wearing a Phrygian bonnet and holding a pike so as to signify that she was the ‘Goddess of Reason’, was fairly worshiped at the high altar; and all whilst a gaggle of other half naked doxies danced around her singing ribald songs in celebration of the revolution.

But I digress; suffice to say that by mid-April 1795 I was kicking my heels in St James’s, heartily sick of it, and feeling damned sorry for myself. Most mornings I would rise, pull on my old single breasted blue coat with its grubby white piping, don my white waistcoat and breeches, and my shiny black Hessians (they weren’t regulation, but I did so love those boots), strap on my short, straight bladed fighting sword, clap on my tricorne, and walk the short distance from King Street across the Cockpit to the Admiralty Building in Whitehall. Once there I would wait upon the word of one of the pettifogging clerks to Mr Napean, the Secretary to the Board, as to whether there was any news for me - which, invariably, there wasn’t. And to cap it all I had to drop the little conveyancer tuppence for the privilege.

One good thing though, there was always a chance to catch up with some of the other fellows who were in the same straits as me, and thus I could often be seen killing time around town in the company of Harry Felgate and young Charlie Edwardes. Felgate was a jolly fellow much given to jests and other low wit and I confess I did not much take to him, but unfortunately he and Edwardes came as a pair and so I found I could not really avoid his company. Charlie was a much more serious young man, whose erudite conversation pleased me greatly. Being a Scotchman, Charlie was considerably interested in the natural histories of religion that had been produced some years earlier by his fellow Hibernians, Messrs Hume and Robertson. These works, he oft contended, sought to apply the science of human nature to the study of the origins and development of religious beliefs.

One afternoon, the weather being rainy and most inclement, we three had repaired to Bedford’s, a coffee house located under the Piazza in Covent Garden. Bedford’s, a dark and dingy place with wainscoted walls and shaved wooden floors, smelled foul and was permanently hung with tobacco smoke. And it was one of our favourite haunts. Its patrons were almost invariably men of parts - scholars and wits mostly, so that within the grimy bulwarks of that establishment jokes and

bon-mots would echo from box to box and every branch of literature and philosophy would be minutely and critically examined. At this hour, it being a little after four o' the clock, the place was not too overcrowded so that we were able to secure a box at the upper end without being troubled too much by cries of 'what news have you' and suchlike from other members of the assembled multitude. After shrugging off our wet and steamy outerwear and ordering three bowls of the house's bitter Mohammedan gruel, we fell into conversation.

Harry started in along his customary lines.

"I say, you fellows," he grinned, as Charlie and I exchanged rueful glances. "Did you hear that last year, when the Frogs were taking the Duchess of Gramont to the guillotine she continually complained about the miserable rainy weather? That is until one of her guards said loudly, 'I don't know what you've got to complain about Madam - we've got to walk all the way home in this!'"

Of course, Charlie fairly fell about, and, thus encouraged, Harry prepared to launch into another groaner from his latest jest book. But, as was my wont, I was quick to bring things around to more serious matters.

"Charlie," I said. "On the subject of the French, let us hear some more of your latest hypothesis concerning the origins of that troubled nation's radical philosophies."

"Why, but of course," said Charlie. "To begin, might I ask if you were aware that, in framing their accounts of the natural development of religious belief, both Hume and Robertson appealed to the evidence of the pagan past?"

"Really?" said I, recognising the course we were about to embark upon, for it was not the first time that we had sailed these particular waters and so caused those two celebrated Sandies to raise their heads in our discourse. "Please, do explain, old fellow, how so?"

"Well, all throughout their writings, both of those learned scholars have clear recourse to the study of ancient texts that show that pagan religions have always provided a crucial support for popular morality. And I have lately been minded that this has never been more evident than in the revolution's overriding clarion call for universal *égalité* which, to their credit, the Jacobins apply even as between the sexes, don't y'know?"

"It appears to me that the Frenchies are certainly very keen on equality between the sexes," Harry put in, as a cherubic young lad appeared at the table with our drinks. "They don't rightly care whose head they chop off - man or woman!"

"Hush, Harry, let the man finish," I admonished, realising

that it wouldn't take much for the conversation to shift once more from the intellectual to the farcical. "Carry on Charlie, let's hear your point".

Charlie carried on.

"You see," he said. "In ancient times nearly all pagan religions regarded men and women as true equals, subject to the biological realities of gender of course. They also had a clear understanding that these natural differences did not in any way privilege one sex over the other. And this, it seems to me, is something of what the Frenchies are getting at. Your Frenchman, in common with his pagan ancestors, believes that man and woman are equal in the eyes of God, or as Robespierre would have had it, the Supreme Being, and as such should, for example, be allowed to enjoy the equal right to petition for divorce, or the equal right to inherit. But, and here's the rub, unlike their ancestors the Frogs still maintain that, because women inhabit bodies with different physical attributes, they must necessarily possess fundamentally different qualities and virtues which, though not impacting upon their right to equal treatment as human beings, will, as Rousseau himself has argued, inevitably render them unsuitable to vote, say, or hold any kind of public office."

"I take your meaning," said Harry, leaning back in his seat and taking a pull from a long clay pipe. "Men are undeniably the stronger sex, and therefore more intelligent, courageous, and determined. Women, on the other hand, God love 'em, though undoubtedly sweet and nurturing, are far more governed by their emotions, and indeed their lusts."

"That's most likely why we are now seeing French women in another kind of role," replied Charlie. "I don't know if you have become aware of this, but it is a reported fact that most of the French revolutionary values - liberty, equality, reason, and so on - are now being represented in the arts through the depiction of female figures from antiquity, and, should you chance upon such images, as I have, you'll plainly see that those figures are more often than not shown dressed in skimpy togas or else are displayed half, or even fully, naked."

At which point, I weighed in with what was, well, almost, my own opinion. "Are either of you gentlemen perhaps familiar with Mary Wollstonecraft's work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*?" I asked.

Both my companions shook their heads, and so, taking a tentative sip of the noxious brew before me, I went on.

"It is a very thought provoking work, to be sure - although it is damned wordy! By my reading of it, the author's central tenet is that women are not naturally inferior to men and that it

is only because women are subject to what she calls a ‘false system of education’ - that is, a system that is based only on what men consider women should be - that women inevitably become frivolous, silly, and ultimately unable to make a meaningful contribution to society.”

“In that respect, then,” said Charlie. “Could not this lady’s work be compared to the ideas put forward a few years ago by that French playwright, Olympe de Gouges? Although I believe de Gouges dared to venture even further by declaring women to be not only man’s equal but his partner?”

“Quite so,” I replied. “Women are as naturally rational as men and therefore it follows that, if they were given access to the same educational opportunities as their opposite sex, they must surely have every chance of working alongside men in the furtherance of all manner of trades, professions, commerce, and even, it must be said, politics. Indeed, it occurs to me that our current assembly of ineffectual Jacks-in-Office would most certainly benefit from a more compassionate and empathetic, or dare I say feminine, representation amongst them.”

At that point however, a perhaps not so random thought struck me, and I paused to take another draught from my cup before turning to Harry.

“Mark you, on the question of lust, Harry” I mused, “I think you may have hit upon some truth. Though whether such passions are innate or no is a matter for conjecture.”

“Whether it be innate or learned, Roger, perhaps the counterbalance to the delimiting effects of a woman’s high propensity to sensuality can be seen as simply a matter of needing to properly weigh up the effects of pleasure against any resulting pain, like that fellow Bentham says,” suggested Harry.”

“Perhaps so,” says I. “Certainly Bentham’s principle of utility allows that any kind of action is right if it tends to promote happiness or pleasure, and only wrong if it tends to produce unhappiness or pain. And you are in the right of it, Harry, Bentham does tell us that happiness is a balance of pleasure over pain, and so it may be that instances of overt sexuality in both women and men can always be overlooked or condoned in as far as no consequential harm emanates from them.”

Charlie and Harry nodded their agreement, but as they did so I abruptly changed tack.

“But I don’t know,” I said, sadly. “I have a mind that Bentham’s philosophies, though eloquently defined, might well merely be a veiled attempt to justify the unfortunate dedication to the blind pursuit of hedonistic pleasure that so blights our

society these days.”

“Come now, Roger, it’s not as bad as all that,” said Charlie. “Everyone needs to blow off a little steam every now and then, even you, I’m sure.”

“Ah, but it is as bad as that, Charlie. And it’s not only the common types either, barely a day passes without reports and letters being published in the press telling of the adulterous liaisons and amorous adventures of Lady So-and So and the Duchess of What-Not - people of high standing who must surely be conscious of a need to maintain a suitable level of decorum in these dangerous times? I myself will have no truck with it, damme if I will, and I’ll go so far as to declare that it is the bawdy and perverse self-gratification that is so prevalent around town that is causing me to become so deadly tired of London life.”

“But you do recall what the Good Doctor said, laddie?” Charlie asked with a smile. “When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life!”

“That’s all very well and good,” I replied. “But, if I add the frustrations of needing to continually kow-tow to those damned Admiralty clerks to the complete lack of morals I have seen since I arrived, I despair of finding any pleasure in my current situation - beyond the chance of snatching a few moments of civilised conversation with you both, of course. London is a mean and ugly place that has sunk to the very depths of depravity in its veneration of Cytherea. Why, if evidence be needed of the extent of the moral degeneration in this city, one need only stray among the old ‘dark walks’ of Vauxhall, which, even though now dimly lit, are still exceedingly secluded. Any visitor spending his evening among those arbours is certain to see women of the utmost social respectability willingly and publicly entering the amatory lists alongside various so called demi-reps, dashers, and your common or garden Drury Lane vestals. I tell you gentlemen, this city is in truth beginning to repel me and I have a mind to take a break from London for a while.”

Extracted from *The Moon Dancers*, the first novel in John Pitman’s *Moon Dancers* series.

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