

FOR CENTURIES, THE greatest explorers of their age were dispatched from the power-houses of Europe — London, Paris and Berlin — on a quest unlike any other: To be the first white Christian to visit, and then to sack, the fabled metropolis of Timbuctoo.

Most of them never returned alive.

At the height of the Timbuctoo mania, two hundred years ago, it was widely believed that the elusive Saharan city was fashioned in entirety from the purest gold — everything from the buildings to the cobblestones, from the buckets to the bedsteads was said to be made from it.

One winter night in 1815, a young illiterate American seaman named Robert Adams was discovered half-naked and starving on the snow-bound streets of London. His skin seared from years in the African desert, he claimed to have been a guest of the King of Timbuctoo.

At a time when anything American was less than popular, the loss of the colony still fresh in British minds, the thought of an American claiming anything — let alone the greatest prize in exploration — was abhorrent in the extreme.

Closing ranks against their unwelcome American guest, the British Establishment lampooned his tale, and began a campaign of discrediting him, one that continues even today.

An astonishing tale based on true-life endurance, *Timbuctoo* vividly recreates the obsessions of the time, as a backdrop for one of the greatest love stories ever told.

Also by Tahir Shah

Travels With Myself

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Sorcerer's Apprentice

Beyond the Devil's Teeth

TIMBUCTOO

TAHIR SHAH

TIMBUCTOO

BEING A SINGULAR
AND MOST ANIMATED ACCOUNT

OF AN ILLITERATE AMERICAN SAILOR,

TAKEN AS A SLAVE
IN THE GREAT ZAHARA AND,

AFTER TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS APLENTY,

REACHING LONDON
WHERE HE NARRATED HIS TALE

TAHIR SHAH

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This book is inspired by a true story.

*For my mother,
whose love of the Regency is matched only by my own.*

WHEN I SAW IT FIRST, I was lost in the bowels of the London Library, searching for an obscure volume on shrunken heads...

A leather-bound book, an inch thick, jammed up against a water pipe. Without thinking, I reached up and yanked it out. Cupping the book gently in my hands, I pulled it open at the title page and began to read. That was the moment my obsession with the *Narrative of Robert Adams* began.

Twenty years have passed since then. And, through that time, my fascination for the tale of an illiterate American sailor has gripped me like nothing else.

The book you hold is my own fictional version of what is surely one of the greatest stories of survival ever told. I can only offer gratitude to the reader for turning a blind eye to any historical inaccuracies, and for tolerating a novelist's liberties. I am no historian, and have massaged facts and fictions into place, re-conjuring history.

With that, let the tale begin...

TAHIR SHAH

I

The Royal African Committee invites subscriptions — The ragged figure of a man collapses in the London snow — Mr. Cochran's letter to Beattie — The vagrant is almost run down by a carriage — Mr. Cochran informs Beattie of the Timbuctoo expedition — The vagrant is recognised by Viscount Fortescue — Mr. Cochran reports to Beattie on receiving a letter — Miss Fortescue takes breakfast with her father — Sir Geoffrey Caldecott interviews Major Peddie before the departure of the expedition — Beattie's letter to Mr. Cochran — At Camelford House the visitor is stirring — The visitor introduces himself to the Fortescues as Mr. Robert Adams, confirming that he has visited Timbuctoo — Viscount Fortescue takes Mr. Adams to the Royal African Committee — Sir Geoffrey Caldecott learns of Mr. Adams — Mr. Cochran advises Beattie of the arrival of the visitor — Mr. Adams moves into Mr. Cochran's Fleet Street chambers — Mr. Adams arrives to begin his narration at the Royal African Committee — The business of the Royal African Committee — Mr. Cochran receives a letter from Beattie — Mr. Adams commences his narration, describing how he was dispatched from America.

ONE

AN ORNATE QUEEN Anne brazier was crackling with coals at either end of the opulent meeting room.

The heat warmed the extremities, and left the fifty gentlemen seated at the central mahogany table wishing they had worn their woollen underwear instead.

Long portraits of the Committee's founders obscured the dim silk-covered walls, absorbing the light from a great Bohemian chandelier, suspended from the panelled ceiling above.

There was a tension in the room, as if each of the frock-coated gentlemen was well aware of his good fortune at being invited to attend.

The dark waxed table was strewn with papers, ledgers, and with maps of Africa, most of them little more than outlines — hinting at the vast unexplored regions and of the riches awaiting the foolhardy and the brave.

At the far end of it was seated Sir Geoffrey Caldecott.

A fleshy red-faced bulldog of a man of fifty-six, he lurched up from his chair, swept out the forked tails of his coat, and thumped the polished surface with his palm. His breathing was excitable and asthmatic, his manner aggressive.

‘Gentlemen!’ he boomed, raising his hand. ‘Gentlemen, I call this session of the Royal African Committee to order!’

The hum of conversation subsided, and the prosperous-looking men seated turned their attentions to the chairman.

‘Since the earliest glimpses of history,’ Caldecott called out, ‘chroniclers have documented its treasures. Ibn Battutah and Leo the African among them — all have recorded its astounding wealth. Never before has a land so abundant with bullion been known!’

William DeWitt, a meagre figure with small calculating eyes, seated to the left of the chairman, stood up. He coughed to gain the attention of the room. DeWitt was a merchant whose immense private fortune had been constructed on the misfortune of others.

He coughed again, more forcefully.

‘Gentlemen,’ he announced, ‘I coax you to conjure your imagination. Picture an African El Dorado where the only known metal is gold! Storehouses overflow with it, and coffers are brimming with it. Roof tiles and cobblestones, cups and plates, buckets and bedsteads, all are fashioned from that most intoxicating yellow ore!’

‘The purest gold,’ Caldecott broke in, ‘all of it awaiting any gentleman who subscribes to this sound project. Our own Major Peddie will be the first Christian, the first Caucasian gentleman, to journey to the golden land and back. And with him will come the entire bounty of that sacked metropolis! But we *must* hurry!’

‘Just this morning a messenger has brought news of the French expeditionary force,’ DeWitt added urgently, ‘departed three

nights ago from Marseilles. Their feet already tramp south across African sands.’

Caldecott nudged a finger at the wiry, hunched man to his right. Livered in a flamboyant lilac frock coat with oversized cuffs, a froth of cream silk wound tight around his neck, Simon Cochran held the title of Committee secretary, although he spent most of his time carrying out duties well below his position.

He did not stand, but instead held up a crisp white sheet of laid paper and a goose-feather quill.

‘Pledge your savings now, gentlemen,’ Caldecott urged, ‘and tomorrow you will be prosperous beyond all imagination!’

With the long-bearded founders peering down in witness from their gilded frames, the investors sprang to their feet. They huddled around the secretary, each one eager to sign the paper, headed with a single word in copperplate script — *TIMBUCTOO*.

TWO

SHOELESS AND FURLED up in a filthy blanket, shielding his face from the arctic wind, a lone figure staggered out into the street from the market stalls of Covent Garden.

Collapsing, his weight fell full force down onto the cobbles.

The last of the stallholders had gone home for the night as the

bell of St. Paul's church struck six. The snow was coming down hard again, softening the sounds of carriage wheels running down to the Strand. The snowflakes gathered, settling on the blanket in silence.

The body beneath it did not move.

An hour passed. A pair of sailors burst out of the Red Swan Tavern, reeled across the square, laughing, boasting, spirits shored up by drink. A stream of bright yellow lamplight from the door illuminated the snow. It narrowed to a triangle and was gone.

Another hour ebbed away and the wind whipped up.

Then came the roar of steel-rimmed wheels, a carriage hurtling over cobbles. Charging from the blackness, its four mares cantered full tilt into the wind. Lashing at the reins, half-blinded by the blizzard, the coachman's face was wrapped in a makeshift calico hood.

The wheels thundered across the square towards the figure.

Fifty feet, thirty, fifteen...

A second before the rims struck flesh, the figure thrust an arm to the side. The coachman tore back on the reins. The horses whinnying, the wheels jammed, sparking, skidding against the snow.

THREE

16, Fleet Street, London

17th October 1815

Dearest Beattie,

Salutations, my little cousin, from a colder London day than I can recall. To think it is only October! I have stoked the fire since before dawn, but was frozen to the bone half the night. So cold was I, that I pulled on my breeches while under the covers. Imagine that! What suffering! This night I will sleep in three pairs of stockings and the maroon felt nightcap you so sweetly presented me with two Christmases ago.

The Committee's chairman, Sir Geoffrey, has been whipped into a maniacal state these past days. There is much talk of the French expedition. The very mention of it, and Sir G flies into a rage. Indeed, the mention of anything French drives him wild with rage. He refuses even the finest glass of claret — remarkable for a man with such an unquenchable thirst. But then, Waterloo is so recent in all our minds.

I have heard tell that the French contingent, under the command of General Dumas, has packed a hundred gallons of eau de cologne in which they intend to bathe the natives when they arrive. The chocolate shops of Mayfair resound to talk of how King Louis insists

his monogram be nailed on the palace walls of far-off Timbuctoo.

Our only advantage is that Bonaparte is impotent at last, en route as I write this to his incarceration at St. Helena. Thank God for that, and for our victory last summer.

Major Peddie will set sail a week tomorrow from Plymouth, and plans to make landfall at Tangiers, leading the largest and best prepared expedition that has ever sought out that glorious desert emporium. The investors appear to have covered the costs for the mission many times over, much to the delight of Sir G.

There is no doubt that Major Peddie marches into history, holding high the colours of the Committee, of Britannia, and the King.

Yours affectionately, my dearest Beattie,

Simon

FOUR

THE WIND HOWLED up the Thames, tearing through Covent Garden, and buffeting the coach on its springs. Pulled to a halt so forcefully, the horses were champing furiously on their bits, their dark coats gleaming like Chinese lacquer in lamplight.

The coachman ran a palm down the back of the lead mare.

‘Easy, me love, easy with ya.’

‘What is it, Dunn?’ shouted a voice from the carriage.

‘A vagrant, sir. We almost struck ’im.’

The carriage door, which bore the monogram C.R.T.F., opened a crack and was flapped back on its hinges by the wind. The heel of a leather boot kicked down the folding step and a gentleman climbed out into the snow.

He was dressed in a cashmere coat with a fox stole tight around his neck, a beaver hat crowning his thin grey hair.

‘Viscount, sir, please take your place inside the carriage. We’ll move away as soon as the horses have calmed.’

‘Is he dead?’

The coachman tugged the carriage lamp off its fastening, pushed forward, and held the flame to the man’s face. The snow was bathed in syrupy yellow light. Stooping over, the driver pulled at the rag covering the vagrant’s face.

‘My gawd,’ gasped the driver, lurching backwards.

‘Tell me man, is he dead?’

‘Alive, sir, barely so, but...’

‘But what?’

‘His face, sir. It’s burned.’

‘*Burned?*’

‘Let us away, sir. This is no place for a gentleman.’

‘Get back to the horses.’

The vagrant's eyes opened a fraction. Straining to focus, he was blinded by the lantern-light.

'Can you see me, man?'

The figure faded in and out of consciousness. The Viscount brought the lamp closer to chase away the shadows. He took a good look, examining the man's face with care. Its features were wind-chapped and weatherworn, the left eye bisected by a deep scar. It ran from the middle of the brow down as far as the cheek.

The raw lips parted and, in a whisper, he said:

'*Al Shahra Ahad!* The sun, the desert sun!'

The Viscount pulled a hipflask from his breast pocket and nudged its silver rim to the man's mouth. He struggled to sip.

'*Shukran.* Thank you,' he said, his words barely audible.

The Viscount leant closer, until his ear was half an inch from the man's lips.

'Your voice... It's...'

'American. I am an American.'

'*An American?* But where have you come from?'

'From an African Hell.'

FIVE

16, Fleet Street, London

19th October 1815

Dearest Beattie,

Snow has been falling here for five days now, and the coal merchants have raised their prices a shilling a sack, much to the exasperation of all decent Londoners. I would be protesting along with the others outside the Guildhall, but there is great commotion in the offices of the Committee!

I was this morn at my desk early, preparing for Major Peddie's departure to the Dark Continent. There are so many bills to be paid, details of every kind to attend to. Sir G is adamant that Peddie and his party must reach this desert El Dorado by Christmas if they are to trounce the French. He charges into the building shortly after breakfast, and stampedes about from his study to the library, to the meeting chambers and back to the library, tormenting all those he encounters. It may be freezing, but Sir Geoffrey's brow ever streams with perspiration.

So at my desk were I, adding numbers and squaring papers, when the sound of a stick running down the railings caught my attention. It caught Sir G's too. He pricked up his ears like an old hunting

dog, barked a line of expletives, and ordered me to rebuke the rascal. Pulling on my coat, I stumbled out onto the icy steps, and found an urchin waiting there. He was shaking, grey with cold, clasping a note in his hand.

With a duck of his head, he presented it to me. I gave him a farthing for his trouble, sent him off, went back inside and regarded the envelope at the fireside. At once I recognised the impeccable script — that of my godfather, the Arabist Viscount Fortescue.

*With affection, my dearest Beattie,
Simon*

SIX

A BRIGHT-EYED young woman of twenty, with a delicate complexion and a mane of copper hair, was standing beside the marble-framed fireplace in the drawing room of Camelford House in Hanover Square.

The top of her head was reflected in the mirror above it, her face level with a blue jasperware vase resting upon the mantel. Her palms were pressed together in anticipation, the bow of her jade dress flopping unevenly to one side.

In the background, a long-cased clock chimed nine. From a distance came the sound of bone china rattling on a tray, as a maid ascended the stairs from the kitchen.

The Viscount entered.

Now in the warm, he seemed taller than he appeared the night before. He was fifty-five but looked a little younger, his skin anointed daily with almond oil, and the horseshoe of hair crowning the back of his head scented with *pomade de Nerole*. His movements were measured, his costume immaculate, and his back ramrod straight.

‘Clara, dearest, shall we sit for breakfast?’

The girl smoothed a hand down over her copper locks, and bobbed towards her father.

‘Tell me, Papa, tell me, who is he?’

‘Who is who?’

‘The man brought in last night. I heard the furore. The landing almost collapsed! I have tried the bedroom door but it’s locked. I implore you, Father, whom do you keep as your prisoner?’

Viscount Fortescue glided past his daughter. He had small feet for a man of such height, and had enjoyed quite a reputation in his younger years for the quadrille.

Crossing the central medallion of a Persian carpet, laid over the beech parquet, he reached the mullion window.

Outside, the snow was falling once again, the light flat and

ash-grey. Fortescue glanced out at a sheet of newspaper tossed up. He turned round to face the fire.

‘An American,’ he said, pronouncing the syllables slowly. ‘My *prisoner* is an American.’

‘But Father, our nations are at war!’

The Viscount touched a hand to his chin and smiled.

‘I am well informed of the hostilities, my dear.’

‘But surely it is not wise to allow the enemy into our home. Why, he could murder us in our beds! Or what if he is diseased?’

‘Come now dear Clara, breakfast is ready.’

Fortescue ushered his daughter through to the adjoining parlour, where breakfast had been laid. The room was small, at least when compared to the grandeur of the reception rooms on the ground floor. It was warm, decorated with Japanese prints and a variety of other pictures. The largest was a treasured Hokusai wave in a thin gold frame, and the smallest, a silhouette of Clara’s maternal grandfather made on the afternoon of his death.

Near the window an aspidistra stood on a turquoise china stand. Upon an octagonal walnut table beside it, sat an ironed copy of *The Times*. Clara took her usual seat, away from the window, her father across the table. She poured herself a cup of Darjeeling, added a drop of milk, and stared into the liquid for a moment.

‘Please tell... what do you know of him?’ she asked all of a sudden.

The Viscount looked up from the newspaper.

‘Of whom, dearest?’

‘The American.’

‘Only that he has suffered greatly, and that he may be a key.’

‘A key to what?’

‘A key to a mystery that preoccupies us all.’

SEVEN

SIR GEOFFREY CALDECOTT was pacing in the library, a massive book-lined hall, at the rear of the Committee building.

The room had a domed ceiling, upon which was depicted an exotic interpretation of the African continent: the bulk of it ornamented with dense jungle and cannibal tribes. The library walls were laid with dark teak shelves, each one arranged neatly with books, thirty thousand of them, the spines in matching red morocco. The parquet floor was partly covered by a series of long Persian rugs, and a dozen large desks placed along one side of them, tooled map drawers arranged beneath each one.

A knuckle rapped softly at the door. Slowly, the great portal inched back, revealing Simon Cochran. He entered in silence. Close behind was another gentleman, in full cavalry dress. The two men made for a curious combination: one attired in dandy couture, the

other in the livery of the Dragoon Guards.

As soon as the door opened, Caldecott dug his heels into the parquet, swivelled round, and hurried over boisterously to greet his guest.

The officer had the kind of face one would not pick out in a crowd — blue-grey eyes, a button nose and disappointing chin. But his marvellous red and gold uniform, replete with lanyards and a sprinkling of medals, compensated for any deficiency in facial features.

‘Thank you for coming Major,’ barked Caldecott when he was close up. ‘I wanted to look you in the eye before you set off. After all, no communication can ever be so articulate as two men standing eye to eye.’

Major Peddie regarded Caldecott, taking in the broken capillaries on his cheeks, and the bloodshot whites of his eyes. As an army man, and one who had served under Wellington, he despised the rot that tended to fester among the civilian populace. The chairman may have had the highest hopes for the Major’s ability, but he found himself angered by the aura of military arrogance.

They stood motionless, staring, until Cochran broke the silence.

‘I have taken the liberty of presenting the Major with the latest and most up-to-date cartography of the African continent,’ he said. ‘Park’s journey is featured, as well as Roentgen’s.’

‘You may leave us, Mr. Cochran,’ said Caldecott, waving a hand at the door.

The secretary paced out, closed the door behind him, and pressed his ear to its reverse.

‘Now I have you eye to eye,’ said Caldecott, ‘I will make myself very clear, Major. I don’t care what sacrifice you have to make. It may cost dearly in human life, and in funds, but you must, I repeat — *must* — secure the golden city for our Committee and the Crown. The French will be defeated!’

Peddie, who had not yet spoken, pursed his lips, breathed in, and then frowned.

‘We have planned the expedition as a military campaign,’ he said, in a clipped tone. ‘My men are veterans of Waterloo, all of them baptised in French blood. They have tasted victory against Bonaparte in Europe, and will scotch his comrades on *terra Africanus*. Rest assured, sir, we will hound them over the sands, hack them into mincemeat, burn their bones, and continue forward to claim our prize.’

EIGHT

*Chavenage Hall
2nd November 1815*

Dear Simon,

Forgive my delay in replying to your letters. Of late I have been compelled to attend my mother's strictest wishes. She insists on me playing the pianoforte through the long, dark afternoons. I regret having ever learned to play the accursed instrument.

Otherwise, I can report that all is quiet here at Chavenage, and am disappointed to remark that uproar of any kind is unknown to our simple lives.

This morning we had a call from a Mr. Thomas Wittershall, of Gloucester, who informed Mother that he has just become our neighbour, by purchasing the land to the west of Chavenage Hall. He is a hunter, it seems, par excellence, and is much admired if the reputation that precedes him is to be believed.

If my understanding is correct, Mr. Wittershall intends to build himself a large home on the hill the other side of the eleven-acre forest. He appears to have funds aplenty and owns a large property in London.

I hope that the business of the African Committee is not too

taxing on your time, and that you will remember to write soon, my dear Simon,

*Affectionately yours,
Beattie*

NINE

UPSTAIRS, ON THE second floor, the visitor was stirring.

Through half-open eyes he scanned the room, and drowsily tried to make sense of his reverse in fortunes.

The bedroom was palatial. Its windows were hung with padded olive-silk curtains, its expansive walls adorned with lithographs and hand-coloured prints, most of them details of African scenes. The floor was oak parquet polished with beeswax, and the furniture all rosewood, except for the four-poster bed, which was carved teak.

A coal fire was clicking in the brazier. Beside it stood a leather camel saddle raised on a plinth, next to it a pair of bull elephant tusks. The visitor's eyes took them in, dilating sharply, as if sparked by memory.

At that moment the door opened without a sound, the brass hinges having been lubricated the week before with a feather dipped in linseed oil, on the Viscount's personal instructions.

A butler entered, his felt-soled slippers making no sound at all as they crossed the room, treading from parquet to carpet and back to parquet. He laid a tea tray on the table at the right side of the bed, pushed open the curtains one at a time, and cleared his throat.

‘Good morning, sir.’

‘Huh?’

‘Good morning to you, sir. I am reluctant to say it, but the weather is rather inclement.’

The foreign visitor sat up.

‘Can you tell me where I am?’

‘You are, sir, at Camelford House, the London residence of Sir Richard Fortescue.’

‘Where are my clothes?’

The butler pulled open the doors of a Chippendale wardrobe, revealing a row of fine gentleman’s garments.

‘I believe these are for your use, sir.’

The visitor drew a hand over his forehead, pushing back the mop of blond hair. He seemed anxious for a moment, confused.

‘In the shirt I was wearing, there was in the pocket...’

‘A lace handkerchief?’

‘Yes.’

‘The Viscount felt it might be of some importance. It is laid on the night-stand, sir.’

The man rolled himself forward. Spying the lace, soiled and worn, he touched it to his lips, and sunk back into the pillows.

‘Thank God,’ he said.

There was a pause. The butler moved over to a wooden damascene screen, inlaid with fragments of mother-of-pearl.

‘Your bath is drawn, sir.’

‘Drawn?’

‘Yes, sir. The water is a good temperature. Would you like me to bath you?’

The visitor’s face tightened.

‘No, no, I can bath myself!’

‘Very good, sir.’

TEN

AN HOUR LATER, Fortescue and Clara were still at the breakfast table.

They were about to adjourn, when the butler entered, sailed over to the Viscount, and whispered discreetly in his ear. Fortescue’s eyes widened sharply.

‘Well, show him in at once!’

Glancing up, Clara pushed back her shoulders in defence. Before she could utter a word, the visitor was standing before them. The Viscount found himself at a loss for words.

Unrecognisable now, the American was dressed in a white muslin shirt, riding breeches, and a pair of leather button-down boots. His tanned face, clean-shaven, was gentle but defiant, a mirror to the hardship he had endured. He had a square jaw, dark green eyes, and an aquiline nose. His hair was long, wetted from the bath, the colour of dark straw, and his shoulders broad, so much so as to be unnatural.

Viscount Fortescue tossed down *The Times*, leapt to his feet, and ushered his visitor into the parlour.

‘Come in, please come in, sir!’

Clara placed the china cup in its saucer, looked up, and flinched at the sight of such a handsome figure.

‘My dear Clara, I should like to present our distinguished guest — Mister...’

There was another pause. The American lowered his head a fraction, creasing his eyes engagingly in a smile.

‘My name is Robert Adams,’ he said.

‘And how did you sleep, Mr. Adams?’ asked Fortescue loudly.

Adams took a deep breath. His gaze scanned the array of foods, and moved naturally up to Clara’s eyes.

‘I slept more deeply than on any night I can remember,’ he said in a soft, tender voice, ‘and yet I swear that I am still dreaming.’

Blushing, Clara motioned to the chair beside her own.

‘Will you not sit and have some breakfast, Mr. Adams?’

‘Thank you, Miss...’

‘Clara. My name is Clara.’

‘And I am Fortescue.’

Adams lowered himself onto the chair slowly, mesmerised at being in the presence of so much food. There was oatmeal cooked with cream, smoked herrings, grilled trout in white butter sauce, a tureen of brazed kidneys, eggs, bacon, and an assortment of breads. As the visitor took in the feast laid out before him, Clara stole a glance. Blushing again, she felt her knees weaken, as she struggled to maintain her usual prim façade.

‘Will you eat something, Mr. Adams?’

‘I could swallow the table, legs and all!’

‘There is no need to eat the furniture, sir, I assure you,’ she said, her mouth easing into a smile, ‘for plenty of food is at hand.’

Clara nodded to the manservant to offer the guest the silver platter of kedgeree. It was borne forward at chest height, supported between a pair of spotless white-gloved hands, held to Adams’ left side. Piling his plate high with food, he set about devouring it as fast as he could using a soup spoon.

Clara looked on in fascination. As she did so, her father sprang to his feet energetically, and moved round the table to get a better look at his unusual guest. Filled with vigour, the Viscount remained

silent. Only when he had feasted sufficiently on the sight, did he say anything at all.

‘Mr. Adams, although we have not met, I believe I know who you are, and a little of the trials and tribulations to which you have been exposed. Divine providence threw us together last night.’

Adams did not look up. He was too busy eating.

Viscount Fortescue continued:

‘A month ago I received a letter from an acquaintance of thirty years, a gentleman by the name of Joseph Dupuis.’

The American stopped mid-flow, the laden soup spoon poised by an open mouth.

‘The Consul at Mogador,’ he said, ‘the man I owe my life... the one who was responsible for redeeming me. He is my truest friend.’

The Viscount smacked his palms together.

‘Dupuis wrote of you,’ he whispered after a studious pause, ‘said you have supposedly achieved something, Mr. Adams, something that no other Christian has yet accomplished. And you have achieved it quite incidentally, and without the egoism that is the mainstay of our communal efforts.’

Adams let the spoon rest on his plate.

‘I don’t understand.’

Viscount Fortescue put a hand over his mouth and slid it down across his chin. It was a gesture that his peers might have

regarded as beneath him. But the Viscount wasn’t much concerned by the opinions of others.

‘Almost daily, the bravest of men are dispatched from London, Paris and Berlin,’ he said, ‘set on that unconquered goal of goals, that prize of exploration, one that grips all society — all society but your own.’

Viscount Fortescue leant forward on the tips of his toes, his back even straighter than normal. Adams eyed the salver of fresh-baked breads lying just within reach; but his host’s excited sense of urgency drew him away from the thought of food.

‘You have so, have you not...?’

‘Have so, what?’

‘Have set foot at Timbuctoo?’

The butler crept into the room with the morning post. His name was Dalston and his face was expressionless, lids heavy over coal-black eyes. He had been in the Viscount’s employment for thirty-six years, and his father before him had worked as an attendant at the family seat near Bath. He had never met an American before.

Adams scanned the room, taking in the butler, the doorman, the pair of maids standing to attention against the adjacent wall, Clara, and finally Fortescue himself. He reached for a large slice of toasted bread, took a bite, chewed hard, and washed it down with a gulp of tart pineapple juice.

‘My feet have indeed tramped through that city,’ he said distantly, ‘I lived there six months, a guest of its king, until I was sold into slavery.’

‘*Slavery?*’ said Clara, her nose jerking back. ‘But are you not a Christian?’

‘That I am.’

‘Then how could it be so?’

‘Miss,’ said Adams tenderly, ‘these fine surroundings are a world apart from the inferno in which I have existed these past five years. My bondage at the hands of Moors led me through unimaginable torment. I walked a tightrope between survival and damnation.’

Fortescue pressed his fingertips together.

‘Remarkable, truly remarkable. But how on earth did you keep going... endure what would have dispatched any ordinary man?’

‘I was kept going by my faith and by a love so strong it replaced the blood in my veins and the breath in my lungs.’

Clara found herself gazing immodestly into the American’s eyes as he spoke. She was attracted to his raw sensibility, and by the thought that he had been ravaged by a passionate wildness of nature, the kind unlikely ever to visit her life.

The Viscount returned to his seat, allowed Dalston to pour him a third cup of orange pekoe, and turned to look out at Hyde Park.

‘There is a group of gentlemen,’ he said, turning back towards

Adams, ‘a Committee which I am sure would be most interested in hearing the details of your adventures, and your description of the golden metropolis.’

‘But I must hurry back to Hudson. I hope to catch the first available voyage. I am anxious to be reunited with the life that was robbed from me, and with the woman who gives reason to my life.’

One of the maids swapped the dirty plate for a smaller one, from the same Wedgwood service.

‘Even my best intentions to aid your situation would be thwarted,’ said Fortescue. ‘You cannot return home until there is a cessation of the conflict between our nations. As you must surely be aware, we are at war, sir, over trade.’

Adams pushed away the delicate patterned plate, and stared at the tablecloth, starched white like new sailcloth. It reminded him of a giant mainsail heaving in the Atlantic wind.

‘I must get home,’ he said, in a low strained voice. ‘I must get back to Hudson. And I will. Five years with Death as my shadow, hanging in limbo, a common slave, has taught me to never give up. I will swim if I have to. But I *will* get home.’

Clara breathed in hard through her nose, stretching the corset tight on her chest, suffocating her.

‘You must avail yourself of our gentle hospitality,’ she said, without looking Adams in the eye.

‘You are very kind, but why are you helping me?’

The Viscount nodded to Dalston, signalling that breakfast was at an end.

‘Because I have the Devil in me,’ he said.

ELEVEN

A DOORMAN WAS salting the steps of the Committee headquarters when the carriage pulled up. He saw a blur of monogram on the door, the letters C.R.T.F. and, although he was illiterate, he knew a monogram meant a gentleman, and a gentleman meant largesse.

Jumping down to the street, he readied himself to be useful. The horses drew to a halt, their breath billowing like gun-smoke, fusing with the sound of the brake levers pulled hard to the back wheels. The coachman climbed down, squared the footstep on the snow and signalled to his passengers.

The Viscount opened the door from the inside when he was ready, his lined leather glove taking the cold of the brass knob. He descended, and was followed by Robert Adams, now dressed in a heavy gabardine overcoat. The two men mounted the salted steps with care and, a moment later, they were inside, being ushered towards the library by Cochran.

Adams’ eyes roamed the magnificent corridor, taking in the rows

of marble busts, the exotic trophy heads, the chequerboard floor and, above it, the vaulted ceiling inset with coloured glass. He might have been fearful at finding himself in such a grand setting, but he wasn’t in the least, just a little confused.

‘What is this place?’ he asked.

‘The Royal African Committee, the bastion of His Majesty’s exploration into the Dark Continent,’ said Fortescue. ‘Its governors intend to dispatch a great expedition to Timbuctoo.’

There was silence for a moment.

‘Why the interest with that city?’

The Viscount smiled.

‘Surely you are mocking the legend, are you not, Mr. Adams?’

Cochran opened the double doors to the library, and invited Adams to sit on a banquette lined in crimson velvet. He did so, and his eyes were soon locked on the fanciful mural of Africa painted across the dome.

‘We shall leave you for a moment, Mr. Adams,’ said Fortescue, ‘for we must inform the chairman of your arrival.’

There was the sound of the doors opening again, and of the lock snapping shut, but Adams didn’t hear it. He was transfixed on the ceiling.

As his eyes took in the jungle foliage and the cannibal tribes, his memory transposed over them five years of anguish.

TWELVE

IN A PRIVATE STUDY on the second floor, Sir Geoffrey was taking a pinch of ground tobacco from a tortoiseshell snuffbox. He enjoyed a blend of macouba prepared for him by William Hebb of Old Bond Street, priding himself on its expense.

There was a knock at the door.

Sir Geoffrey slipped the box away, called ‘Enter!’ and turned to receive his visitor.

Viscount Fortescue had no formal association with the Committee but, as a respected member of the gentry, a learned gentleman, and a linguist, he was always welcome, and was occasionally invited to advise. He shook hands with Caldecott, exchanged pleasantries, and moved over to warm himself beside the fire.

‘I was much interested by your message this morning, Viscount,’ Sir Geoffrey wheezed. ‘But what new information could you have possibly received of the golden city?’

Fortescue declined an armchair and, instead, leant against the pink marble mantel, his leather cavalry boots reflecting the glow of the coals. He wanted to be standing when he delivered his punchline.

‘You are aware that no Christian has ever reached it, and returned alive to tell their tale?’

‘Quite so.’

‘Well how would it sound to your ears if I were to inform you that a young man, a Christian, as pink as you or I, had reached Timbuctoo, and resided there as a guest of the king?’

‘It would sound just as it is — *Preposterous!*’

Sir Geoffrey Caldecott had beads of perspiration on his forehead again. He felt his chest tighten with asthma, as it always did when he heard things he didn’t appreciate. Crossing the room, he pushed up the window, letting in a blast of freezing air.

‘Well,’ said Fortescue, flexing his back, ‘you may be intrigued to know that such a man claims to have been to the golden city, and has returned alive. But more to the point, he is not English.’

‘A damned foreigner?’

‘A foreigner, yes.’

‘Where’s he from then? From France?’

‘No, not France.’

‘Then Berlin. I knew it... He’s a damned German!’

‘No, Sir Geoffrey, not German either.’

‘Italian?’

‘No.’

‘A Russian?’

The Viscount motioned the negative with his hand.

‘Not from Europe at all.’

The chairman looked dumbfounded.

‘Well who else is there?’

‘In actual fact he is from across the ocean.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘He is an American.’

There was silence as Caldecott’s overheated cranium processed the name of the unpopular republic. He was unable to respond at first. His face became dove-grey and, a moment after that, a surge of blood turned it cherry-red. Fortescue wondered whether he might pass out.

‘Would you like a tonic, Sir Geoffrey?’ he asked.

Caldecott held the back of his hand to his mouth and began to choke.

‘Then if you have no objection, I shall fetch him,’ said the Viscount easily.

‘You brought him here?!’ barked Caldecott, still choking.

Fortescue didn’t hear the question. He had already stridden out, down to the library. Soon he was back at the door, Adams in his shadow.

‘Sir Geoffrey, I have the distinct pleasure of introducing you to Mr. Robert Adams, from Hudson, in the state of New York.’

‘Good afternoon,’ said Adams, bending over Caldecott.

‘He *is* American!’

‘That I am, born and raised.’

‘And, sir, I understand that you claim that you have been to Timbuctoo.’

‘I claim nothing, but I’ve been there.’

‘And what took you to Timbuctoo, Mr. Adams?’

‘Slavery.’

‘How many did you own?’

‘No, no, I was not a merchant.’

‘What?’

‘You misunderstand. *I* was a slave.’

‘A Christian... a Christian slave?’

‘Yes.’

‘I have never heard of such an outrageous thing!’

The conversation was almost too much for Caldecott to take. He began hyperventilating and staggered out of the room.

Cochran entered, his lilac tailcoat scented with rose water.

‘I must advise you that Sir Geoffrey is prone to these attacks,’ he said solemnly. ‘They do not in general last very long. But I fear this one may last longer than most.’

Ten minutes later, Caldecott emerged. He was ashen-grey, and looked as if he had suffered a heart attack. He slouched in a chinoiserie chair beside the window, his stout form overflowing the sides.

‘Tell me, Mr. Adams, why should I believe your assertion?’

Adams looked down at the chairman.

‘I don’t care if you believe me or not.’

Fortescue stepped forward until his shadow fell over Sir Geoffrey.

‘Would it not be prudent for Mr. Adams to transcribe his recollections to paper? After all, the notes may be of assistance to your own Mr. Peddie.’

‘Our *Major* Peddie can well do without the help of an American!’ snapped Caldecott, rising to the bait.

‘But surely any information that might reduce the hazards of the party has some value?’

‘Very well, sir. We shall take your statement for the record.’

‘I should like to help,’ replied Adams, ‘but I have to return to Hudson.’

‘That is not possible as you are aware,’ Fortescue broke in, ‘not until the naval blockade is at an end.’

Adams dug a hand into his pocket, allowing his fingertips to caress the lace handkerchief.

‘I have, sir, come to realise that *nothing* is impossible,’ he said.

‘Write us a full and detailed account of your reminiscences, Mr. Adams, and we shall afford you a passage back to America when the conflict is at an end. Cochran, fetch a quill and a ream of paper.’

‘I am sorry,’ Adams replied quickly, ‘but writing my tale *will* be impossible.’

Fortescue looked at him with surprise.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes, very sure.’

‘May I enquire why?’

‘A difficulty prevents me. You see...’

‘See what?’

‘You see I can’t read or write.’

Fortescue broke into a smile. Stuck in the chair, Caldecott waved a hand at his assistant.

‘Mr. Cochran, as it seems as though inadequate American schooling has left Mr. Adams deficient in the art of literacy, you are to commit his narration to paper.’

‘Very good, Sir Geoffrey.’ It was a standard reply Cochran gave to any demand Caldecott made on him.

‘Tell me, Mr. Adams, where are you lodging?’

‘He is staying with me at Camelford House.’

‘Under the circumstances,’ said Sir Geoffrey, struggling to disengage himself from the seat, ‘I think we ought to have Mr. Adams a little closer to us. Mr. Cochran, you have ample space in your chambers, Adams will be lodging with you.’

‘Very good, Sir Geoffrey.’

THIRTEEN

16, Fleet Street
6th November 1815

My dearest cousin Beattie,

I hope that this little missive finds you in good spirits. I long to see you, and to take a walk with you in the open country. Here in London I am ensnared, unable to remove myself from duties of the Committee. From time to time, though, there are sparks of marvel, which illuminate the tediousness. One such wonder is currently sharing my chambers. His name is Robert Adams. He is an American. Imagine that! An American!

I have been charged with his responsibility, and with the transcription of his curious journey through the remotest reaches of Africa. For, apparently, Mr. Adams has set foot in the holy of holies — the golden metropolis of Timbuctoo.

He arrived here last evening, after reaching the Committee, and being presented by Viscount Fortescue. He is pleasing enough. Raw, but pleasing, and quite charming to the ladies, if his effect on my landlady Mrs. Pickeriff is anything to go by. She swooned at hearing his peculiar accent, and was stirred greatly by his rugged looks.

As you may imagine, Sir G was apoplectic at learning of the

existence of such a man, especially him being an American. He maintained a brave visage in front of the Viscount, but in private he is gravely alarmed. He dares not mention it, but he has sunk the Committee's fortunes into a project which depends entirely on Major Peddie's swift success.

*I leave you, my little rose, with all my affection,
Simon*

FOURTEEN

IT HAD RAINED all night, flooding Cochran's bedroom, and causing him much anxiety. He flitted about, mopping the wet with bundles of dirty clothes, desperately excusing the wretchedness of his lodgings.

The modest apartment on Fleet Street had never been free from damp. This was due largely to the fact that the lead seals had been stripped from the roof by thieves, who had sold the metal to buy one-penny gin. Afraid of even the most modest of heights, Cochran had never summoned the courage to investigate why the roof leaked like a sieve. His landlady, aged Mrs. Pickeriff, who believed a little damp was good for the bones, refused point blank to have any money spent on the building.

The apartment consisted of three rooms — a bedroom, a small sitting room, and a boxroom. Each one was filled with clutter acquired as the consequence of an untidy life.

Despite having a well-respected godfather, Cochran had been unable to muster the connections to find him a place at the Albany on Piccadilly, where his childhood friend George Byron had recently taken rooms. He dreamt of it all the same. After all, an address at the Albany marked one as a gentleman with prospects.

As a bachelor Cochran rarely admitted anyone into his lodgings, least of all strangers. He had never even invited his beloved cousin Beattie, to whom he hoped one day to propose, when his financial circumstances were improved. Even if it had been appropriate for her to visit, he feared she would shun him after setting eyes on such monumental disorder. But, as his friend George ‘Beau’ Brummell used to say, before he absconded to the Continent, hounded by his debtors, ‘a gentleman’s quarters are for a gentleman’s eyes alone’.

The rain, which had subsided a little after eight o’clock, had warmed the air. The skies had cleared, and there was a balmy freshness, something London had not enjoyed for weeks.

As soon as he woke, Cochran pulled on his breeches, and coaxed Adams from his deep, childlike slumber.

‘We will be late, Mr. Adams,’ he said, ‘and Sir Geoffrey’s fragile disposition doesn’t take kindly to tardiness.’

Adams pushed his face deeper into the pillow, a tangle of blond hair washing around it like waves on the shore. He never remembered his dreams except when woken suddenly from sleep and, when woken suddenly, the dream was always the same: A woman walking through a field of winter barley, dry and undulating, ready for the scythe.

She was moving towards him, smiling, not a full smile, but a smile that hinted at something very subtle, very warm. When they were within touching distance, she held out a hand, and pressed it into his. He felt something soft, a folded lace handkerchief. Touching it to his nose, he breathed in her scent.

FIFTEEN

TEN MINUTES AFTER waking, Adams was up, washed, dressed, and ready to begin the narration of his tale.

He had little interest in helping the Committee, and certainly had no interest at all in Timbuctoo, however, the promise of a passage home was too good to pass up. So he followed Cochran down the winding staircase, and out onto the street, persuading himself to believe that the last steps of his journey were about to begin.

The two men walked through light rain from the Fleet Street lodgings to the Committee’s headquarters at Old Jewry. Cochran

had traced the same route so many times over the previous five years, he hardly noticed his feet tramping the mile distance over the cobbles. But, having arrived in the capital a week before, starving and half-naked, Robert Adams was wide-eyed at it all, the showcase of empire.

By the time they reached the Committee headquarters, it was ten minutes past ten. Glancing up at the second floor, Cochran could tell whether his superior had arrived. If he had, the window above the portico would be open an inch, just enough for the flow of damp air to cool the chairman's ever-heated brow.

Fortunately, on the morning of Adams' first narration, Caldecott and the other directors were running late as well. They had been up until the early hours celebrating Major Peddie's impending departure to the Dark Continent, gorging themselves on broiled pheasant and plum pudding, washed down with a stream of warmed Madeira wine.

SIXTEEN

SIMON COCHRAN'S STUDY was cramped, cold, and overflowing with files. There were hundreds of them, each one recording a month in the Committee's history, a history dedicated to the creation of wealth at the expense of African lands.

Half the files were concerned with the ivory trade, with indigo, and salt — cut in slabs from the dry mineral lakes of the Niger delta. The other half was related to the only business that had ever brought the Committee any real prosperity — slavery.

For almost a century, the directors had run ships from Goré Island to the Caribbean. Tens of thousands of African souls had owed their suffering to the efficiency with which the company vessels could cross the Atlantic, disinfect their holds, and race back for another shipload of freshly captured natives.

Any other man might have resented such an uncomfortable and confined space to work, but Simon Cochran liked his room very much indeed. Most of all, he enjoyed the view out over Frederick's Place, even though much of it was obscured by a tall plane tree. When he was not stoking the fire, or staring out at the tree, he was daydreaming of escape, and of the life he hoped one day to share with his cousin Beattie.

As for actual work, there was very little of that. Cochran's chief daily activity was to stay out of Sir Geoffrey's way. On the rare occasions that their paths crossed, he did all he could to calm the chairman's inflamed temper.

Over the generations, the Committee's work had been finely tuned. Its ships would ply back and forth from Africa to the Americas according to a strict rota. Payments arising from

the cargoes would be made through a series of intermediaries in Newfoundland and in the Caribbean. The arrangement had been devised in an effort to mask the source of the wealth, frowned upon since the Abolition Act was signed nine years before.

The funds gained from sale of healthy natives would be passed through the accounts of a cotton plantation on Hispaniola, which in turn paid the bulk to a company of fur traders in Labrador. They submitted the balance less their commission to the Committee's account at Hoare's Bank, at the sign of the golden bottle on Fleet Street.

Every Friday afternoon Caldecott would ride down to the bank in his barouche, take a glass of sweet sherry with the partners, and return to Old Jewry, a plump purse of guineas tucked under his cloak.

Each week the senior partner at Hoare's struggled a little harder than the week before to encourage Sir Geoffrey to accept bank notes rather than gold. After all, the Peninsular War had put bullion in short supply.

A stickler for what he knew and trusted, Caldecott scoffed at the thought of paper currency. The preoccupation with gold was the habit of a lifetime, one he was not yet willing to forgo.

SEVENTEEN

*Chavenage Hall
12th November 1815*

Dear Simon,

I do hope the cold is not too terrible down in London. Up here, the frost has been thicker than at any other year I can remember. The plants are frozen, brittle like glass. This morning I went for a long walk through the grounds of Chavenage, and felt myself in sorrow for the gentle creatures who make their homes in the gardens and down near the lake.

I found your information regarding the American quite alluring! Simon, you live such an exotic life, one filled with captivating people and circumstance. I have asked mother time and again to allow me to spend a little of the winter season in town. She says the journey is far too precarious for a young woman, and that I should be spoilt by the meanness of London society.

I bothered her all morning on the subject, and well into the afternoon. Then, an hour ago, at teatime, she expressed a reluctant agreement, that is, if a suitable chaperone could be found. I do believe her mind was changed by her wish to set eyes upon the London home of our new neighbour, Mr. Wittershall. An invitation there may be

the excuse I have been waiting for so ardently these past months.

*Affectionately yours,
Beattie*

EIGHTEEN

RELIEVED TO HAVE some real work at last, Cochran was looking forward to taking down the narration of Adams' tale. Since childhood he had prided himself on the form and consistency of his script, a skill that had won him a class prize at Charterhouse when he was twelve.

He opened a slim drawer in the mahogany bureau, withdrew a new swan-feather quill, and inspected the nib.

'I shall be ready in a moment, Mr. Adams,' he said, angling the end to give a sharper writing edge.

Robert Adams took a seat beside the window and stared out at the grey. He was dreaming of the barley again.

'I do believe your thoughts are on the Dark Continent, Mr. Adams,' said Cochran, slipping away the knife.

'No, not Africa. My mind is a world away, on a little home across the fields.'

'Your family?'

'My wife...'

'You are married, sir?' said Cochran, flexing his rounded shoulders straight.

'Yes I am.'

Taking a seat at the desk, placing a sheet of foolscap squarely before him, Cochran dipped his quill.

'I am at your service, Mr. Adams.'

'Where should I begin?'

'Perhaps we ought to start at the moment your life deviated away from the course it had known.'

Adams looked hard at the plane tree, his eyes taking in the mottled detailing of the trunk.

'Hudson is a whaling port, up river from New York,' he began in a slow and deliberate voice. 'It was chartered thirty years ago, and is as idyllic as any place I have ever imagined. In the spring the meadows are ablaze with colour, the air scented with the perfume of peonies; and in the fall the trees are every shade of brown, the floor beneath them a patchwork of gold.'

'It was there that I was born and raised. My father was a sail-maker, and my mother a seamstress, that is until she succumbed to consumption in the winter of 1801. We lived in a house my father built with his own hands, perched at the edge of the beech forest. To the east across a sea of barley lay Hudson and, to the west, a

small but profitable ordnance factory where I found work.

‘Its owner, Mr. Ferguson, was an arrogant man who treated his employees with contempt. In his view a young man without the knowledge to read or to write was a disgrace, unfit to call themselves a citizen, as low as a hog in a sty.

‘During the three years I toiled making black powder for Mr. Ferguson, I became acquainted with his daughter, Christina, or rather, I became reacquainted. We had met as children at a Spring Fair. Something had drawn us together even then. In the long shadows of the Hudson afternoon we had held hands, and she had pressed her lips to my cheek. As her mother pulled us apart, I swore aloud that one day she would be my wife.

‘Unlike her father, who was aggressive and pompous, Christina was mild-mannered, gentle, and possessed a kindness that touched everyone she met. Over the months I would do anything in my power to catch a glimpse of her, but I was uncomfortable for her to see me in such a wretched state.

‘One evening in late spring she visited the factory, and found me covered in filth, filling cartridges. When I apologised for my appearance, she broke into laughter. I asked if she remembered me. Smiling, she said: “I am still waiting for your proposal, Robert Adams.”’

Rising to his feet, the American stepped over to the fire, and

stared at himself in the smoked sheet of glass hanging above the mantel. He took in the scar on his left eye and touched a fingertip to his mouth.

‘My family may not have been blessed with wealth,’ he said distantly, ‘but I was raised to understand right from wrong, and was taught that, by perseverance, even the most far-fetched dream can and will come true.

‘Over the weeks I found various opportunities to meet Christina again. She was shy, reserved at first, yet with a smile so warm it would have melted even the most frozen heart. I promised her again and again that I would do good, and we would have a life together. And, with time, we found that we had much in common — most of all a yearning to escape, to make something of our lives.

‘By the end of the summer we had fallen in love, although we kept this from both our families. Christina greatly feared telling her father. She said he would slay me, and that he had killed before. Having worked for the man for three years, I believed her. He was a tyrant. I had once seen him whip a man to within a hair’s breadth of life.

‘Then one afternoon we met in secret as usual, under a beech tree at the edge of the barley fields. Christina’s face seemed taut with worry. She held me close, whispered that her father had discovered our romance. He was hunting me even then, she said. I couldn’t

understand how such a swine had raised such a gentle young woman.

‘So I fell to my knee and I proposed. “I may not be rich,” I said, “but my hands are honest, and my heart God-fearing. If you accept I shall strive every moment to bring you the happiness you deserve.” To my joy, she accepted. We went straight to the church on Union Street, where the pastor married us.

‘We planned to quit Hudson in secret the next day, and head south to New York, where I hoped to get work at an ordnance factory near Wall Street. I begged Christina to leave with me that night. But she resisted, declaring it to be too dangerous. Instead, she returned home to pack clothes and her savings. She promised we’d flee together at dawn.

‘We kissed, pledged our unflinching love for each other, and Christina turned to walk up the hill to her father’s mansion. As she stepped away, I asked how I would endure the twelve hours without her. She smiled, leant forward and kissed my cheek, just as she had done at the Spring Fair all those years before. Then, pulling a lace handkerchief from the wrist of her dress, she passed it to me. “Let this be your memento of me,” she said.

‘I watched as the distance between us increased, the last throes of light catching the red velvet sash on her dress. Just before she was out of sight, she turned, and we glanced at each other. I touched the handkerchief to my nostrils, breathed in its scent,

and wondered how I could ever withstand twelve hours without my beloved Christina.’

Again, Adams glanced at his reflection. He drew a fingertip down the scar, then gazed out at the rain.

‘Fate is more cruel than any jailer,’ he said.

Cochran reached for another sheet and dipped his quill.

‘What was it, sir, that prevented your union?’

Robert Adams sat down beside the window again. His chest filling with the damp air, he breathed out in a sigh.

‘The evening of our wedding,’ he said, ‘I went to a tavern on Cherry Alley to celebrate. It was a moment of solitude, but one tinged with extraordinary hope. I was sitting there sipping a mug of ale when the door was near thrust from its hinges.

‘Mr. Ferguson was standing silhouetted in the frame. He scanned the room. A moment later he was towering over me, his henchmen huddled behind like spectres of death.

“Touch my daughter and Oscar here will cleave off your hands,” he yelled.

‘I stood up, my courage buoyed by drink. I am never one to shirk from injustice, and I would never class myself a coward.

“Christina and I were married this afternoon,” I exclaimed. Before I could utter another word, a fist smashed my jaw and I was knocked out cold. My last memory of America is of Ferguson’s face

before me, flushed with rage.’

Cochran looked up from the sheet, dipped the goose-feather quill again and touched the nib to the rim of the crystal inkwell.

‘I am not sure that I understand you, sir,’ he said.

Adams turned to face him. He swallowed hard.

‘The next thing I knew, I was locked in the hold of a ship, timbers creaking, rasping, groaning. I shouted out over the noise but no one heard me or, if they did, they took no notice of my cries.

‘The darkness was illuminated by shafts of light streaming in from the deck. Over the first hours I struggled to get an accurate idea of the cargo. The hold was piled with Bibles and black powder, and was alive with a multitude of rats. I managed to find somehardtack and enough water to keep alive. I was in there four days before I smelled the salt.’

‘Salt?’

‘The ocean air. There’s no smell like it in all the world. Mr. Ferguson had solved the problem of his unwanted son-in-law with an enforced voyage. The ship had sailed gently enough down the Hudson River, but the instant it pushed out into the Atlantic swell, it began to heave and shudder as if the end of the world were about to greet it.’

Adams ran the tip of his tongue over his upper lip.

‘After five days the hatch was knocked back, and the rats and

I were blinded by the sunlight flooding in. A bucket of freezing Atlantic water was hurled down.’

“‘Where am I?’ I yelled.

“‘On the high seas,’ called a voice.

“‘Bound for where?’”

“‘For African shores.’”