

**TOM
HOLT**

**FLYING
DUTCH**

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Also by Tom Holt](#)

[Dedication](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

FLYING DUTCH

Tom Holt



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Also by Tom Holt

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Flying Dutch

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Overtime

Here Comes the Sun

Grailblazers

Faust Among Equals

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Barking

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May Contain Traces of Magic

Blonde Bombshell

Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Sausages

Doughnut

To Malcolm

CHAPTER ONE



It's always a little startling to hear your name in a public place, and Vanderdecker froze. The beer in his glass didn't, and the froth splashed his nose. He put the glass down and listened.

'The story of the Flying Dutchman . . .' the man opposite had said. Slowly, so as not to be seen to be staring, Vanderdecker looked round. His profession had trained him to take in all the information he needed to enable him to form a judgement in one swift glance, and what he saw was a plump young man wearing a corduroy jacket and a pink shirt with a white collar. Trousers slightly too tight. Round steel-rimmed spectacles. Talking at a girl at least seven years his junior. American. Vanderdecker wasn't much taken with what he saw, but he listened anyway.

'Most people think,' said the plump young man, 'that Wagner invented the story of the Flying Dutchman. Not true.'

'Really?' said the girl.

'Absolutely,' the plump young man confirmed. 'The legend can be traced back to the early seventeenth century. My own theory is that it represents some misconstrued recollection of the Dutch fleet in the Medway.'

'Where is the Medway, exactly?' asked the girl, but the plump young man hadn't heard her. He was looking through her, as if she were a ghost, to the distant but irresistible vision of his own cleverness.

Vanderdecker knew exactly where the Medway was, and frowned. He disliked being referred to as a legend, even in his own lifetime. But the plump young man hadn't finished yet.

'The version used by Wagner - I say used, but of course the Master tailored it to his own uses - tells of a Dutch captain who once tried to double the Cape of Good Hope in the teeth of a furious gale, and swore he would accomplish the feat even if it took him all eternity.'

'You don't say,' said the girl.

'No sooner had the fateful oath left his lips,' he continued, 'when Satan heard the oath and condemned the wretched blasphemer to sail the seas until the Day of Judgement, without aim and without hope of release, until he could find a woman who would be faithful until death. Once every seven years the Devil allows him on shore to seek such a woman; and it is on one such occasion . . .'

'I always thought,' said the girl, 'that the Flying Dutchman was a steam train.'

This had the effect on the plump young man that sugar has on a full tank of petrol. He stopped talking and made a request that Vanderdecker, for his part, would have found it difficult to grant.

'Pardon me?' he asked.

'Or was that the Flying Scotsman?' said the girl, realising that the joke needed explanation before

an American could understand it. She might as well have been speaking in Latvian for all the effort she had, however, and again a moment of bewilderment the plump man started off again with the details of the Daland-Senta plot from Wagner's opera. At this point, Vanderdecker let his attention drift back to his pint of beer, for he loathed the story. He had seriously considered taking legal action when the opera was first presented, but the problems of proving who he was would have been insurmountable.

By an odd coincidence, although not even Vanderdecker was aware of it, the plump young man was Vanderdecker's great-great-great-great-great-great-grandson; the final product of a long evolutionary process which had started with a fleeting encounter with a barmaid in New England in 1674. And there was proof, if proof were needed, that the version of the story that Junior had just gone through was nothing but a pack of lies, for Vanderdecker had been off and away without waiting to see if the barmaid in question would be faithful until a mild cold, let alone death. He was younger then, of course - a stripling of one hundred and sixteen - and still obsessed with wild notions of having a good time every once in a while. Nowadays, on the rare occasions when he met them, he looked upon barmaids simply as people who were paid to sell him alcoholic beverages.

The girl looked at her watch for the third time in four minutes and said that they had better be getting along or they would be late for the curtain. Her companion said there was no hurry, he hadn't finished telling her the plot. She replied that she would just have to muddle through, somehow or other. Vanderdecker got the impression that she wasn't enjoying herself very much.

They got up and left, leaving the Flying Dutchman staring at his glass and wondering why, when so many things had remained basically the same through the centuries, the human race had chosen to muck about with beer quite so much. In his young days they slung some malt in a bucket, added some boiling water, and then went away and forgot about it for a week or so. The result of this laissez-faire attitude was incomparably preferable to the modern version, he seemed to remember - or was that just another aspect of getting old? Not that he was getting old, of course; no such luck. He looked and felt exactly the way he did in 1585 - which was more, he reflected, than you could say for Dover Castle.

Melancholy reflections on the subject of beer led him to even more melancholy reflections concerning the great web of being, and in particular his part in it, which had been so much more protracted than anybody else's. Not more significant, to the best of his knowledge. His role in history was rather like that of lettuce in the average salad; it achieves no useful purpose, but there's always a lot of it. But this was by no means a new train of thought, and he knew how to cope with it by now. He finished his drink and went to the bar for another.

As he stood at the bar and fumbled in his pocket for money, he tried playing the old 'I-remember when' game which had entertained him briefly about a century ago and which now only irritated him. I remember when money was real money, he said to himself, when it was made of solid silver and had lots of Latin on it. I remember when you could have bought all the beer in Bavaria, plus sale tax and carriage, for the price of half a pint of this. I even remember flared trousers. That dates me.

As he sat down to his drink, he tried to think of something that wouldn't set him thinking about how incredibly long he had lived, just for a change. He tried to think of what he was going to do next. But that, of course, wouldn't take him very long, because he knew exactly what he was going to do next. He was going to get pathetically drunk, crawl back to his hotel, and wake up with a splitting head next morning which would leave him in no fit state to go flogging round Hatton Garden selling gold bars. After he had sold the gold bars, he would traipse through the bookshops and buy up enough reading matter to keep him from going stark raving mad for the next seven years. Then he would do the rest of his shopping, which would only leave him just enough time to get pathetically drunk again before

slouching back to Bridport and his bloody ship and his bloody, bloody shipmates. It wasn't that I didn't want to find a woman who would be true until death; he simply didn't have the time.

He was following the first part of this programme with almost religious diligence when, seven hours later, the plump man and the girl came back for a last drink. Vanderdecker hoped that they would enjoy it, since it might make up for an otherwise completely wasted evening witnessing the puerile burlesque of his life story. For his part, as usual, Vanderdecker had come to terms with moderate beer, and was rather better adjusted to the world in general. He no longer cared if he appeared to be staring. Staring was fun - at any rate, it was considerably more entertaining than what he had been doing for the last seven years - and a good long stare might help clear his head.

'The costumes,' said the girl after a long silence, 'were quite pretty.'

Her companion gave her the sort of look that should have been reserved for a tourist who goes to Rome just to look at the gas works. 'What did you think,' he asked - with obvious restraint - 'of the music?'

'I got used to it,' she replied, 'after a bit. Like a dripping tap,' she added.

That seemed to wrap it up, so far as the plump young man was concerned.

'Is that the time?' he said without looking at his watch. 'I must go or I'll miss the last train.'

'Must you?' said the girl. 'Oh well, never mind. I think I'll just finish my drink.'

'See you tomorrow, then,' said the plump man. 'Perhaps we can make a start on the July figures.'

Shortly afterwards, he wasn't there any more. Vanderdecker, however, continued to stare. If the girl was aware of this, she gave no sign of it. She was reading her programme. Presumably, Vanderdecker imagined, the summary of the plot. The injustice of it made him suddenly angry, although he recognised in his soul that it was too late to do anything about it now. He finished his drink and stood up to go. His route to the door and the street led him past the girl's table and as he passed over the top of her bowed head he heard himself speak.

'All that stuff,' he said, 'about angels and faithful until death is rubbish. It was the smell.'

The girl looked up sharply, and just as Vanderdecker was going through the door she caught a glimpse of his face. Somewhere in the back of her mind she had a vague, indefinable, inchoate feeling that she had seen him somewhere before.

'I remember,' said the stranger, 'when money was real money.'

'That's right, mate,' said his new friend. 'Pounds, shillings and pence.'

'And testoons,' said the stranger, 'and groats and placks and angels and ryals and ducats and louis d'or and louis d'argent . . .'

'You what?'

'And nobles of course,' continued the stranger. 'I remember when you could get pissed as a rabbit and have a really good blow-out in a bakehouse, see the bear-baiting, and still have change out of a noble.'

The landlord turned his head very slightly. Drunks were no problem, but loonies he could do without.

'What are you talking about?' asked the stranger's new friend, in a tone of voice that suggested that their friendship might soon end as rapidly as it had begun.

'Before your time,' explained the stranger, twirling his beer round in its glass to revive the flagging head. 'Can't expect you to remember nobles.'

'Are you taking the . . .'

'No,' said the stranger. 'Are you?'

Twenty years of keeping a pub in this particular district of Southampton had given the landlord a virtually supernatural instinct for the outbreak of a fight. Unfortunately he was at the other end of the bar, and before he could intervene the stranger's new friend had hit the stranger in the face, very hard.

'Christ almighty,' said the stranger's new friend. There was blood streaming from his lacerated knuckles, and the stranger was grinning.

'Go on,' he said, 'hit me again.'

Before this invitation could be accepted, strong and practiced hands had taken up both parties and put them out in the street. For his part the stranger landed awkwardly, staggered, lost his footing and fell extremely heavily against a parking meter. The parking meter broke, but not so the stranger. He simply gathered himself carefully to his feet, looked around, and set off in search of another pub he remembered in this part of town. When he got there, however, it was boarded up. It had been closed for the last seven years, ever since a party of Royal Marines had started a fight with a man the thought was trying to be funny, and which had ended with five very confused Marines receiving treatment for fractured hands and feet.

At this stage, of course, the Dow Jones was still buoyant, the Hang Tseng had never had it so good, the FT was climbing like a deranged convolvulus, futures were trading as if there was no tomorrow, and the only currency that wasn't performing too well was the Confederate dollar.

In an alleyway in the centre of Cadiz, a rather disreputable-looking cat was stalking an empty crisp packet.

Just as the cat had resolved to pounce, a puff of wind caught the crisp packet and blew it into the middle of the highway, along which an articulated lorry full of cans of tomatoes was travelling. The cat saw this, but decided to pursue its quarry nevertheless. He had been stalking it for over half an hour and he was damned if he was going to let it slip through his paws now.

The lorry driver, to his credit, did his best to brake, but the momentum of a heavily laden Mercedes lorry is not an easy thing to dissipate quickly. There was a thud, and the cat was sent flying across the road. The lorry-driver continued on his way, and soon put the incident out of his mind.

The cat wearily got to its feet and looked around for the crisp packet, but it was nowhere to be seen. At that moment an English tourist came running across to inspect the damage. The tourist was female and fond of cats.

When she saw the cat get up, she couldn't believe her eyes. She had seen the poor animal being run over by the lorry - it must have been killed. But it hadn't been. She came closer, and it was then that the smell hit her. She reeled back, with both hands over her face, and groped her way out of the alleyway.

The cat was used to such reactions, but that didn't make them any more pleasant. He sulked for at least ten minutes, until a discarded fruit juice carton caught his eye and he settled his mind to the serious business of hunting. In a very, very long life he had learned how to get his priorities right.

On her way back home to Maida Vale on the tube, the girl who had seen the Flying Dutchman was bored, for she had forgotten to bring a book with her to read on the journey. Not that she had even doubted for one split second that she was coming home tonight - perish the thought! It had been simple forgetfulness, and the tedium of having nothing to entertain herself with but the posters and h

opera programme was a fitting punishment.

After a random sample, she decided that the opera programme was marginally less dire than the posters, and she read the synopsis of the plot again. A modern version of the story, she decided, with the Dutchman doomed to spend the rest of time going round and round the Circle Line with nothing to read but vilely-phrased propaganda from the employment agencies, might have some possibilities, but by and large the whole idea was not so much tragic but silly. The daftest part, she reckoned, was the idea that Satan could get you just for expressing a determination to get round a traffic hazard - if the rule still applied, she said to herself, then you wouldn't be able to set tyre to pavement on the Chiswick Roundabout for souls in torment. Or perhaps the rule did still apply. It would explain the way some people drove.

The train stopped at Paddington, opened its doors, and sat very still. In the corner of the carriage there was a tramp with wild white hair and very distressing shoes, fast asleep with his head almost between his knees, but otherwise she was alone. The girl abandoned the legend of the Flying Dutchman and turned her thoughts toward the great web of being, with particular reference to her own part in it. I am an accountant, she said to herself, working mainly in banking. Why is it that, whenever I remember this fact, I want to scream?

Perhaps, she considered, the Dutchman story wasn't so silly after all. Perhaps Satan did hover unseen in the ether waiting to pounce on ill-considered sayings. She had only said one very stupid thing in her life - 'I want to be an accountant' - but of the various explanations for her present condition to which she had given consideration before, the Satan theory was as good as any. Was there such a person as Satan, by the way? Why not? Satan was no more incredible a concept than Mr Peter, the senior partner, and he undoubtedly existed. All one would have to do to make the gentleman's horns conceivable would be to get him out of those stuffy medieval clothes into a nice three-piece suit, and convert the Fires of Hell into a microwave. You could possibly get a Government grant for that.

The girl recognised that her train of thought was becoming alarmingly metaphysical, but when you are stuck in Paddington station at a quarter to midnight with nothing to read, you can afford to indulge in flights of fancy. Plato would have loved the Bakerloo Line.

I may not be Dutch, she said to herself, but I'm positive I would hate to live for ever. She remembered that week in the middle of the summer holidays when she was young, that one, inevitable week when the joy of not being at school had worn off and the dread of going back to school had not yet taken hold. That week when there was no longer anything to do, when everyone else had gone off with their parents to Jersey, when there was nothing on the television except Wimbledon, and cousin Marian from Swansea came to stay. That week that was free of all the pressures of doing the things you hated doing, devoid of all the pleasures of doing the things you liked doing, that week that lasted at least a month and probably longer. No crime a human being could commit, however terrible, could merit a punishment as dreadful as another of those weeks of killing time. Perhaps she should stop thinking along these lines, before she found out just exactly how shallow her mind really was.

It was then she remembered hearing a voice somewhere above her head at some stage during the evening, which had said that the angels and the love interest were all rubbish, but that the smell had been the real reason - or words to that effect. It was peculiar, to say the least, that her brain should seek to filter out this scrap of jetsam from the rubbish that her memory was sorting and discarding. In her mind, she reckoned, was like the little grill thing over the plug-hole which catches fragments of cauliflower and pasta shells when the washing up bowl is emptied. She was reckoning thus when sleep finally caught her out, and she slept through Warwick Avenue and only just woke up in time to

scramble out of the train at Maida Vale and walk home the long way.

There is one pub in Southampton which it is impossible to get yourself thrown out of no matter what you do or say, and there the newcomer ran into someone he knew very well.

At first they tried to avoid each other, since it was three days yet before they had to go back to the ship, and then they would be together again, inseparable, for another seven years. But this plan broke down when the newcomer realised that he had run out of money.

‘Antonius,’ said the newcomer to his friend in Dutch, ‘lend me a fiver till payday.’

Antonius felt in the pocket of his shirt and found a five pound note, which he gave to his companion. His companion’s name, for the record, was Johannes, and he and Antonius had been born in the same village south of Antwerp over four hundred and thirty years before. Barring shore leave like this, they had been out of each other’s company for a period exceeding eight hours exactly once in four hundred and seventeen of those years, when Johannes’ mother had suspected that her son had caught the plague and locked him up in the barn for a few days.

Neither of them would have chosen to have it this way, since they didn’t get on very well and never had. Johannes was a short, noisy man with a hairy face and hairy arms, who liked drinking a lot and falling over. What Antonius liked doing best was standing quite still, unfocussing his eyes, and thinking of nothing at all. Each of them found the other remarkably uncongenial, and the only point at which they were united and could talk for more than three minutes without losing their temper with each other was their dislike of everyone else on board the ship, and in particular Captain Vanderdecker.

‘After all,’ said Johannes, a few minutes later, as they sat in a corner of the bar under the dartboard and drank their beer, ‘he was the one got us into this in the first place.’

‘That’s right,’ replied Antonius. ‘All his fault.’

A dart bounced out of treble fifteen and point first onto Antonius’ brown, bald head. He extracted it and handed it back to its owner.

‘What the hell did he want to go drinking that stuff for in the first place?’ Johannes continued, picking a grain of chalk dust out of his beer as he spoke. ‘He should have known it would end up a wrong.’

‘He just didn’t think,’ Antonius agreed. ‘No consideration for others.’

‘And then dropping it,’ said Johannes bitterly, ‘into the beer-barrel.’

‘Typical,’ said Antonius. It was a word he was very fond of and saved for special occasions. He didn’t want to wear it out by overuse.

‘This beer,’ said Johannes, unconsciously echoing his captain, ‘grows on you after a bit. You could get used to it.’

‘It’s got a taste, though,’ Antonius asserted. ‘You want another?’

‘Might as well.’

So they had another, and another, and two or three more after that, and then they went outside to get some air. By now they were feeling quite relaxed, and Antonius remembered the girl who lived round the corner. They decided to go and visit her. They did this every time they came to England, just at every time, they forgot that she had died in 1606 and that her house was now a car park. They always left a note though, saying that they were sorry to have missed her and would be sure to drop in next time. Since the building of the car park they had taken to sticking these notes behind the windscreens and wipers of the parked cars, and once they had left one on the car of an avid and knowledgeable local

historian, who had read it and was quite ill for months afterwards.

The plump man, who was also an accountant, although a vastly more important one than the girl, made himself a cup of lemon tea and tried to forget that he had wasted a performance of *The Flying Dutchman* at Covent Garden, with Neustadt singing Senta, on a cultural void like Jane Doland. Next in his career, he loved opera above all things and a failure to appreciate it was a crime that could not be forgiven. He opened his briefcase, switched on his calculator and put *Rienzi* on the CD player. Slowly, like the return of spring, the wound began to heal.

CHAPTER TWO



The National Lombard Bank is situated in the very heart of downtown Bridport. It is the sort of location any red-blooded bank manager would give his heart and soul for, right in the epicentre of the triangle formed by the town's most beguiling attractions - the fish and chip shop, the Post Office and the traffic lights. In summer, whole families still make the difficult journey into Bridport from the surrounding country-side to stand and watch the traffic lights performing their dazzling *son lumiere*; and although they now have a set of lights in Charmouth - a deliberate and cynical attempt to poach the holiday trade that has introduced much bitterness into the previously friendly relationship between the two communities - purists insist that the Bridport set has a purer green, a rosier red, more scintillating amber than any others this side of Dorchester.

To a Sybaritic Londoner like Jane Doland, however, the Bridport Lights meant nothing more than another hold-up on her way to a not particularly pleasant assignment, and with the poverty of spirit that is the hallmark of the city-dweller she assumed that the small throng of children gathered round them were merely waiting to cross the road. She had no street-plan of Bridport to help her find the bank, but she located it nevertheless simply by looking straight in front of her as she drove in from the roundabout. A bank, she said to herself, what fun. This is well worth missing the London premiere of *Crocodile Dundee 9* for.

The causes of momentous events are often so bewilderingly complex that even highly-trained historians are at a loss to unravel them. Men wise in their generation have gone grey, bald and ultimately senile in the great universities grappling with the origins of the English Civil War, the Peasants' Revolt and the rise of Hitler, and it is doubtful now that the truth will ever be known. In contrast, the reason why Jane Doland was in Bridport, two years (give or take a week or so) since she had gone to see *The Flying Dutchman* at the Royal Opera House, was quite remarkably simple. A decree had gone out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed, and since this particular decree had had some viciously unexpected things in it about Advance Corporation Tax, all leave was cancelled in the offices of the leading accountancy firm where Jane Doland occupied a trivial and poorly-paid position, and accountants were dispersed like dazed bacilli into the bloodstream of British commerce to sort out the affairs of the National Lombard Bank, the firm's largest and most complicated client. Since the National Lombard has more branches than all the trees in the New Forest, and the Bridport branch occupies roughly the same place in the bank's list of priorities as the team assigned to Leatherhead Rovers in the Football League, its affairs were unhesitatingly entrusted to Jane Doland's skill, expertise and highly-motivated commitment.

Jane was considering this when she parked her car under a lime tree in that famous Bridport thoroughfare which some unusually imaginative soul had christened South Street. In fact the term 'nonentity' had been rattling about in her brain like a small, loose bearing all the way down the A30 and by the time she reached her destination she was in no mood to be pleasant to anybody or appreciate anything. This would go some way towards explaining her lack of enthusiasm for the traffic lights, which happened to be at their luminescent best this not particularly fine morning.

Nevertheless, Jane said to herself as she walked through the door of the bank. When trying to cheer herself up, she never got further than nevertheless, but it was always worth giving it just one more go. As she had expected, they had looked out lots of nice accounts for her to amuse herself with, and although they were all in such a hopeless mess that Sherlock Holmes, with Theseus to help him and Einstein to handle the figures and Escoffier laying on plenty of strong black coffee, would have had a devil of a job sorting them out. Jane told herself that it is always the thought that counts. She could imagine the faces of the bank staff when the news hit them that an accountant from Moss Berwick was coming to visit them. 'Moss Berwick, eh?' she could hear them saying to each other. 'Somebody hid the July returns while I shuffle the invoices.'

After several false starts, the hour-hand of the clock on the wall in the pleasantly intimate cupboard they had set aside for her personal use crept round to one o'clock and she made her Unilateral Declaration of Lunchtime. The precious forty-five minutes that her contract of employment allowed her for rest, nourishment and the contemplation of the infinite was mostly dissipated in locating and booking into the Union Hotel, which Jane was able to tell from the public lavatories next door by the fact that the roller towel in the public lavatories worked. By not bothering to unpack, Jane was able to dash down to the bar, fail to get a drink and a sandwich before it shut, and sprint back to the bank just in time to be three minutes late for the afternoon session. The manager wasn't impressed, and one of the cashiers gave her a look that nearly stripped all the varnish off her nails. At about three-fifteen her pencil broke.

Stay with it, girl, she said to herself as the office junior came to tell her to go away because the computers were locking up now, you've got four more days of this. Think (she said to herself) of the Honourable Firm. Think of old man Moss hauling himself up by his bootstraps out of the slums of nineteenth-century Liverpool, studying all the hours God sent at the Mechanics Institute to pass his examination, to qualify, meet up with old man Berwick and found the greatest accounting firm the world has ever known. She had read this stirring story in the recruitment pamphlets they had sent her when she had joined, and the recollection of it never failed to arouse in her strong feelings of pure apathy. Oddly enough, the pamphlet had been curiously reticent on the subject of old man Berwick, preferring to concentrate on his more dashing colleague, and Jane often wondered where he had pulled himself up out of by his bootstraps. Harrow, probably.

A year or so back, the compilers of the same recruitment guide had been going round interviewing members of staff for the new edition, and they had asked Jane what the most satisfying, fulfilling, life-enhancing thing about working for the firm was, in her lowly opinion. She had replied, without hesitation, going home, and they hadn't included her in the guide or even the video, although she prided herself that she had the best legs in the department. Since the rest of the legs in the department belonged to Mr Shaw, Mr Peterson, Mr Ferrara and Mr Timson respectively, this was no symptom of vanity on Jane's part, merely the scrupulous accuracy and devotion to truth which marks a good accountant out from his fellow creatures.

Since then, Jane had kept her opinion of her chosen career very much to herself; but, as if to compensate, she let it out of its cage pretty freely once she was alone with it. As she was now, for

instance, on a cold Monday night in Bridport.

There are few excitements to compare with one's first night in a strange new town, and despite her weariness and a deplorable urge to take her tights off and watch 'Cagney and Lacey' on the black and white portable in her room at the Union Hotel, Jane set out to immerse herself completely in the town. After all, she reckoned, she might never come here again; live this precious moment to the full, crush each ripe fruit of sensation against the palate until the appetite is cloyed in intoxicating richness.

The cinema was closed when she eventually found it, what with it being half past September, and since she had no wish to be raped, robbed or murdered she didn't go into the White Hart, the Blue Ball, the Bunch of Grapes, the Prince of Wales, the Peacock, the Catherine Wheel, the Green Dragon, the Four Horseshoes, the Hour Glass, the Half Way House, the Bird in Hand, the Bottle and Glass, the Jolly Sportsman, the Dorsetshire Yeoman, the Boot and Slipper, the Rising Sun, the Crown and Cushion, the Poulteney Arms, the Red Cross Knight, the Two Brewers, the Black Dog, the Temporary Sign, the Duke of Rochester, the Gardeners Arms or the Mississippi Riverboat Night Club. Apart from these, the only place of entertainment open to the public was the bus shelter, and that was a touch too crowded for Jane's taste. She went back to the Union Hotel, had a glass of orange juice and some fresh local boiled carpet with gravy in the dining room, and went upstairs to catch the last ten minutes of 'Cagney and Lacey', which had been cancelled and replaced with athletics from Zurich.

Isn't it fortunate, Jane reflected, that I brought a good book with me. The only thing which can stop me enjoying my book is if the proprietors of this charnel-house forget to put a shilling in the meter. She picked the book out of her suitcase, opened it where her expired Capitalcard marked the place, and began to read.

This is not the right book, she said to herself as her eye fell upon the corduroy furrows of the page. This is the book I finished reading yesterday.

You can tell of your Torments of the Damned. You can, if you wish, allude to Sisyphus and the Stone. You can wax eloquent, especially if you are a television evangelist, about what is going to happen to the fornicators and the bearers of false witness when they finally come eyeball to eyeball with the Big G. But you cannot begin to describe, not if you speak with the tongues of men and angels, the exquisite agony of being stuck in a fleabag hotel in a shut town with a choice between watching a load of tubby East Germans putting the shot in their underwear or reading a detective story, every detail of whose plot is etched on your mind.

A berserk fury came over quiet, tranquil-minded Jane Doland. She pulled on her tights, picked up her room-key and went out into the gloomy corridor. Downstairs, in what was described with cruel irony as the residents' lounge, there might be a week-old newspaper or the July 1956 issue of *Woman and Home*. Or perhaps she might find a reasonably well-written telephone directory, or even a discarded matchbox with a puzzle on the back. There is always hope, so long as life subsists. The beating of the heart and the action of the lungs are a useful prevarication, keeping all options open.

She did find a matchbox, as it happens, but all it said was 'Made in Finland, Average Contents For Matches', and after the third reading Jane felt that she had sucked all the value out of that one. Disconsolate, she wandered out to the reception desk. The sound of a television commentator joyfully exclaiming that Kevin Bradford from Cark-in-Cartmel had managed to avoid coming last in the six hundred metres drifted through the illuminated crack above the office door. Jane looked down and saw the hotel register. Salvation! She could read that.

It was a fascinating document. For example, Jane learned that in November 1986 Mr and Mrs Belmont from Winnipeg had stayed three nights at the Union Hotel, and although they had had breakfast, they had not had any evening meals.

Why was that, she wondered? Had they spent every last cent on the flight, and been reduced eating their way through all the individual portions of jam and marmalade on the breakfast table keep body and soul together during their stay? Did they spend the evenings flitting from casino night-club to casino, scorning the Union's prosaic cuisine? Perhaps they just didn't like the look of the menu terribly much. She could sympathise with that. And what had brought these globe-trotting Belmonts half-way across the world, uprooting them from their cosy timber-frame home among the wheatfields, beside the immeasurable vastness of the mighty lake? Had they come back in search of their heritage, or to pay their last respects to a dying relative, resolving a twenty-year-old feud in final deathbed reconciliation? Did they feel that same restless urge that drove much-enduring Ulysses to see the cities of men and know their minds? Or had they simply got on the wrong coach?

Another thing that Jane discovered, and could well believe, was that not many people stayed at the Union Hotel, or at least not enough to fill up an optimistically large register in a hurry. This one went back nine years, to when a Mr J. Vanderdecker of Antwerp had booked in for two nights. Oddly enough, she noticed, another J. Vanderdecker (or the same man that bit older and wiser) had booked in seven years later. On neither occasion had he risked the evening meal, but he had insisted on a room with bath both times. A shy, private sort of man, Jane imagined, who would rather die than have strangers see him in his dressing gown and slippers wandering the corridors at half-past seven in the morning.

The office door started to open, and Jane dodged guiltily away from the desk. As she did so she barked her shin on a low table, on which reposed a dog-eared copy of *Shooting Times* and *Country Magazine*. She seized it, fled, read it from cover to cover, finally fell asleep and had a nightmare about a man-eating ferret.

'I spy,' said the first mate, 'with my little eye, something beginning with W.'

Nobody took any notice. Even Jan Christian Duysberg had guessed that one back in the 1740s, and he had been thirty-four years old before he realised he was left-handed.

A seagull drifted across the sky, staggered in mid-air, banked violently and flew off to the south-east. Cornelius Schumaker clipped his toenails quietly in the shade of the mast. Wilhelm Triegaa completed his seventy-ninth crossword of the trip.

For some of the crew of the sailing-ship *Verdomde* (which is Dutch for 'Damned') the second year of each seven-year term was the worst. Just as Jane Doland often felt at her most miserable on Tuesdays, because the memory of the brief freedom of the weekend had already faded without bringing Friday appreciably nearer, so it was with the more impatient of Vanderdecker's command. Others were content to take each year as it came, whiling away the time with impossible projects. Pieter Pretorius, for example, was building a scale model of the battle of Lepanto inside an empty Coca-Cola bottle, while his brother Dirk pushed back the limits of pure mathematics by calculating the overtime claim he was going to put in when the trip finally ended - while the remaining members of the crew saw no further than the next watch. By now, the only man on the ship who even bothered trying to do something about the mess they were all in was the captain himself.

Captain Vanderdecker was a great reader of the *Scientific American*. He sat in his cabin with his feet up on the map-table and a relatively recent copy of that publication on his knees, trying to do long division in his head while he shook his solar calculator violently in a vain effort to make it work. Something important to do with the half-life of radium was on the point of slipping away from him for want of the square root of 47, and if it got away this time it might take him weeks to get it back. The

fact that time was not of the essence was something he tried not to think about, for fear of giving up altogether. Vanderdecker generated artificial urgency with the same fatuous optimism that makes an eighty-year-old woman dye her hair.

Ever since 1945, Vanderdecker had been fascinated by radiation. His original wild hopes had been dashed when he and the crew had lived through an early nuclear test in the Pacific and suffered nothing worse than glowing faintly in the dark for the next week or so; but he had persisted with a blind, unquestioning faith ever since he had finally been forced to give up on volcanoes. Not that he approved of radiation; he had read too much about it for that. For the rest of the human race, he thought it was a bad move and likely to end in tears before bedtime. For himself and his crew however, it offered a tiny glimmer of hope, and he could not afford to dismiss it until he had crushed every last possibility firmly into the ground.

And so he read on, disturbed only by the creaking of the rigging and the occasional thump. Sebastian van Doorning threw himself off the top of the mast onto the deck. In 1964 the poor fool had got it into his head that although one fall might not necessarily be fatal, repeated crash-landings might eventually wear a brittle patch in his invulnerable skull and offer him the ultimate discharge he so desperately wanted. At least it provided occasional work for the ship's carpenter; every time he landed so hard he went right through the deck.

'The Philosopher's Stone?' the captain read. 'Breakthrough In Plutonium Isotopes Offers Insight Into Transmutation of Matter.' Vanderdecker swallowed hard and took his feet off the table. It was probably the same old nonsense he personally had seen through in the late seventies, but there was always the possibility that there was something in it.

'It is rumored,' said the *Scientific American*, 'that experiments at Britain's Dounreay nuclear reactor will lead to a new reappraisal of some fundamental aspects of atomic theory. If recent published results by physicists Marshmain and Kellner are vindicated by the Dounreay tests, the alchemist may shortly step out of the pages of histories of the occult and into European R&D laboratories. The co-ordinator of the new programme, Professor Montalban of Oxford University . . .

Montalban. *Montalban*, for God's sake!

Over four hundred years of existence had left Vanderdecker curiously undecided about coincidences. Sometimes he believed in them, sometimes he didn't. The name Montalban is not common, but it is not so incredibly unique that one shouldn't expect to come across it more than once in four hundred years. Its appearance on the same page as the word 'alchemist' was a little harder to explain away, and Vanderdecker had to remind himself of the monkeys with typewriters knocking over *Hamlet* before he could get himself into a properly sceptical frame of mind to read on. By then, of course, the lamp in his cabin had blown out, and rather than waste time trying to light it again with his original but clapped-out Zippo, he decided to go out on deck and let the sun do the work for once. With his finger in the fold of the magazine so as not to lose the place, he scrambled up the ladder and out of the hatch, just as Sebastian van Doorning made his ninth descent of the day.

Vanderdecker was knocked sideways and landed in a pile of coiled-up rope. As he pulled himself together, he saw his copy of the *Scientific American* being hoisted up into the air by a gust of wind and deposited neatly into the Atlantic Ocean.

'Sebastian.'

The sky-diver picked himself sheepishly off the deck. 'Yes, captain?' he said.

'If you jump off the mast ever again,' said the Flying Dutchman, 'I'll break your blasted neck.'

They didn't bother lowering the ship's boat, they just jumped; the captain was in that sort of mood. Eventually Pieter Pretorius fished the magazine out, and they tried drying it in the sun. But

was no good; the water had washed away all the print, so that the only words still legible on the whole page were 'Montalban' and 'alchemist'. Dirk Pretorius calculated the odds against this at nine million fourteen thousand two hundred and sixty-eight to one against, something which everyone except the captain found extremely interesting.

There, Jane said to herself, is a funny thing.

Do not get the impression, just because Jane is forever talking to herself, that she is not quite right in the head, or even unusually inclined towards contemplation. It was simply that in her profession there are not many people to talk to, and if one is naturally talkative one does the best one can. It is important that this point be made early, since Jane has a lot to do in this story, and you should not be put off her just because she soliloquizes. So did Hamlet. Give the poor girl a chance.

Extremely strange, she considered, and stared at the ledger in front of her through eyes made watery by deciphering handwriting worse even than her own. Undoubtedly there has been a visit from the Cock-Up Fairy at some stage; but when, and how?

It should not have been her job to look at the ledgers recording the current accounts; but an exasperating detail in quite ordinary calculation had gone astray, and she had, just for once, become so engrossed in the abstract interest of solving it that she had stayed with it for six hours, including her lunch break. Although she was not aware of it, she was pulling off a quite amazing *tour de force* of accountancy that her superiors would never have believed her capable of.

The reason why she had gone overboard on this one was a name. It wasn't a particularly common name, you see, and she had come across it once already. The name was Vanderdecker, J.

Vanderdecker, J had a current account with the National Lombard Bank. It contained £6.42. It had also contained £6.42 for well over a hundred years.

A pity, Jane said to herself, it hadn't been a deposit account. The bank staff had stared at her as if she was completely crazy when she demanded the excavation of ledgers going back almost to the dawn of time. They had protested. They had assured her that the ledgers for the period before 1970 had been incinerated years ago. They had told her that even if they hadn't been incinerated (which they hadn't), they had been lost. Even if they hadn't been lost, they were hopelessly difficult to get at. They were in storage at the bank's central storage depot in Newcastle-under-Lyme. Even if they weren't in Newcastle-under-Lyme, they were in the cellar. There were spiders in the cellar. Big spiders. A foolhardy clerk had gone into the cellar five years ago, and all they ever found of him was his shoes.

Until computerisation, all the ledgers were handwritten, and some of the handwriting was difficult to read. Jane's eyesight had never been brilliant, and too much staring at scrawly copperplate gave her a headache. She had a headache now; not one of your everyday temple-throbbers but something drastic in the middle of her forehead. Despite this, she was managing to think.

The logical explanation of the mystery - there is always a logical explanation - was that Vanderdecker, J had opened an account in 1879, lived his normal span of years and died, leaving the sum of £6/8/4d. In the anguish of his parting (Jane had read some deathbed scenes in Victorian novels and knew that people made a meal of such things in those days) the account had been overlooked. Inertia, the banker's familiar demon, had allowed the account to drift along from year to year like an Iron Age body in a peat bog, dead but perfectly preserved, and here it was to this day. Very salutary.

The only problem was the name J. Vanderdecker in the register of the Union Hotel. Dammit, it wasn't a common name; and if J Vanderdecker was swanning around Bridport two years ago, and seven years before that, he couldn't have died in the early nineteen-hundreds, which was what the

sensible theory demanded.

~~Anyone but an accountant would have told the sensible theory to stuff it and gone on with something else. But accountants are different. Legend has it that all accountants are descended from one Barnabas of Sidon, a peripheral associate of the disciples of Our Lord who had done the accounts for Joseph's carpentry business in Galilee. After receiving a severe shock at the Feeding of the Five Thousand, he had been present at the Last Supper but had missed all the fun because he was too busy adding up the bill and trying to remember who had had what. Like fish, accountants see things in a different way from people, and details which people find unimportant are their reason for existing.~~

Well now, said Jane to herself, what are we going to do about this? In theory, all she had to do was report her findings to the manager, who would say, Yes how interesting, have you got much more to do or will you be going soon? and then write the account off against arrears of bank charges as soon as she left the premises. Jane felt very strongly, for some reason, that this was not something that ought to happen. She had no idea why it was important, but it was.

The only other information she had about the account, apart from the name Vanderdecker, J and the sum of £6.42, was an address: Lower Brickwood Farm Cottage, Melplash, near Bridport, Dorset. It followed that if there was anything else capable of being found out about this mystery, it would have to be sought there. She would go there this evening, she resolved, and everything would be explained there *would* be a simple explanation, and she would find it at Lower Brickwood Farm Cottage. In the meanwhile, she could get on with her proper work and put it out of her mind.

Came half-past six, and Jane was off in her W registration Ford Fiesta looking for Lower Brickwood Farm Cottage, a task marginally more difficult than finding the Holy Grail. Melplash is not on the street map of Bridport which the seeker after truth can buy at the newsagent; neither, if the truth be told, is most of Bridport itself. When it comes to Melplash, however, the stranger is definitely on his own. It is assumed that the only people who need have anything to do with Melplash are people who live there already, and of course they all know where Lower Brickwood Farm Cottage is. They have gone past it on their way to the pillar-box or the Green Man every day since they were six, and they don't know it as Lower Brickwood Farm Cottage; they know it as 'Davis's' or 'the old linney', or even, rather metaphysically, 'in over'. The postal address concerns nobody except the postman; and since he was up at half-past four this morning, he is presumably now in bed.

Jane was not one of those people who are too embarrassed to stop people and ask directions to places, but this facility wasn't a great deal of use to her. Of the six people she stopped and asked, two were retired Midlanders who had only been living in Melplash for a year or so, two were informative but completely incomprehensible, and one gave her a set of clear and concise directions which, had she followed them, would have taken Jane to Liverpool. The sixth informant was the landlord of the Green Man. He asked if she was from Pardoes and were they going to do the old place up at last? Jane remembered the name Pardoes from For Sale boards, and said yes for the sake of a quiet life.

By the time Jane got to Lower Brickwood Farm Cottage - which is, of course, about as far from Lower Brickwood Farm as you can go without leaving the parish - it was nearly dark. The directions she had been given led her down an unmetalled road to a yard containing five fallen-down corrugated iron sheds, which looked for all the world as if they were used for storing the proceeds of plundering expeditions against the neighbouring villages. There were in addition a spectacular collection of damaged tractor tyres, a burnt-out Ford Anglia with a small tree growing through the windscreens, several discarded items of farm machinery and a derelict stone structure of great age.

Jane would probably have given up at this point, for she was unused to such scenes; but she saw a crudely-painted sign on the derelict stone structure which said 'Lower Brickwood Farm Cottage' and

decided that this must be it. She walked up to the door and, being a well-brought-up young lady, knocked. A voice in the back of her mind called her an idiot, and she tried the door instead.

It wasn't locked; indeed, it gave a couple of inches before coming to rest against something low and heavy and thereafter becoming immovable. It has previously been recorded that the book Jane Dolan had been reading before she came to Bridport was a detective story, and it should be noted that Jane was a devotee of this genre of fiction. In many detective stories, the detective tries the door of the lonely house to find it open but obstructed in precisely this way. The obstruction, you can bet your sweet life, will invariably turn out to be a dead body.

The last thing Jane wanted to find was a dead body. However, the same inner voice that had called her an idiot only moments before urged her to push against the door, and when she did it opened. There was no dead body. Instead, there was a heavy snowdrift of envelopes, most of them extremely mouldy. Some of them had stamps with the head of Queen Victoria on them. All of them had come from the National Lombard Bank. Jane knelt down on a century's worth of bank statements, invitations to take out credit cards, insurance company mail-shots and encomiums of National Lombard Unit Trusts, and searched her handbag for her torch.

A brief torchlight survey produced evidence that Lower Brickwood Farm Cottage had not been inhabited for many, many years by anything except small animals and birds. It was extremely unpleasant, and Jane found herself thanking Providence that she had been born with virtually no sense of smell. She picked her way tentatively across the floor to the middle of the one room that occupied the ground floor and peered round. She saw that the staircase had long since collapsed, along with large portions of the ceiling. She decided that it probably wasn't terribly safe in there.

Just as she was about to leave, she saw a small tea-chest. It too contained envelopes. Having come this far and found so little, Jane made up her mind to investigate these. With extreme distaste, she fished out a handful of them and looked at them in the torchlight. They were all addressed to Vanderdecker, and they contained invoices.

Whoever J Vanderdecker was, he had been a good customer of Jeanes' boatyard for a very long time. Each invoice was marked 'Paid with thanks' and related to some sort of repair done to a ship, a wooden ship, evidently; many references to tar, nails, boards, ropes, lines, sailcloth, as well as a mass of nautical technical terms which Jane did not pretend to understand. The earliest invoice, which was so sodden with damp and rot that it fell to pieces in her hand, was dated 1704. The most recent one was exactly two years old. By the time her torch battery died on her, Jane had traced the invoices back in an unbroken line, from the present day to the reign of Queen Anne, at twenty-one year intervals.

Jane fumbled about in the dark looking for the door, and eventually she found it. Not the front door with all the dead bank statements; the back door, which was also unlocked. Jane suddenly felt very nervous; something was going on, and from the facts she had at her command it looked as if it was something highly peculiar. Peculiar things, her common sense told her, are usually illegal. Perhaps she didn't want to know any more after all. Perhaps she should forget all about it and go back to London.

One thing was definite, and that was that she needed a drink, quickly. From what she had seen of the Green Man was fractionally less unpleasant than the snake-pit in a Harrison Ford adventure movie, but it was close and the landlord might tell her something else about Lower Brickwood Farm Cottage. She went there.

'So they're selling the cottage, are they?' said the landlord. 'They'll be lucky.'

The pub was virtually empty, and Jane wondered how the landlord made a living out of it. She looked at him and decided that he probably did a little body-snatching on the side.

'Oh yes?' she said. 'Why not?'

The landlord looked at her. 'Haven't you been up there, then?' he asked.

'Yes,' Jane said, 'just now. But even if the building's all fallen down, the site must be worth something, surely.'

The landlord looked at her again, and Jane started to feel uncomfortable. 'You sure you went there,' he said.

Jane described what she had seen, leaving nothing out except the bank statements and the invoice. 'Is that the place you mean?'

'You didn't notice the smell?'

Jane explained that she had a truly abysmal sense of smell. The landlord burst out laughing. When after a long time, he regained a semblance of coherence, he explained. He said that the place had been deserted for as long as everyone could remember because of the worst smell in the entire world. The story went that a foreigner with a funny name had rented it for a week or so, years and years back before anyone now in the village had been born, and that ever since he left nobody had been able to stay more than ten minutes in the place, because of the smell. Everything had been tried to get rid of it, but it persisted. An attempt to use it as a pigsty had failed when all the pigs died. After being on the books of Messrs Pardoes for fifty-two years it had been taken off the market and forgotten about.

'Didn't they tell you that, then?' he concluded.

'No,' Jane said, 'they didn't mention it.'

'And you, not being able to smell, you didn't notice it.'

'That's right.'

'Well,' said the landlord, 'if that doesn't beat cock-fighting. That'll be a pound five, for the gin and tonic.'

Jane drove back to Union Hotel and went to bed. She didn't feel the lack of something to read. She was too preoccupied with thinking.

CHAPTER THREE



The slight misunderstanding concerning the legend of the Flying Dutchman came about like this.

In the summer of 1839, a young German musician was sitting in a cafe in Paris drinking armagnac and thinking uncharitable thoughts about the regime of King Louis Philippe. It was a hot day and armagnac is by no means non-alcoholic, and the German was fiercely Republican by temperament, so it was perhaps understandable that the intensity of his reaction to the crimes against freedom that were going on all around him led him to speak his thoughts out loud. Before he knew what he was doing he was discussing them with the man sitting at the next table.

‘Kings,’ said the young German, ‘are an anachronistic obscenity. Mankind will never be truly free until the last king’s head is impaled on the battlements of his own palace.’

If the young German had bothered to look closely at the stranger (which of course he didn’t) he would have seen a neatly-dressed weatherbeaten man of absolutely average height and build, who could have been any age between a gnarled twenty-nine and a boyish forty. There was just a hint of grey in his short beard, and his eyes were as sharp as paper can be when you lick the gum on a postage stamp envelope. He considered the German’s statement seriously, wiped a little foam off his moustache and replied that in his experience, for what it was worth, most kings were no worse than a visit to the dentist. The young German scowled at him.

‘How can you say that?’ he snarled. ‘Consider some of the so-called great kings of history. Look at Xerxes! Look at Barbarossa! Look at Napoleon!’

‘I thought,’ interrupted the stranger, ‘he was an emperor.’

‘Same thing,’ said the young German. ‘Look at Ivan the Terrible,’ he continued. ‘Look at Philip of Spain!’

‘I did,’ said the stranger, ‘once.’

Something about the way he said it made the young German stop dead in his tracks and stare. It was as if he had suddenly come face to face with Michaelangelo’s David, wearing a top hat and a frock coat, in the middle of the Champs Elysées. He put down his glass and looked at the stranger.

‘What did you say?’ he asked quietly.

‘Please don’t think I’m boasting,’ said the stranger. ‘I don’t know why I mentioned it, since it isn’t really relevant to what you were saying. Do please go on.’

‘You saw Philip of Spain?’

‘Just the once. At the Escorial, back in ’85. I was in Madrid with nothing to do - I’d just got rid of a load of jute, you could name your own price for jute in Madrid just then, I think they use it in rop-

making - and I thought I'd take a ride out to see the palace. And when I got there - took me all day, it was thirty miles if it's a step - Philip was just coming home from some visit or other. As I remember I saw the top of his head for at least twelve seconds before the guards moved me on. I could tell it was the top of *his* head because it had a crown perched on it. Sorry, you were saying?'

'How can you have *seen* Philip of Spain?' said the young German. He never doubted the stranger's word for a moment; but he needed to know, very badly indeed, how this could be possible. 'He's been dead for two hundred and fifty years.'

The stranger smiled; it was a very peculiar smile. 'It's rather a long story,' he said.

'Never mind.'

'No but really,' the stranger said. His accent was very peculiar indeed, the sort of accent that would always sound foreign, wherever he went. 'When I say long I mean long.'

'Never mind.'

'All right, then,' said the stranger. 'But don't say I didn't warn you.'

The young German nodded impatiently. The stranger took a pull at his beer and sat back in his chair.

'I was born in Antwerp,' he said, 'in 1553.' He paused. 'Aren't you going to say something?'

'No,' said the German.

'Funny,' said the stranger. 'I usually get interrupted at this point. I'll say it again. I was born in Antwerp in 1553. Fifteen fifty-three,' he repeated, as if he wished the young German would call him a liar. No such luck. He went on, '. . . And when I was fifteen my father got me a job with a merchant-adventurer he owed some money to. The merchant was in the wool trade, like more people were then, and he said I could either work in the counting-house or go to sea, and since handling raw wool brings me out in a rash I chose the sea. Funny, isn't it, what decides you on your choice of career? I once knew a man who became a mercenary soldier just because he liked the long holidays. Dead before he was thirty, of course. Camp fever.'

'Well, I worked hard and saved what I earned, just like you're supposed to, and before I was twenty-seven I had enough put by to take a share in a ship of my own. Not long after that I inherited some money and bought out my partners, and there I was with my own ship, at twenty-nine. Dear God, I sounded like one of those advertisements for correspondence courses. Excuse me, please.'

'Anyway, soon I was doing very nicely indeed, despite the wars and the Spanish taxes - the Spanish were pretty well in charge of the Netherlands then, you remember, what with the Earl of Leicester and the Duke of Parma and all that - and I was all set to retire at thirty-five when I had a stroke of bad luck. Two strokes of bad luck. The first was the bottom falling out of jute, just when I'd got a ship crammed with the stuff. I'd put every last liard I had into jute, and suddenly you couldn't give it away. I hawked it all round Spain and Portugal and people just stared at me as if I was trying to sell them tainted beer. It was amazing; one minute you had perfect strangers accosting you in the street begging you to sell them some jute, the next thing you know jute is out. I'm not even sure that I know what jute is. I'm absolutely positive I don't care.'

'And then I had my second stroke of bad luck, which happened just off Cadiz. I happened to run into the celebrated Francis Drake, who was on his way to singe the King of Spain's beard. You've heard of Francis Drake? Oh good.'

'When I said you couldn't give the stuff away I was exaggerating, because actually that's exactly what I did. I needed some persuasion, mind, but I think it was the way Sir Francis drew up alongside and said that if I didn't surrender my cargo he'd blow me out of the water that tipped the scale.'

'Well, after that there was nothing much I could do except wait until Sir Francis had finished'

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