



1

Ships in the Night

On a moonless night in high summer, a small boat lay drifting in the English Channel, rising and falling slowly on the long, low swells. A single man sat on the rowing bench, hands resting on the oars. The boat, its oarlocks stuffed with rags to stifle their sound, was almost silent as it glided over the black water. Every so often he dug the oars into the water and rowed a few strokes, keeping the boat on station against the current. Mostly, though, the man simply sat, and waited.

The night sky was clear and beautiful. Stars flamed in their thousands, flickering against the deep blue of midnight. In their midst the Milky Way glowed like the vault of heaven, arching from horizon to horizon. There was no other light save for the faint spark of Dungeness lighthouse, shining four miles to the south. A light wind blew gently from the north, rippling the surface of the water.

The man in the boat paid no attention to the stars. He sat staring east, listening and watching, his attention focused on the dark sea. *They must come soon*, he thought. In a few hours, dawn would arrive, and the cloak of night that hid him and his boat would be dispelled.

In the shadows to the east there was a flicker of movement. The man stirred. He pulled a small spyglass from his coat pocket, raised it to his eye and focused. There, black against the blackness, was a small ship, a cutter creeping along under a single jib. The man puffed out his cheeks and exhaled with relief. *About bloody time*, he thought.





The cutter drew closer. The man in the boat cupped his hands and gave a soft hail. 'Finny! Say voo?'

A moment, and then a voice sounded low over the water from the ship. '*C'est moi, bien sûr. Où êtes-vous?*'

'Heave to. I'll come to you.' He dug in the oars again. A few minutes later the smaller boat was alongside the cutter, hulls bumping together in the long swells.

'Yorkshire Tom,' said a shadowy figure in the cutter. He spoke good English, though with a rasping north French accent. 'It is good to see you, my friend. All is well?'

'All quiet, Finny. Are we on?'

'As agreed, in two days' time. We'll come a little before high tide, as usual. Here are the manifests.'

An oilcloth packet was passed over. Inside it, the man called Yorkshire Tom knew, were lists of the consignments that would be smuggled across the Channel: tubs of gin, casks and bottles of brandy, bolts of silk and lace, chests of tobacco – comforts and luxuries that were heavily taxed in England.

'You have the downpayment, of course,' Finny added.

Yorkshire Tom reached into the boat and pulled out a heavy canvas bag that clinked a little. 'Twenty per cent,' he said, handing the bag across to the cutter, where eager hands grasped it. 'Rest to follow on receipt of the goods.'

'*Bon.* I will inform Le Passeur. The location is the same? St Mary's Bay?'

'Yes. Look for the usual signals.'

'And the Preventive men?'

'The revenue cruiser went down the Channel yesterday. She'll be down Brighton way until next week. We've arranged a distraction for the land guard, but if they do come near us, Clubber will have enough men to deal with them.'

'Then all is well.'





Yorkshire Tom nodded in the dark. 'Le Passeur will be in charge of the boats. What about Bertrand? Will he be there?'

The man called Finny chuckled. 'Bertrand does not want to see you. Does he still owe you the money?'

'He does,' said Yorkshire Tom.

Finny chuckled again. All the smuggling communities on both sides of the Channel knew that Bertrand owed this debt, and why.

'I saw Bertrand's lugger this evening,' said Finny, conversationally. 'He set out from Wimereux just after sunset, shaping a course west. On that heading, I reckon he was making for Dungeness.'

Yorkshire Tom swore. 'What's that blasted lubber up to now?'

'I have no idea. We do not see each other socially,' Finny was from Ambleteuse, while Bertrand was from Wimereux; the French smugglers, just like the English ones, had their local rivalries.

'I must go,' said the Frenchman. 'It will be light soon. *Au revoir*, Tom.'

The man in the boat waved and dug in his oars, pulling away from the cutter. Dim in the darkness he saw her mainsail run up, and then another jib, before she turned, gathering speed, and vanished into the night.

Yorkshire Tom, who also answered to the name of Joshua Stemp, rested on his oars for a moment, thinking about the man called Bertrand. Six months ago, he had helped the Frenchman escape from an English gaol and recover his ship. The price for this had been clearly agreed; but since then, Bertrand had been elusive.

'Dungeness,' Stemp muttered to himself. 'What would that daft French bugger be doing down at Dungeness?' If Bertrand had a new English business partner, Stemp wanted to know who



it was. He dug in the oars again and bent his back, turning the boat south and rowing steadily across the quiet, rolling sea.

High above, the stars shimmered in their cold, distant glory. The coast of Romney Marsh lay low to his left; he could just make out the tall tower of New Romney church, dark against the starlight. From time to time he stopped and turned to scan the sea ahead through his spyglass.

An hour passed. The gleam of Dungeness lighthouse was brighter now. Dawn must not be far away. Stemp drew in his oars and turned to look ahead once more, letting the boat drift on the gentle sea. Through the glass he could see a shadow against the stars; a dark rectangle, the lugsail of a ship perhaps half a mile away, crawling over the sea in the light breeze. He stared hard at the sail.

That was not Bertrand's ship. In fact, he was quite certain he had never seen that particular rig before.

Even as he watched, a light flashed from the ship's deck, a lantern briefly uncovered and then covered again. The signal was repeated. Stemp strained his eyes looking for an answering signal from the shore; he saw none. But the ship's captain must have been satisfied, for the sail came down. The lugger drifted on the current now, her bare masts and yards dark lines against the faint sky. Cautiously, Stemp dipped his oars and rowed a little closer.

A new sound came to his ears; the creak and splash of oars from another boat, rowing out from shore. Again Stemp peered through the spyglass, watching a silhouette emerge from the night. He studied the other boat, and then went still. All the boats along this coast were of the same design, with high thwarts and pointed prows, but every one was built by hand and each had its own unique character.

This particular boat belonged to man called Noakes, a boatman from Hythe. Like Stemp himself, Noakes was a smuggler; but even in that unruly fraternity, he was regarded as a violent and dangerous man. Stemp suspected him of killing at least three men. He focused his spyglass on the man at the oars. *There: that bulky shape, driving the boat over the water with powerful strokes; that surely is Noakes himself.* Instinctively, like a man trying to ward off danger, Stemp crouched lower in the darkness.

The boat moved up alongside the lugger. Voices called quiet greetings. Stemp continued to study the ship. She was broad in the beam, and judging by the way she rolled on the swells, of shallow draught. From the rake of her masts and the angle of her yards, he was certain she was not French. *Dutch, perhaps?* he wondered. He had seen ships out of Rotterdam in the past, and they looked a little like this.

He looked again. There were gaps in her bulwarks too; gun ports. This ship carried cannon.

Something was lowered carefully into Noakes's boat, something long and apparently heavy. In the darkness, Stemp could not see clearly what it was. He watched the silhouettes of the men on deck, talking and gesturing to Noakes. Then the lugger hoisted her sails and turned away east, sailing close to the light wind. Noakes watched her go for a moment, and then began to row again, heading straight back to shore.

Cautiously, keeping to a parallel course, Stemp followed. They were not far from Dungeness now, no more than half a mile, the lighthouse a stone finger rising from the empty wastes around it. And now the night was fading. In the east, pink streaks began to flush the sky, the waves below reflecting patterns of rippling pale and shadow.



Fog began to rise feather-white from the water. In minutes the sunrise and the coast were both out of sight. The lighthouse vanished. Visibility fell to perhaps twenty or thirty yards. Cold and clammy, the fog settled on Stemp. Sweating though he was from his exertions, he still felt the chill bite into him. A gull mewed, its cry muffled in the thick air.

Up ahead more gulls were wailing. Something had disturbed them; Noakes, perhaps, landing his boat. Stemp turned towards the direction of the sound and rowed on, slowly, straining his ears. Now he could hear the sea against the invisible shore, waves breaking with a soft thump, foam hissing on the beach, then the rattle of stones as the receding waves dragged the shingle after them.

Ta-whoom . . . sheeeee . . . ratta-ratta-ratta-ratta

Ta-whoom . . . sheeeee . . . ratta-ratta-ratta-ratta

The beach loomed out of the mist, a steep bank of shingle in front of him. Stemp ran his boat ashore with a grate of keel on stones and climbed out, dragging the boat up onto the beach. His boots crunched with every step. The fog hung like a grey cloak, hiding everything. Still the sea hissed and rattled.

Ta-whoom . . . sheeeee . . . ratta-ratta-ratta-ratta

Ee-ow! Ow! Ow! Ow! Something hurtled, shrieking, out of the mist and nearly hit Stemp's head before veering off sharply, still wailing in alarm. Stemp started violently, reaching for his knife, before realising it was a gull, lost in the fog like himself. He cursed, then stood working out what to do next.

He thought Noakes might have landed a little way to his left. Slowly, with deliberate steps, he set off down the beach. The wind rose at his back and sent ghostly shapes of fog spinning around him, clutching at him. His heart thudded hard in his chest. He was sweating and cold. The fog reeked of the sea, filling his nostrils. The clumps of sea kale that grew out of the shingle were



black in the dull light. *Crunch, crunch, crunch* went his boots, and the sea continued its hissing rhythm, sinister in the fog.

Ta-whoom . . . sheeeee . . . ratta-ratta-ratta-ratta

A dark shape in the fog ahead, a low lump on the beach. Stemp crouched down, drawing his knife. A gull cried mournfully overhead, setting his stretched nerves still further on edge. He wiped the water from his face and moved forward, crunching. The outlines of the dark shape hardened and he saw Noakes's boat, deserted. Indentations in the shingle showed that the boat's owner had climbed the beach and disappeared inland. Stemp waited for several minutes, listening for any sound of Noakes's return, but beyond the sea and the nerve-shredding cries of the gulls, all was silent.

He walked forward to the boat. He listened again for a moment, then stooped and drew back the canvas cover.

Lying in the bottom of the boat was a coffin.

Tingling with tension, Stemp studied it. The coffin was plain, of dark wood with carrying handles on either side. The lid was securely nailed down, either to protect the body inside or, more likely, to prevent the smells of corruption from escaping. It had been a little damaged; splinters had been knocked out of one corner. *Whose body was inside?* he wondered. *Where did it come from?*

Stemp was not a superstitious man, and the proximity of a corpse would not normally concern him. He had seen the dead before, many times. But here on this lonely fogbound beach, with the sea hissing and rattling and the dark sea kale glowing like devil's eyes against the pale shingle, the hair stood up on the nape of his neck. He drew the cover back over the boat, concealing the coffin, and backed away. His hands were shaking. He no longer cared who the body in the boat was. He only wanted to get away from this place before he was spotted.



Too late. *Crunch, crunch, crunch* came to his ears. Invisible overhead, a gull screamed a warning.

Panicked, Stemp turned and ran back towards his boat; but the thing pursuing him ran faster still, drawing closer and closer, the rattle of shingle louder and louder. Cornered, he wheeled, knife in hand, and out of the fog came an immense shape, its size magnified by the dim light, bounding on four legs across the shingle. It was a mastiff, a huge one, black fur matted with damp, jaws dripping long strings of slaver. When it saw him it skidded to a halt and then stalked forward slowly, hackles raised, eyes mad with violence, growling deep in its throat. Then the dog threw up its head and barked loudly, twice.

Stemp cursed. He stepped backwards, still facing the dog, waiting for it to attack. One leap and it would throw him backwards and pin him, then rip out his throat. More running steps; the dog's master coming in response to its call. Stemp continued to back away, his eyes never leaving the dog, until he bumped against his own boat.

Crunch, crunch, crunch. The running footsteps were only a few yards away. Still watching the dog, Stemp heaved his boat into the water, then scrambled in over the thwarts. The mastiff rushed after him, teeth bared and ready for the kill. Stemp stood up in the boat, an oar in his hand. He flailed at the dog, then pushed the oar against the shingle to drive the boat into deeper water. Balked, the mastiff raged at him, dancing up and down the line of the water, snarling and barking. After him out of the drifting fog came a big man with lank, greasydark hair, carrying a knife of his own. His seamed face and broken nose were dark with rage.

'*Yorkshire Tom!* Get back here, you bastard!'

'Go to hell, Noakes,' said Stemp, breathing hard.



Noakes roared at him, baring yellow, gapped teeth. 'What're you doing down here? This ain't your patch!'

'No more is it yours.' Stemp sat down on the bench, slammed the oars into their locks and dug into the water, pulling hard.

'Get back here, I say! Get back here!' The boat was carried further from the beach and Noakes snarled. 'Nah, that's it! Run away, you bloody coward!'

Stemp gritted his teeth and pulled on the oars again.

'I'm coming after you, Tom!' Noakes shouted, slashing the air with his knife. 'I'll finish you, by God I will! I'll cut your heart out, you son of a whore!'

'Go bugger yourself,' said Stemp. It was not the most original insult, but it was all he had energy for. Then the fog swirled again and the beach was hidden from view, and all he could hear was the complaint of the gulls and the mad snarl of the dog. Weary with relief, he turned the boat north towards home.



2

Magpie Court

Clouds scudded across the sky, flinging the odd splatter of showery rain against the windows of the rectory of St Mary in the Marsh. Between the showers, the sun shone brightly off the bridle of the horse waiting patiently outside the door. Inside, much less patiently, the Reverend Marcus Aurelius Hardcastle, rector of St Mary, shouted once more for his sister to come downstairs – as quickly as may be, if you please! – so they could finally depart.

At last Calpurnia Vane came wafting down the stairs, smelling of violets, dressed as if for a London salon and trailing scarves. ‘You had best take a coat,’ the rector said. ‘Those scarves won’t keep out the rain when it comes. And it will.’

‘Oh Marcus, don’t be such a bear.’ A widow, Calpurnia had moved into the rectory last year, ostensibly to find a more congenial atmosphere in which to write, but in reality, the rector believed, to annoy him.

‘You will enjoy the party once you are there,’ she said firmly. ‘You know you love music. No, no, Rodolpho, you cannot come with us.’

This last remark was aimed at a very large, very shaggy wolfhound who was making ready to jump into the dog cart. Hardcastle thought seriously of offering up his place to the dog, then with weary resignation, handed his sister up to the seat and climbed up beside her, taking the reins.

They travelled the ten miles from St Mary up to Shadoxhurst, above Romney Marsh in the rolling woodlands near Ashford. Hardcastle drove as quickly as the horse and his own skills



would allow, trying to block out the sound of Calpurnia's voice as she discussed the private lives of most of those coming to the party, before turning to how she would work them into the plot of her next novel. Just before reaching the village, they turned onto a short avenue and came finally to their destination.

Magpie Court had been built five centuries ago, and added to progressively ever since. As a result, the house was a cheerful jumble of stone, brick and half-timber, with spiral chimneys and tall windows. A range of barns ran to one side, balanced by a walled garden on the other. A big, solidly built man with a pleasant smiling face in a blue coat, fawn breeches and a flamboyant red and gold brocade waistcoat came out of the house and bowed in greeting.

'Reverend, how very good of you to come. And Mrs Vane, what a pleasure it is to welcome you.'

'The pleasure is entirely ours, Mr Munro,' said Hardcastle. Annoyingly, Calpurnia was right; he was starting to look forward to this evening. The owner of Magpie Court, Frederick Maudsley, the local justice of the peace, was an old friend; most years, Hardcastle came to stay for a few days in winter for the shooting. Hector Munro was his son-in-law. 'And how is the birthday girl?'

Before Munro could answer, there came the sound of hooves and wheels travelling fast, and an elegant little gig came racing up the drive towards the house. Hardcastle did not need to look at the gig to know that the driver was a woman, or that the groom sitting on the bench beside her was white-faced and clinging on for dear life.

The gig pulled up beside them, the house grooms coming to take both horses and rigs. 'Welcome, Mrs Chaytor,' said Munro to the driver. 'I say, that's a splendid little mare you have there. Does she run?'

‘No,’ said Mrs Chaytor, the driver of the gig, smiling and patting the horse on the flank. ‘She flies. She is called Asia; I bought her last month in Tenterden. I am very proud of her.’

‘And you are now more likely than ever to break your neck in a driving accident,’ the rector said to her. He and Mrs Chaytor were near neighbours in St Mary, and friends. She smiled at him, and then took the arm Munro offered as they passed into the house. Hardcastle and Calpurnia followed, he ignoring the meaningful looks cast at him by his sister.

‘I must thank you again for all your help in arranging the music for my dear wife’s birthday,’ said Munro to his companion.

‘It was nothing,’ said Mrs Chaytor. ‘The summer season always brings the best musicians out of London to escape the heat. I knew Mr Salomon and his orchestra were in Kent, and Mrs Mara too, and it was a simple matter to write to them. And it is good to do something for Cecilia, after all her kindnesses to me.’

‘And here she is,’ said Munro. ‘Now, not a word, any of you, about the music. It is a surprise.’

A small, pretty woman with a fine-featured face, plumply pregnant in a long, loose-flowing robe, came up and took Mrs Chaytor’s hands. ‘Oh, my dear Amelia! How simply splendid to see you! And Reverend Hardcastle, and Mrs Vane! My darling Hector has invited all of my dearest friends! Oh, I am quite overwhelmed.’

‘Happy birthday, my dear,’ said Hardcastle, smiling. He was very fond of Cecilia Munro; everyone was. Her husband watched her proudly. Hardcastle did not know him well, but approved of what he knew. Like his father-in-law, Maudsley, Munro was a partner in the local East Weald and Ashford Bank, and seemed solid and reliable. There was no doubt that he adored his wife.

They passed into the hall, already crowded with people. One of the oldest parts of the building, it was normally rather gloomy, but today it was bright with garlands and bunting and masses of

late-blooming flowers. Frederick Maudsley came through the press, bluff and cheerful as ever, bowing to the ladies and clapping Hardcastle on the shoulder. 'How are you, old fellow? Capital to see you, as always. Come and have a drink.'

'A small glass,' said Hardcastle.

Maudsley turned to look for a servant. Calpurnia had already been swallowed up by a little group of women, and Hardcastle could hear her talking about her latest book. He looked at Mrs Chaytor. 'It was good of you to come,' he said.

She seldom accepted social invitations of any kind, especially formal ones. 'I could not refuse her invitation,' said Mrs Chaytor. 'I spoke truly about her kindnesses. Why did you come?'

'Calpurnia insisted. It was a case of anything for a quiet life.'

She smiled. 'Hector has worked very hard,' she said. 'Most of the district seems to have turned out. Indeed, there is Edward Austen.'

'Austen?' The rector peered across the room. 'I've not seen him for ages.'

'That is unsurprising. He has a young family, an estate to run and his duties as a captain of Volunteers; I do not expect he has much time to call his own. The lady with him must be his wife. If you will forgive me, I must go and be introduced to her.'

'I don't expect she gets out much either,' the rector said.

She was right about the turnout; there were fifty people or more in the hall and drawing room, a fine testament to the regard people had for Cecilia Munro. The rain was clearing away now, and the tall windows had been opened to take advantage of the afternoon sunshine. Let us hope they remain open during the performance, Hardcastle thought; otherwise the players may have to overcome the sounds of snoring from some of the audience. Not all the company looked as if they appreciated fine music as much as their hostess did.

A servant brought him a glass of punch. Freddie Woodford, rector of Ashford and an old friend, hailed him. 'Hardcastle, old fellow! Come and join us. Gentlemen, this old reprobate you see before you is the Reverend Marcus Hardcastle, rector of St Mary and a justice of the peace in Romney Marsh.'

'Temporary justice of the peace,' Hardcastle corrected. 'I took on the post as a favour for Lord Clavertye after Fanscombe's . . . untimely departure last summer. I'm still waiting for him to find a permanent replacement.'

'You may be waiting a while,' said Woodford. 'Too good at your job, old fellow, that's the problem. Do you know everyone here? This is Cranthorpe, our solicitor in Ashford, and this young dandy is Ricardo, down from London.'

'I imagine that between the smugglers and the French spies, being a J.P. on Romney Marsh is a busy occupation,' said Ricardo. He was hardly a dandy; his dress was sober, though expensive.

'At present, the spies seem to be more numerous than the smugglers,' said Hardcastle. 'Much of my time over the past year has been spent chasing spies and rumours of spies. I fear our proximity to the French shore makes them overly bold. As for the smugglers, I leave them alone and they leave me alone.'

They all turned as Hector Munro joined them. 'Ah, here he is,' said Cranthorpe. He was a big, bluff man in his early forties, both face and paunch showing signs of high living. 'The very model of uxoriousness! Surely now, Munro, you have made a rod for the back of every husband in the district. We shall all have to work very hard to impress our own wives in future.'

The others agreed. 'Aye, that's your lookout,' said Munro in his soft Edinburgh accent. 'There's no man alive will prevent me from spoiling my dear wife if I choose. So, gentlemen, what is the news? Has anything more been heard from Lille?'

The entire county, indeed the entire country, was hanging on events in Lille across the water in France, where the British

diplomat Lord Malmesbury was meeting with French negotiators, hoping to bring the four-year war to an end. 'Do any of us think his lordship will meet with much luck in Lille?' asked Hardcastle. 'I certainly hope so. I for one should like to be able to gaze out to sea without expecting to see a French armada on the horizon.'

The stockbroker, Ricardo, responded with a wry laugh. 'Even if he returns with peace treaty in hand, the government will have to hope that the French also cease stirring up trouble in Ireland, if we are to see any real peace. The Irish and other troublemakers with revolutionary sympathies were certainly behind the mutinies in the navy last spring, at Spithead and the Nore. And all this uncertainty about French intentions is making for jitters in the market.'

'Ah, but uncertainty also makes for good profits in the market, does it not?' asked Munro, smiling. 'A financial genius such as yourself should look on these events as an opportunity.'

Ricardo bowed. 'Those who have the right contacts and sources of news will do well, perhaps,' he said, smiling in return. 'But what of the banks? They don't like uncertainty either. They are so rattled they are issuing paper £1 banknotes instead of gold sovereigns. Is it true that your own bank has begun to do so, Munro?'

'Small-value paper money is more convenient than coin,' said Munro. 'The banks will get used to it, and so will the country. And now, Ricardo, let us stop boring my guests with talk of banking. Is anyone going to the races at Canterbury next week?'

'Austen. Very good to see you. And you too, Mrs Austen.' Tall and aristocratic, wiggled and elegant in a fashionably cut coat and breeches, the speaker bowed.

'Mr Faversham,' said Edward Austen. He was a tall man in his late twenties, with a cheerful face and an air of reliability.

His voice was not exactly full of enthusiasm. The three of them, Austen, his wife Elizabeth and Mrs Chaytor, had been having a cosy chat about the time, years ago, when Austen had called on Mrs Chaytor and her husband in Paris. Mrs Chaytor had been recounting some of his exploits that summer, to the amusement of his wife.

'May I present Mrs Chaytor, from St Mary in the Marsh?' said Austen.

'Charles Faversham,' said the other man, bowing again. He had an affected voice of a kind Mrs Chaytor knew well, and disliked; his name came out as *Chawles Fevashem*. 'An honour to meet you, ma'am. May I present my wife, Anne? My son Grebell; my daughter Charlotte. And this is Mr Stone, from London.'

'And what do you do in London, Mr Stone?' asked Mrs Austen.

'I am a banker, ma'am, with Martin, Stone and Foote,' said Stone. He was young and keen, very smartly dressed. The same could not be said for Grebell Faversham; he had red hair and slightly protuberant brown eyes, and wore a purple brocade coat that Mrs Chaytor thought one of the most vulgar things she had seen in some time.

'I very much fear, ladies, that you have fallen among bankers,' said Faversham, smiling. 'I too am in the profession, as is my son.'

'I would expect little else in Mr Maudsley's house, when both he and his son-in-law are also bankers,' said Mrs Chaytor, smiling in return. 'And on the subject of money, how is the Restriction Act affecting your business?'

There was a short silence as the men reacted to her question. Charles Faversham blinked; his son simply stared at her. George Stone recovered first.

'We are managing to work within the confines of the new laws,' he said. 'We trust that the restriction will not be of prolonged duration.'

‘For your sake, gentlemen, I hope so. The currency is no longer backed by gold. This must be affecting confidence, in the markets and among the populace.’

‘Oh, indeed, ma’am,’ said Charles Faversham. ‘But these little ups and downs are all part of the everyday world of business for we men of money. The modern bank is designed to withstand such vagaries. You may be assured that the banks will weather this storm, as they have weathered many others.’

‘Truly it is remarkable to find a lady such as yourself interested in business and banking,’ said Grebell. He was still staring at her. He was in his mid-twenties, only a half-dozen years her junior, but he seemed younger.

‘Perhaps your husband or father was in banking?’ he asked.

‘No,’ Mrs Chaytor said. ‘But I do think it desirable to understand the institutions who control our money. You hold the future prosperity of your clients in your hands.’

Grebell looked at her even more intently. His father had turned away and was talking to Austen; his mother was chatting with Mrs Austen about her latest baby. ‘You are right,’ the young man said. ‘Ma’am, I feel sure that your opinions on such matters would be valuable to a man of business such as myself. Would you be so kind as to allow me –’

He got no further before he was interrupted by his sister, an effervescent young woman with red hair and sparkling eyes and what seemed to be an extraordinary number of teeth. Mrs Chaytor got the impression that she was used to interrupting her older brother. ‘Oh, ma’am, you come from St Mary in the Marsh; do you know the famous authoress, Cordelia Hartbourne?’

This was Calpurnia Vane’s nom de plume. ‘I know her very well,’ said Mrs Chaytor. ‘Indeed, she is here tonight.’

‘Oh, Mrs Chaytor! I simply adore her books. I would be so honoured if you felt able to introduce me to her.’

Mrs Chaytor smiled. 'I should be delighted to do so. But perhaps at the interval? I see the musicians are coming in.'

The musicians were indeed coming in, a dozen of them led by Johann Peter Salomon, the doyen of orchestral conductors in London, and with them a tall woman in a dark gown and headdress of swan's feathers, the renowned German soprano Elisabeth Mara. Silence fell around the room. Cecilia Munro sat in a chair, her eyes enormous and round with astonishment, one hand resting on her belly, the other clapped to her open mouth.

Hector Munro came to stand beside her, smiling down at her. 'My dear wife is aptly named,' he said. 'Cecilia, the patron saint of music, has clearly touched her, for music is her great love . . . though I very much hope that I can at least claim second place in her affections,' he added, to laughter in the room. 'As you know, in her condition she cannot travel to hear the music she loves. So, with the aid of a few affectionate friends,' and his eye fell on Mrs Chaytor, 'we have brought the music to her.'

Applause, and Salomon lifted his baton and the music began. They played Handel and Purcell and Arne, the music flowing like a soft river through the room, sweeping them all along. Hardcastle's fears were unfounded; country solicitors and clerks and yeomen and their wives the guests might mostly be, but they sat straight in their chairs and listened, absorbed. And when Elisabeth Mara sang, in a voice of pure liquid gold, holding each note and letting it sigh into the flower-scented air, they held their breath. The applause at the interval was rapturous.

Outside the light was dimming a little; the servants were lighting candles, and little sparkling points of flame blossomed among the flowers around the room. Nervous and excited, Miss Charlotte Faversham was duly introduced to her heroine.

Mrs Chaytor left Charlotte and Calpurnia to talk of the delights of the gothic novel, and moved to join Hardcastle beside the terrace doors.

There was another man with him. 'Mrs Chaytor, may I present to you Mr Ricardo, from London?'

'Your servant, ma'am.' Ricardo bowed gracefully. He was a likeable young man, immensely self-possessed in a way that young Mr Faversham could only dream of, she thought. This one has confidence; the other merely has bumptiousness.

'And how was London when you left, Mr Ricardo?'

'Hot and humid, ma'am. My wife and I were grateful for the excuse to leave.'

'Are you staying with Mr Maudsley?' asked Hardcastle.

'No; with relations of my wife, who have a house near Canterbury. And yourself, Mrs Chaytor?'

'I live close by, in Romney Marsh. I am one of Reverend Hardcastle's parishioners. What is your connection with the Munros, Mr Ricardo?'

'I've known Mr Munro for some time, since before he came down from Edinburgh. And the East Weald and Ashford Bank have recently become one of my clients. Thanks to Mr Munro, I have been appointed the bank's stockbroker.'

'Oh,' said Mrs Chaytor. She peered at him. 'You don't much look like a stockbroker.'

'You mean, I don't have port wine cheeks and a chequered waistcoat?' said Ricardo, smiling. 'Perhaps with time these things will come to me, but I am relatively new to the business.'

'Then you must have considerable skill,' observed Hardcastle. 'The bank is unlikely to have entrusted you with its affairs, unless it was certain of your abilities.'

Ricardo bowed. 'You are kind, sir. I have some years of experience working with my father; I meant to say that I have only

recently struck out on my own. But I am sure neither of you is remotely interested in talking about finance.'

'You would be surprised to learn what interests Reverend Hardcastle,' said Mrs Chaytor. 'And how do you find the East Weald and Ashford Bank? Are they not a little provincial, after the excitement and hurly-burly of the City?'

'I don't mind provincial things,' said Ricardo. 'I actually quite like the quiet life.' He paused for a moment. 'Tell me, if you will. Are either of you clients of the East Weald and Ashford?'

'No, not I,' said Hardcastle. 'I bank with Hoare's.'

'So do we all,' said Mrs Chaytor, 'but very few of us ever realise it.'

Both men looked at her. She smiled benignly back. 'My affairs also are in London. Why do you ask, Mr Ricardo?'

'It is of no great matter,' said Ricardo, still looking at her wryly. 'I was merely curious to meet some clients of my clients, if you take my meaning. It is of no account. What do you make of the music? I must say, Madame Mara is in fine voice this evening.'

Dr Mackay, physician of New Romney, made his way through the press of people looking for interval refreshment. Conversation and laughter washed around him in the candlelight. He scanned the crowd, looking for the one person who mattered to him.

He found her, for once on her own, by the windows where the soft evening air flowed in from the terrace. 'Good evening to you, Mrs Vane,' he said in his soft Scots accent, bowing.

'Why, good evening, doctor! I have been having such a delightful talk with young Miss Faversham. So wonderful to meet one's readers, and know that one has touched their lives. This is a very pleasant soirée, is it not? Such a fine house, and such distinguished company.'

'And the music is splendid,' said the doctor.

‘Oh, it is simply heavenly. Mr Salomon’s orchestra is reputed to be the finest in London.’

‘They are living up to their reputation,’ agreed the doctor. He hesitated for a moment. ‘May I be so bold as to congratulate you, ma’am, on the success of your latest novel? I am told *The Lighthouse of Vavassal* has become the most talked-about book in Town.’

Calpurnia beamed at him. ‘Dear doctor, you are too kind. My little tale has been fortunate to enjoy some modest success. It has not quite achieved the fame of my first book, *Rodolpho, A Tale of Love and Liberty*, but nevertheless, I am pleased. Have you read it?’

Mackay flushed. ‘I . . . I confess I have not. I’m not really a –’

‘Then I shall send you a copy as soon as I return home. Inscribed to you personally, of course. And you must tell me what you think of it.’

The doctor bowed. ‘And are you writing another novel, ma’am?’

‘Why, yes. It is to be called *The Cardinal’s Jewels*. It is a tale of lust, greed and revenge, set in Rome. There is a great deal of popery in it, but I trust my readers will understand that with any story set in Rome, popery is something of a necessity.’ She launched at once into a description of the plot. The doctor listened, his face a mixture of admiration and mild horror.

‘It sounds . . . fascinating,’ he said at the end. ‘You are clever, ma’am, to think of such stories.’

‘Oh, stories come naturally to me. I am a teller of tales, Dr Mackay; I am a spinner of dreams, a weaver of mysteries.’ Her hands made motions vaguely akin to spinning and weaving in the air. ‘We are alike in some ways, doctor. You deal with the physical realm, while I work in the realm of the mind; you heal the sick and make their bodies healthy and whole once again,

while I elevate their senses and stir their imaginations. But our purpose is the same.'

'You have the advantage of me, ma'am,' said the doctor after a while.

'We both make people happy, doctor,' she said, beaming at him. 'Don't you see?'

He did not see; but for the sake of that smile, he was prepared to pretend. He bowed again.

On the far side of the room, Mrs Chaytor turned to see Grebell Faversham approaching. Her heart sank. 'Good evening once more, Mrs Chaytor,' said Grebell. 'I am sure that to your sophisticated eyes our little country parties must seem simple and homely. You must be used to much greater events than this.'

'On the contrary, Mr Faversham, the music this evening has been of the highest quality. And unlike London, the room has been comfortable for all, and not so stuffy as many London soirées can be.'

'To be sure, to be sure,' said Grebell. 'I myself often find the press of people in London to be overwhelming.' He paused, his face going pink. 'But you must find Romney Marsh very empty, after London and Paris and Rome.'

He had clearly been making enquiries about her during the evening, she thought with displeasure. 'But the Marsh appears to agree with you,' he said.

'Thank you. Yes, Romney air is very wholesome. So far this year, only a few people have died of marsh fever.'

'Ah. Ah . . . yes. We are blessed in Rye. Up on our hill, we are safe from the marsh miasma. Rye is quite a delightful place. Do you know it well?'

'I know it a little.'

‘You must call on us, next time you are there,’ he said, his blush deepening. ‘I know that my mother would be delighted to receive you.’

‘Thank you, sir. You are kind.’

‘You are most welcome. Meanwhile, Mrs Chaytor, I wonder . . .’

His voice trailed off. ‘Wonder what, Mr Faversham?’ she prompted.

‘I wonder if I might be permitted to advance a small hope? Should there be dancing after, would you be willing to partner me?’

She turned her head then and looked directly at him. He is nowhere near as handsome as he would like to think he is, she thought.

‘I do not dance,’ she said.

‘Really? I cannot imagine why a lady of such grace and elegance as yourself does not dance.’

‘I have not danced since my husband died,’ she said. ‘Forgive me, sir, but I must go and thank our host and hostess for the wonderful music.’

To the rector’s relief, the music and supper had ended with no dancing. He had arranged with Mrs Chaytor to drive back together to St Mary in the Marsh, on condition that she kept Asia to an easy pace so he could keep up with her. While Mrs Chaytor and Calpurnia were making their goodbyes to Cecilia, he stepped outside to wait for the carriages to be brought round.

The long summer evening was clear, with a sky turning to deep blue. Long shadows stretched from the house across the garden. He stood still, and drank in the silence for a few moments.

The silence was broken by voices from inside the house. ‘You are still determined to go?’ he heard Maudsley ask.

‘You know I must.’ The second voice was that of Hector Munro. ‘There’s no choice.’

'I don't like this. I have never liked it, right from the beginning. There must be another way.'

'No, Frederick. We cannot carry on like this. We must find out what is happening.'

'Then send someone else. It need not be you.'

'We don't know who we can trust in this business. You know that too. If I thought I could trust anyone, I might approach Hardcastle . . . But no, I must attend to this myself.'

Unwilling to be an eavesdropper, the rector had been turning to go, but at the sound of his own name he stopped.

'I want to make sure this whole affair is kept absolutely quiet,' Munro was saying. 'And speaking of keeping things quiet, what is Stone doing here? I nearly jumped out of my skin when I saw him.'

'I invited him. It seemed the polite thing to do.'

'Are you mad? What if he learns something? My God, if the Grasshopper finds out what we're up to, there'll be hell to pay!'

'The Grasshopper won't find out. Stone is a good fellow, but he is not the most perspicacious of men. Hector, I beg you. Think of Cecilia.'

'I think of very little else.' There was a tender note in Munro's voice. 'Frederick, all will be well. Men make this journey all the time.'

'Then you are resolved,' said Maudsley. His voice had gone quiet. 'There is nothing I can say that will sway you?'

'Nothing whatever. Father-in-law, I understand your fears. Put them away. I'll not be gone for long.'

'When will you go?'

'There are a few things I must attend to first.' The two men moved away then, and their voices faded and became inaudible.