Prologue: Two Streets in London

The young woman counted—"*Otu*, *abua*, *ato*, *ano*, *ise*, *isii*, *asaa*"—using what remained to her of the secret language her mother had learned from *her* father, the language they had used in the place across the ocean when they did not want the white men with whips to understand. "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven . . . we need seven to succeed, seven to open the way. *Chi di*, there is still daylight left, still time, but not much."

She stood near dusk in a blind alley in Whitechapel on the verge of the City of London. Distant notes drifted down from the sliver of sky far above, bells tolling the Feast of the Epiphany on the first Sunday in 1812. The young woman (little more than a girl, perhaps sixteen years of age) pulled her worn-out sailor's coat around her and knotted her red kerchief against the cold. She scratched numbers on the brick wall in front of her, deepening the grooves made hundreds of times before. Staring at the numbers until the bricks faded, until she could see deep into herself and beyond, the girl hummed.

Rooks flew over rooftops but she did not heed their calls. She was

on the marches of *ala mmuo*, the realm of the spirits. There she met the ancestors, the *ndichie*, who spoke of pride burnished under the sun, the heart of courageous healing, the brown eye of wisdom. Today she went farther than she ever had before, led on by the humming of a thousand bees at a thousand bee-ships, until she neared the border to another land. The moon in that place illuminated a row of pillars on a ridge in the distance, pillars topped with watching creatures. One shape lifted itself off a pillar, a white owl as large as a house, an owl with a swallow's tail streaming behind it as it flew towards her. The young woman fled the owl's reshing beak, escaped from the borderland, turned back to see the owl circling at an invisible threshold. Its cry pierced the humming, followed her as she tumbled away.

Falling, she caught a glimpse of a young white woman reading by candlelight in an attic. A golden cat sat in the white woman's lap. The walls of the attic leaned inward, the roof sagging like a thumb seeking an insect to squash. The white woman thrust the book up against the room's slow throttle; the cat arched its back and spat. The candle flame shrank. The white woman threw back her head and opened her mouth, trying to sing but only gasping. The candle went out.

The woman in the alley ceased humming, fell back into herself. Before she awoke fully to her body, she heard the beating of a great drum and the booming of a great bell—a drum with eyes and a bell rimmed by living fire, out of which came a voice soothing and powerful, neither male nor female yet both at the same time.

"*Uche chukwu ga-eme*, God's will shall be done," intoned the voice in the secret language and in English. "Seven singers for turning to the people a pure language. 'But who shall lead them? From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia and Cush, the daughter of the dispersed . . .'"

A figure emerged in the mist on Mincing Lane. He wore a coat from the previous century, a reddish coat that seemed to shift with the vagaries of the fog. Porters, carriage-men and servants passed him by but would be hard-pressed to describe him in that instant and had forgotten him

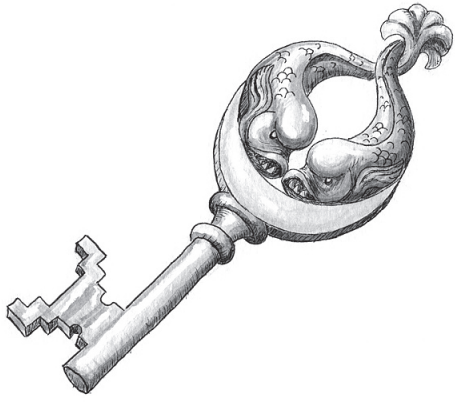
entirely by the time they reached their destinations. Only the rooks wheeling overhead in the late-afternoon sky might have known what the man was, but no one understands their calls. Unheeded, the rooks returned to their towers as the church bells ceased tolling for the Feast of the Epiphany on the first Sunday of 1812.

The man in the crimson coat scanned Mincing Lane, a thoroughfare between Fenchurch Street and Great Tower Street not far from the Thames in the City of London. He found the three-story counting house of a merchant, unremarkable except for its dolphin-shaped door knocker and pale blue window trim. Without removing his gaze from the house, he took from one pocket a shrivelled apple. Fastidiously, he ate. His eyes took in the house, knowing as they already did every angle and every surface. Keeping pace with his eyes, his tongue and teeth delicately destroyed the fruit.

He was down to the core when the first light came on in the house. One window glowed in the mist, flickered as someone inside crossed the candle. He stopped eating, apple core held like a half-moon twixt finger and thumb. A candle was lighted in an attic room, illuminating a golden cat sitting on the window sill. The man's coat undulated, restless and ruddy. Night came. The cold increased but the coat-man disregarded it; he had been much colder before.

Very faint, the man heard a hum in the back of his mind. Eyes still on the house, he sought inward and outward and round-ward, chasing the source of the sound. No good. The ghost whisper of a hum faded, eluding him as it had for a long age of this earth. Somewhere above the fog the moon rose. The house—moored and complacent—was unaware of him, or aware only as a sleeper is, in some deep recess of thought beyond waking.

The man in the coat swallowed the core in one bite. "Soon," he said to the house. The next moment, he was gone.



Chapter 1: Drunk with Secret Joy

London merchant Barnabas Eusebius Playdermon McDoon received a box at his Mincing Lane house on the first Monday of 1812. Sanford, the firm's other partner, a man of few hairs and fewer words, said the box had come in the morning post but no one knew its origin. Barnabas pushed aside the letter he had been writing to their Bombay factor about the Hamburg and Copenhagen markets for smilax root, pepper and mastic gum. The interruption pleased Barnabas: he had fretted all morning, his irritation mounting as he wrote about stratagems and manoeuvres in the North Sea that he would not be able to execute in person. He was tired of waging tabletop battles between his inkpot and his snuffbox. He longed for the cardamom whispers he thought he heard just around the corner of deserted streets, the minarets and elephants he thought he saw reflected in shop windows. He desired to exorcise the ghost of guilt and the memory of actions undone, a love abandoned.

"Well, beans and bacon, let's have a look," said Barnabas, who retained a Scottish accent even after years in London. He cut away

the wrapper, revealing a wooden box. At that moment Barnabas and Sanford heard, or thought they heard, a low, distant hum, like a hundred bees moving together over a far-away meadow. They heard the ticking of the clock on the mantle, the voice of their apprentice (Barnabas's nephew Tom) in the main office, the cry of rooks circling the rooftops, the clatter of horses and wagons on Mincing Lane, all the hubbub of London life. But under that was a humming. Barnabas opened the box. The humming, still unacknowledged by either man, grew louder in their ears, though it remained low and distant, as if the bees had only gotten larger, not closer.

The box held a key, a book, and a letter. Seeing three new mysteries in place of one, Barnabas nearly left his seat with excitement. Sanford's face became three times as dour as before. Barnabas placed the three new things on the desk, thrusting aside his inkbottle, quill, blotting paper, quizzing glass, and now-forgotten letter to the Bombay factor. Gripping his vest with one hand, Barnabas held up the key and commented on its ordinary appearance. Sanford nodded but disagreed inwardly: keys need locks, and McDoon & Associates knew of no lock for this key, which was disorder of the worst kind.

Clutching at his vest so a button nearly came loose, Barnabas turned his attention to the book. On its age-mottled cover stood in abraded gold print: *Journies and Travells to Yount and the Realms Within, Being Divers Recollections of Those Who Wished Themselves to Go*. The book listed no author. The two partners considered the book. They knew every land, city, and fiefdom on all the trade routes, and had shipped out to India when employed by Barnabas's uncle. They corresponded with merchants, bankers, naval agents, and consuls around the world. Their library held maps, portolans, atlases, travel accounts, histories, and descriptions of the known parts of the globe. Yet they had never heard of any place called Yount. Sanford's face was beside itself with premonitions. A key out of place was a travesty, but a country out of place was beyond reckoning, a non-thing, a disorder, a debit without a credit.

Divining Sanford's feelings, Barnabas grinned and held out the book. Sanford declined. Barnabas pressed the book forward. Sanford, with a mulish quiver, refused again to take it.

Barnabas put the book aside, took up his quizzing glass, opened the letter, and began to read. As he read, the humming grew louder—not closer but as if more and larger bees joined the first battalion. He breathed in time to the humming. Sanford's face resembled a winnowing blade: first a misplaced key, then a no-placed land, now Barnabas about to go missing. "Not good at all," Sanford thought. "Bears close minding, someone to put the accounts back to rights."

Barnabas handed the letter and the quizzing glass to Sanford. As Sanford read the letter, Barnabas hummed and stroked his vest, unaware that he did either thing. Despite himself, Sanford too hummed. A thousand thoughts raced through Barnabas's head, spinning and whirling as they did when he was striking deals on the exchange, only a hundred times more powerful. A thousand thoughts marched through Sanford's head, wheeling and stamping as they did when he was closing the account books, only a hundred times more powerful. Humming in unison now, the two men looked at the letter and then at one another. They dimly heard the hurly-burly of Mincing Lane and apprentice Tom teasing his sister Sally as she returned from lessons. The humming overlaid all else in their minds. Barnabas hummed bees that coursed in mighty zigzags and raced in golden loops. Sanford hummed bees that serried together in purposed patterns.

"Yes," they said together, "we will."

The humming crescendoed and ceased. The ticking of the clock was the loudest thing in the room again. The two men leaned back, blinking. Barnabas continued to stroke his vest, fingers tracing the pattern out of India, with its curling red tendrils and little blue flowers on a cream background. His breathing slowed. Sanford handed back the quizzing glass. Barnabas reread the letter, aloud this time:

On the Day of Three Kings,
To Mister McDoon,
Merchant of Mincing Lane,
by Dunster's Court

Dear Sir,

You seek something new, a way to your future by reclaiming your past. We can show that to you, if you take the chance. Enclosed are a key and a book. The book explains itself: others have gone before you, and have left instructions for those who would follow. The key is another matter. We cannot tell you all you need to know about the key, only that you must learn about its peculiar abilities yourself. This is not a game. If you seize the chance, you will be engaged in a great mission upon which the fates of many depend. More we cannot reveal until your heart speaks for you and you pass certain tests.

Go Tuesday week to the Piebald Swan, in Finch-House Mews hard by the London Dock. Two o'clock. Ask for the Purser. He will explain what needs explaining in the first instance. Take a trusted companion, one who would share hazards with you on a long journey if you were to undertake such.

Tell no one of your plans. Others seek the key. Their intentions are not good. Above all, avoid the agents of N.C. Strix Tender Wurm.

This offer will not be repeated. If you do not meet the Purser on Tuesday (being January 14th), you will never be given this opportunity again. Will you take it?

Postscript: We cannot promise heart's desire. But we know what you seek and can help you regain what you have lost. Will you take the chance?

Barnabas rubbed his eyes. Sanford shook his head. Each man

wondered if the ink might suddenly fade or the letter evaporate, so strange and unexpected was its message. Barnabas and Sanford thought of another letter, almost a quarter-century old, locked in a trunk, never revealed and never spoken of. The contents of *that* letter were stroked upon their hearts, Barnabas the recipient, Sanford the confidante.

Barnabas leaped back in memory to a place smelling of coriander, mangoes and sandalwood. Her voice was in his ear, the touch of her arms around his neck. He saw her singing in a garden. Kneading his vest, Barnabas stared at a print on the wall (one of his favourites, depicting Acteon and Diana) but he did not see it. Sanford remembered that place too, where the sun was as huge and red as a pomegranate. He recalled the aftermath: the letter hidden in the trunk, the arguments with Barnabas's uncle (*the* McDoon in those days), threats of dismissal from the firm and of disinheritance. Barnabas had not had the strength to resist his uncle, and had stayed in the firm and kept his inheritance, paying a heavy price to do so.

Barnabas gazed at his calicosh vest. Without raising his face, Barnabas said, "We should go, old friend." Sanford waited. "We must go, to discover whether the letter's claims are true."

Sanford said, "Heart's desire. A most private affair, Barnabas. How could strangers know?"

"Precisely," said Barnabas. "How could they?"

"Speculation," said Sanford, "or just business. Everyone knows, for example, that McDoon & Associates lost on our ventures in clove and nutmeg last year."

"In which case, we should meet the letter writers if only to recoup that loss," said Barnabas, "But, nay, spices as heart's desire? Surely you, of all people, would argue that poetics ought best be left out of the counting house."

"The loss you would have the letter refer to cannot be recovered," said Sanford. His voice now bore traces of his Norfolk upbringing

(Sanford had come to London years ago from Norwich).

"No," Barnabas said, gripping his vest. "But, oh Sanford, who can say? I should have . . . What if she . . . ? Not one day in all these years . . ." Barnabas sighed, then realized that Sanford alluded to more than Barnabas's own loss. Suddenly he saw in memory his uncle, slamming a door, upsetting a shelf of ledger books. Old McDoon had exiled Sanford when Sanford defended Barnabas, ended Sanford's employment. Damned as he was, Sanford could only find employment as a wharfinger's "boy," a mercantile odd-jobs man making barely enough to stay alive. Mrs. Sanford did not survive the blow—she died of pleurisy that winter, a death Sanford laid at the feet of the Old McDoon. Barnabas supported Sanford as best he could in secret, and had been the only mourner at Mrs. Sanford's funeral besides Sanford and the McDoon's cook.

In the end, thought Barnabas, looking at his stockings, which were quince-coloured because it was Monday, w*hat did he gain from it, my implacable uncle? He died not long after he denied me my desire and ruined Sanford. All his talk of our Edinburgh upbringing and our reputation in London, our standing: those things did not warm him in his waning hours. He was as good as his word, though, no matter how hard that word was. He did not disinherit me.* The first thing Barnabas had done as the proprietor of McDoon & Associates was to install Sanford as his partner in the firm.

The ticking clock brought Barnabas back to the present. He said, "You are right, dear Sanford, some things cannot be gotten again."

"But some things might be," said Sanford, the Norfolk thick in his voice, holding his fist in the palm of his other hand. "One loss shall not compound another." He leaned across the desk, prodded the letter. "If even one loss could be mended, then we would be nearly as good as restored."

For a second Barnabas and Sanford shared a montage of memories: a chaffinch on the churchyard gate, a minaret against a great red sun, the roar of surf under a ship the size of a castle. And

crabbed handwriting on a letter locked in a trunk upstairs. Barnabas pushed his chair back, and strode forward to clasp his partner's hand. "Thank you," he said, in a voice low and taut. "We shall double this cape together, old friend. Together."

The partners turned to practical matters, neither of them having heard of the Piebald Swan. Sanford said, "Finch-House Mews is above Hermitage Stairs near Brown's Key and the Oil Wharf. George & Sons, the chandlers, have their office at Finch-House Longstreet and the New Deanery. You'll recall they owe us for jute-sacking from the *Gazelle*'s last voyage."

"Well, buttons and beeswax," said Barnabas, "We should ask 'em, the Georges, about this Piebald Swan."

Sanford shook his head. "The letter is clear about not telling anyone."

Barnabas would not be swayed. "Not to tell anyone of our *plans*," he pointed to the letter, adopting the tone he used with East India Company officials and their lawyers when interpreting a clause in a contract. The lips on Sanford's face stretched briefly upward, the nearest thing to a smile he afforded himself or others. Barnabas was, he knew, "clarifying," as Barnabas called it. He'd seen Barnabas "clarify" contractual points to a profitable nicety many times before. Sanford was an able practitioner of "clarification" himself.

"In formal terms, yes," said Sanford. "But think what might occur should we noise about our enquiries for an inn or coffeehouse named the Piebald Swan. Quick ears will pick up our tale, pass our scent for money in all the rookeries and dens from Cripplegate to Whitechapel."

"Fairly spoken," said Barnabas. "Point to you, round still undecided." Sanford bowed his head. "No good to have every rascal, wretch, and cutpurse from here to Limehouse swarmin' 'round us. Not that we couldn't handle 'em, of course, just that the letter states it pretty plain . . ." Barnabas lost his sentence as he thrust out his arm, waving the quizzing glass in lieu of a cutlass to "handle 'em."

Sanford ducked the sweep of the quizzing glass. "Quite," he said. "And

then there's the N.C. Strix Tender Wurm the letter warns us against."

Barnabas paused in mid-stroke, looking like Playdermon, the hero of the hills whose exploits were put on stage by Buskirk in the year Barnabas was born. "Ah," he exclaimed. "Surely a monstrous brute, this Wurm fellow, a great villain . . . but we . . . aren't . . . scared . . . of . . . him!" Between each word, Barnabas took huge swipes with his phantom blade, ending with an explosive chop to a globe that he deemed suitable as a substitute for the Wurm's head.

Once again, the merest rictus crossed Sanford's face, the grimace that was his mule's smile. *Not scared, no,* he thought. *But best be wary, all the same*.

Satisfied that he had dispatched the Wurm, Barnabas thumbed through the book from the box. As Sanford's eyes narrowed, Barnabas read aloud from a page at random: "'On March 10, 1788 the two ships in the French naval expedition led by de la Perouse left Port Jackson in Australia, witnessed by the British onshore, and vanished. France has been searching ever since for the lost expedition.' Well, there's some proof for you! Everyone has heard about the lost Perouse expedition. There was even that play about it, here in London. Not that I care for the French, mind you, but all the same, poor devils. . . . Ah listen, here's more: 'Some believe that the Perouse ships have wandered off our world onto the mist-wracked roads that lead to Yount . . .'"

Words like "mist-wracked" nearly caused the tendrils on Barnabas's vest to uncurl with delight. Eyes shining, Barnabas was about to steer the McDoon's Mincing Lane counting house onto the salt-roads in search of the Perouse expedition and Yount itself, when Sanford pointed to the clock and reminded Barnabas that they were due at the Exchange right after lunch. The India tendrils strained, and the counting house bucked to leave the quay, but Barnabas with a great sigh warped himself back to the clock and its demands. Barnabas sighed, "Yes, yes, right you are, *tempus fugit*, as the old Tully would put it. But tonight then, we can read the book this evening."

"No," said Sanford. "Tonight we meet at the Jerusalem coffee-

house to discuss the business in camphor wood with Matchett & Frew and their syndicate. Remember?"

Barnabas sighed again and searched the key for clues about its provenance. Finding none, he put the key in a vest-pocket. He took it out, checked the key again, returned it to his pocket. One hand soon found itself stroking the vest-pocket, sometimes fondling the key within. He locked the letter in the lockbox.

"We need to keep the book about so that we can read it, clear up this mystery," said Barnabas. "I know. We'll hide it in plain sight . . . in the library."

Neat and orderly, thought Sanford, who followed Barnabas out of the inner office, up the back stairs, and into the library on the second floor. Barnabas slipped *Journies and Travells to Yount and the Realms Within* onto a lower shelf between *The Life and Adventures of Joe Thompson* and *The Female Quixote*. Waving a hand above his head, Barnabas declared that no one would ever think to find the strange book there. But he was wrong.

Tom could not believe his luck. For an hour, his masters had been in the partners' office, leaving him unsupervised in the clerk's room. Perched high on a stool at his scrivener's desk, surrounded by ledgers and inventory books, he at first diligently reconciled the accounts for the *Gazelle*'s latest voyage. Gradually, however, as the partners' office door remained shut, Tom dwelled instead on the escapades of various friends. His pen moved with languor as he thought of the theatres in Drury Lane, Covent Garden and Vauxhall. The door to the street opened, startling him into activity, but it was only his sister Sally, back from her morning lessons.

Tom was grateful for his situation but he longed for life beyond the ledger books, especially at a time when England was fighting for its life against the tyrant Bonaparte. The house of McDoon dealt in goods from India and China, selling mostly to merchants in Hamburg and Copenhagen and other ports in the North of Europe, with an occasional foray into cochineal or campeche wood

from the southern Americas or figs from Turkey. While the trade sounded exciting, Tom never ventured farther than the Thameside quays and spent most of his days at his daventry-desk within the four walls of the house on Mincing House Lane. Tom had never even been back to Edinburgh, let alone seen Bombay or Madras: *Bit unfair*, Tom thought, his pen blotting. *Uncle Barnabas was sent out to Bombay by his uncle when he was my age!*

Thomas Tobias MacLeish and Sarah Margaret MacLeish had come to their uncle as children. Their mother was sister to Barnabas, a younger sister whose naval husband had died at the Battle of Camperdown in 1797. Having nowhere to turn as a pregnant widow, with a son aged six and a daughter aged three, she had left Edinburgh to plead for haven with Barnabas. Haven he had gladly given her, his only surviving sibling, but she died just months later delivering a stillborn son. In the fifteen years since their mother's death, Tom and Sally had become as son and daughter to Barnabas and he was both father and mother to them, with Sanford as much a parent to them as Barnabas.

Sally loved Tom with the comprehensive fierceness of an orphan. Sally resembled Tom in more than just looks (both had dark unruly hair, darting hazel eyes over high cheekbones, and chins a trifle too small for their faces): she too longed to find a dazzling field upon which to meet the cavalry charge of fate. More, she yearned for high houses of thought that girls were not allowed to enter and she dreamed of hills that could not be found on any map in the City of London.

The interlude ended as Tom knew it must, with Barnabas and Sanford returning to the outer office. (Sanford's full name was Nehemiah Severin Sanford, but he never answered to anything other than his last name, finding it uneconomical to use three words when one would suffice.) Tom picked up his pen, sighed, did sums in the margins of wastepaper fetched out of the cartonnier. Sally had already gone upstairs. Magpies cried above the gables, horses whinnied outside, an oyster-man hawked his wares in the street.

The clock seemed to tick even more slowly than usual.

On her way to her room, Sally made a detour. She heard footsteps on the back stairs, which was odd because she heard the maid—for whose use the back stairs were primarily intended—gossiping in the kitchen ("mardling," the maid called it) with her aunt, the cook. The footsteps must, therefore, belong to Barnabas and Sanford, which was doubly odd because neither man regularly left the ground floor during business hours. Sally dashed across the landing before the two merchants reached the second floor from the opposite direction. She dove into the library, and then scrambled under the writing desk in the far corner. Sanford and her uncle walked into the library. Hardly daring to breathe, Sally knelt under the desk and listened (dismissing thoughts that it was not very ladylike to hide under desks and eavesdrop).

When the men were gone, she came out from under the desk and searched the shelves for whatever book her uncle had deemed so important or dangerous that he had hidden it. Sally knew the library better than anyone else. For Barnabas and Sanford the library was a tool of the trade, for Tom a duty, but for Sally it was a field of pleasure, a storehouse, the contents of which she purloined on nocturnal raids. Her schoolmates, the daughters of other men of good standing, fancied romances and tales of gothic horror, but Sally hungered for knowledge about political economy, history, natural philosophy, just about any topic that a man (but, alas, not a woman) might debate in Parliament or in the coffeehouses. Her uncle worried about how she was to marry, since few men were interested in an educated woman, but he indulged her. Sally located the book in five minutes.

Her room was a cubby right under the eaves, smelling of tea and pepper because the rest of the attic was used to store trade goods. By the gable-window, alone with her cat Isaak, Sally began to read *Journies and Travells to Yount and the Realms Within*. The yearning in her heart responded, quickened as she turned the pages, began to take shape and name. The book's anonymous author, or authors,

seemed to be present, whispering in her ear. She missed lunch, then almost missed dinner and barely ate when she did come to the table. The cook was not the only one to notice Sally's agitation. "Roasted rabbit, Miss Sally," urged the cook. "With mustard gravy just the way you like it." But Sally paid little heed to either coney or mustard.

"Something is afoot in this house," said the cook to her niece, the maid. "Or I am a stag-turkey." The cook and the maid were in the kitchen as noon neared. They had just heard Sally enter the library, followed closely by Barnabas and Sanford.

The cook picked up her flairing knife in one hand and the rabbit to be skinned in the other. Her words followed the rhythm of her knife.

"I have been in this house a long time," the cook said. "And I feel something's come unstilted." She *had* been a long time at McDoon & Associates. Originally from a village by the Norfolk Broads, near the fishing port of Great Yarmouth, she had been called to London by Sanford many years ago. Her mother had been a maid to Sanford's family in Norwich, and now the cook had called her niece from the same village. Unlike Sanford, the cook's Norfolk accent was plain to hear at all times. She ran the kitchen the way Sanford ran the office: no pan was ever misplaced, no tureen lacked its top.

Her niece, the maid, nodded. The cook put down the flairing knife, wiped her hands, picked up the leaching knife to slice the skinned coney.

"Yestereve," the cook said, leaching the meat. "I felt uneasy. Mark my words, niece, this home is being watched . . . spied on like."

"Aunt," said the maid. "As I lighted the candles yesterday, I had a sort of quaver, like Old Shuck had walked on my shadow. There was something outside in the dark. I thought maybe I saw a man near Dunster Court."

Both women crossed themselves.

"Mister McDoon and Mister Sanford, now, they are up to something, those two; they'll keep this home safe, so don't you worry about no boggarts in the alley," said the cook. "But could be

there's our Miss Sally to worry about, regardless."

The cook put the coney in the roasting-pan, and said, "Miss Sally is a funny little smee."

Aunt and niece thought of ducks trapped by nets in the Norfolk Broads, how the "smees" struggled in the brashy reeds until exhaustion and the hunter's hand overcame them. The cook wiped her hands again, touched the medallion of St. Morgaine (the baker-abbess of Chiswick-near-Shea, the matron saint of cooks) around her neck , returned to grinding the mustard seeds for the dinner's sauce.

"I think she sees things you and I don't, niece, nor other folks neither, though what things I don't rightly know," said the cook, shaking her head. "Always up in her room with her books."

The cook finished grinding the mustard seeds.

"Which ain't normal itself, her all alone up in the attic, in the *maid's* room, mind you," said the cook.

"Grateful I am for that, aunt," said her niece. "Especially as means sharing a room instead with you in the back-house, with its lovely big fireplace."

"Make yourself useful then," said the aunt. "Fetch out the china with the pheasant on it, the blue pheasant, that's the one, it's Sally's favourite, we'll serve on it today. So long as Sally eats proper, won't matter so much what she sees . . . funny little smee."

Sally disappointed the cook that afternoon, hardly touching the coney in mustard gravy. She did not voice her excitement but Tom sensed something, just as he sensed an electric air about Sanford and Uncle Barnabas. Tom sensed equally that Covent Garden might be less exciting than whatever agitated the other three. Rather than visit the theatre after dinner, Tom intercepted Sally as she hurried upstairs.

"You are quiet today, sister," said Tom. He did not need to say more. Sally beckoned him into the partners' room, empty since Barnabas and Sanford were at a coffeehouse. The coals in the fireplace and a lone candle on the table created shadows on the walls. Sally told Tom what she had read.

"A book about a lost continent in the southern seas?" Tom laughed. "Well, I'll sooner believe that the giants will walk off the Guildhall clock! It's an old and discredited story, dear sister! Cook and Bougainville have been there, to the far South Seas, you know that. They charted Australia, New Zealand and Van Diemen's Land. But that's all, there's nothing more to be discovered except perhaps some tiny islands not worth the mention. At most, we'd find some strange animals, with luck some gold or cotton or other useful stuffs worth trading, and a king we'd either have to conquer or make a treaty with."

He stopped when he saw the anger on Sally's face.

"The book," she said, "The book . . . it's real, what it says, I can tell. You must believe me. Let me show you." Something in her voice made him follow her to the library. Lighting one candle and shutting the door, in case Barnabas and Sanford returned early from the coffeehouse, Sally produced the book for Tom. Seeing the dog-eared, weathered tome, the apprentice became a little less jocular. The mere sight of it made Sally's claims more plausible.

Sally read, "'Ptolemy and Pomponius Mela assumed the existence of a great southern continent, necessary to balance the boreal continents, for how otherwise would the Earth remain equilibrated and avoid wandering lost in the void?'"

She paused. The lacquered globe in the room caught the candlelight.

"'Plato wrote of the fall of Atlantis, a mangled legend in his time but one preserving a measure of truth. A cataclysm in ancient times wrenched the continents and sent the ocean out of its bed. Does not the Bible itself tell us of the great Flood?'"

Sally paused again. She and Tom thought about forty days and forty nights of rain. The dancing shadows from the candle seemed to rise up and overwhelm the ship's model on the top shelf.

She read out another passage: "'Far south of India and Sumatra lies land, exceeding difficult to reach, of no fixed latitude, fenced by perils. Some say this is the land of Prester John, in the wilderness of

sunrise seas beyond Araby. Others say it is a floating island, peopled with the races described by Herodotus. The Chinese admiral Cheng Ho, on his expeditions through the Indian Ocean to eastern Africa, is said to have lost ships on a coast that no one has since seen. Dutch whalers speak of mountains on the anti-septentrional horizon and say that boats seeking those mountains never return, only that sometimes one hears voices over the near-frozen waters of the deepest south.'"

Tom stirred. "That sounds like what the survivors claimed happened to the boats of the *Glen Carrig*."

Sally and Tom thought about the story published by the survivors of that ill-fated ship. The *Glen Carrig* had wrecked in 1757 in the southern ocean, blown far off the shipping lanes. The ship's boats had landed on vast mud-flats where they were attacked by creatures unknown to natural philosophers. Plangent cries had filled the air, and other ships, empty, were stranded in the estuaries of that land. The authors swore that their adventures were true, but they were derided or pitied as madmen whose thirst and hunger as they drifted on the open sea had forced nightmares into their minds.

The candle burned low. Sally thumbed ahead to a page very near the end of the book. Her voice lowered as she read again: "'We live in the Age of Reason. We employ the tools of enquiry that Locke and Leibniz, Hume and Condorcet have uncovered so that we may correct the omission of Yount from mankind's histories and systems of thought. Yount is a third hemisphere, a *terra abscondita*, a hidden world within a lost sea, or *mare perdita*.'"

Tom shrugged and said, "All those claims hardly make it as correct as Cocker."

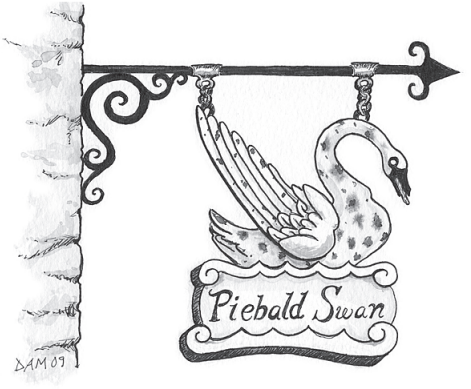
Sally implored, "Damn it, brother: *sapere aude*."

Tom looked shocked at the first expression and then blank at the second. Sally translated: "'Dare to know.' It's Latin, the rallying cry of our modern age, the motto of Kant."

Tom laughed. "I yield, sister. You are harder than Coade-stone." He and Sally had been schooled in German, Tom because he needed

it for McDoon & Associates' business in Germany and Scandinavia, Sally because her uncle had indulged her desire to learn as much as (no, more than) Tom. One of McDoon's corresponding merchants, the Landemanns of Hamburg, had recommended a German governess, Fraulein Reimer, a member of the German expatriate community around Wellclose Square. Fraulein Reimer had become part of the family over the years and now lived in a small apartment in the back-house behind the main house. She had not, however, had uniform success with each of her charges. Tom had a lazy facility with German but annoyed Fraulein Reimer with his indifference to the dative and genitive cases. Sally was Fraulein Reimer's star pupil, speaking with the precision of a Heidelberg professor. Unfortunately, Sally acted like a Heidelberg professor in other ways too. "*Quatsch*," was all Tom could muster in reply, the German word for "nonsense," which he heard all too often from Fraulein Reimer.

Sally was about to continue her lecture when they heard the clackering of the brass dolphin on the door as Barnabas and Sanford returned from the coffeehouse. By the time Barnabas and Sanford had reached the top of the front stairs, Tom was in his bedroom, and Sally was tiptoeing into her room in the attic. Tom would not admit it to Sally, but he thought about Yount late into the night. Sally was beyond debate. She wished herself to go. Somewhere far off there was a humming, threaded now with an intermittent, thin wailing, an eerie contrapunto that made Sally cry out in her sleep.



Chapter 2: A Visit to the Piebald Swan

For the next week Barnabas thought about little else except the meeting with the Purser, whoever he might be. Bursting with gambits, queries, and recipes for swift success, but not able to tell Tom or Sally about them, Barnabas shared his thoughts instead with Yikes, the ancient border collie curled at his feet by the fire, and Chock, the parrot given as a gift by an East Indian connection.

"What's lost will be recovered, well, what do you think of that?"

Yikes—whom no one had ever heard bark or ever seen move more than three feet at any speed resembling haste—regarded Barnabas with equanimity and snuggled closer to the hearth. Uncharitable souls noted that Yikes, whom Barnabas characterized as a "Scotsman in London, just like me," was no more a border collie than King George III was sane; in truth, Yikes had come into the world behind a knacker's yard near Bishopsgate, so the only border known to him was that between the City and Spitalfields, and the only sheep Yikes was likely ever to herd were those in his sleep. Chock made the sound for which he was named, and shifted from

one foot to another on his perch. Pleased with these responses, Barnabas forged ahead with his drawing-room plans.

Sanford was another matter. Learning about Yount was important, and seeking to restore a past that Barnabas had thrown away most important of all, but McDoon & Associates had to be in order before they embarked on a new venture. One locked one's door and arranged for alternative postal delivery before a journey.

"Beans and bacon," Barnabas muttered when Sanford urged their attention to the disposition of the northern trades.

"Barnabas, be reasonable," said Sanford. "Our regular trade is blocked but the Landemanns in Hamburg and the Buddenbrooks in Luebeck write of loopholes in the French embargo. Helgoland in the North Sea, Toenning on Jutland: the Royal Navy protects merchants at those places."

Barnabas, with a "*Quatsch*," consented to be led through the opportunities to break the French blockade. Would Tuesday the 14th never come?

Tuesday came, January 14th, the feast day of St. Fiona, so all the shops had a dried nettle hung above the door in memory of her martyrdom. Barnabas and Sanford stepped out into a raw, sunless day. Barnabas admired the dolphin door knocker as he closed the door behind him, and wondered if the pale blue window trim wouldn't want refreshing come spring. From the McDoon comptoir in Mincing Lane, they walked towards the Piebald Swan in Wapping. All the life of the City of London thronged about them, a raucous river of buying and selling in the world's greatest port. Their house was nestled in the heart of the City, surrounded by the counting houses of friends and rivals such as Chicksey, Veneering & Stobbles just round the corner, Matchett & Frew in Crosby Square and others in Austin Friars and Pope's Head Alley. The pales of their immediate world were the Bank of England and Royal Exchange on Threadneedle Street, the East India House on Leadenhall Street, the Baltic Coffeehouse near St. Mary-Axe, the Victualling Office on

Tower Hill. On a stroll, Barnabas was apt to swell with pride at these edifices to trade, and expatiate on Great Britain's *imperia pelagi*, its oceanic empire, but the intensity of today's mission left him no time for such amplitude. The Purser awaited, and Yount beyond him. The key in his vest-pocket bounced with every stride.

Farther east they headed, near the Danish Church and Wellclose Square, where many of their captains lived, in a neighbourhood known for German merchants and sugar refiners. Skirting the London Dock, they entered a run of streets in the district of Wapping. Past a great brewery, near an even larger staveyard, they found the New Deanery, which intersected Finch-House Longstreet where George & Sons, Ship Chandlers, had their place of business. But Barnabas and Sanford did not halt at George & Sons (*payment owed us*, thought Sanford), hunting instead for the Finch-House Mews that must be nearby. The houses on Finch-House Longstreet were narrow and nondescript, built a century earlier in the plain fashion favoured after the Great Fire of 1666. Few people were about: a butcher's apprentice in an apron hurrying westwards to the Smithfield market, a woman with a load of old clothes for sale on her back, a peddler going house to house selling candle stubs and used suet, one or two men idling at a corner who might be sailors on shore leave. Barnabas paid little heed, but Sanford did not like the looks of the idlers. Wapping was no place for the faintheartedness.

As Finch-House Longstreet turned towards the Thames, inns and taverns catering to a seafaring clientele appeared. Sanford made a slight show of thrusting his walking stick forward with every other step, a parsimonious yet eloquent gesture not lost on several men slouched in front of an alehouse. Interspersed with the taverns were a few coffeehouses, more refined establishments, though hardly as exalted as coffeehouses in the City. Shopkeepers, broker's clerks, coopers, chandlers, minor excise officials, shipwrights, and owners of ropewalks and tar-sheds frequented the Wapping coffeehouses, not great merchants such as Barnabas and Sanford. The proximity of the docks made sailor's tales and other fables as much the subject of

conversation as ship arrival and departure dates, the price of corn or alum, and the state of the war against the tyrant Napoleon. Barnabas slowed as he passed an inn called The White Hart—notorious for the imaginative mendacity of its drinkers—and stopped. A narrow alleyway led off Finch-House Longstreet. Stepping over dung, Barnabas and Sanford walked down a slight incline into the mews. The mews were empty, but at one end was a little sign painted with the likeness of a piebald swan. Barnabas fingered the key in his pocket and walked up the steps of the coffeehouse. Sanford, with a glance over his shoulder, followed.

The Piebald Swan was tiny and seemed to have survived the Great Fire, with its exposed roof beams and crooked stairs. A coffee urn sat on a counter at one end, tended by a man in a skull-cap. He had a short black beard, dark eyes and coppery skin. The man said nothing but looked intently at his only visitors. On a credenza next to the urn was a coffee-service in gold-rimmed white porcelain with harbour scenes painted expertly on each cup. The walls were bare except for an engraving of a man swimming with a dolphin, and a painting of a schooner taking wind into its sails under moonlight.

"I received a letter. I have come to see the Purser," said Barnabas, warming to the puzzle as he did when entering a business negotiation. He felt the key in his pocket. He thought he might have heard a humming as he touched it.

The man in the skullcap pointed to Barnabas's pocket. In an accent that neither Barnabas nor Sanford could place, he asked, "What do you have in your pocket?"

At the very edge of memory, Barnabas vaguely recalled that question coming into an old story of another riddling contest. But didn't the question in that story have to do with a ring?

"A key," said Barnabas.

"To what?"

"I do not know. That's why I seek the Purser."

"Who is your companion?"

"He is . . ." Barnabas checked himself again. "He is the companion

I was directed to bring with me. We are partners."

The man in the skullcap looked from Barnabas to Sanford and back again. Sanford was impressed with how much their host said without speaking. The man in the skullcap pointed upstairs, and stepped aside with his finger still outstretched. Under the proprietor's gaze, Barnabas and Sanford mounted the stairs.

The second floor was all one room, with gable windows letting in wan light from the mews, and a table at one end. At the table sat another man in a skullcap. He might have been a twin to the proprietor except that he was a little taller and had a larger nose. Like his compatriot, he dressed in a way that drew no attention to himself but was, upon close inspection, a model of simple elegance. His skullcap was black, with magenta embroidery.

Barnabas said, "Your cap, sir, I have never seen such a colour."

The man at the desk said, "My people have recently devised the art of extracting dyes from coal-tar. This colour is one we have discovered using the new process."

Self-professed abolitionists, Barnabas and Sanford were ashamed at themselves for wondering that such a dark-skinned people could possess a technology superior to that of any true-born Englishman (or any other European, for that matter): dye from coal-tar was a thing unknown. The merchants were willing to quash their prejudice in pursuit of profit, however, and wondered if the gentleman might consider a joint venture with McDoon & Associates to introduce the new dye process to Great Britain. Let Napoleon try to stop that!

The man at the desk offered compliments on Barnabas's vest. Barnabas beamed: he was wearing his best today, a sherbasse silk with cerulean twiggery and scarlet buds traced on an ivory background. The man in the magenta-limned skullcap said, "I am the Purser. We have much to discuss and very little time to do so. We have summoned you because we need you. More than that I cannot say. The Learned Doctors in Yount will answer your questions. Assuming, of course, that you want to go."

Barnabas tugged at his vest and clenched the key in his pocket.

Bees coursed in his mind through the scent of cardamom under a ripe red sun as he said, "One moment, hold on, figs and feathers . . . of course I do, want to go that is, but this whole thing is like a pig in a poke, you know."

The Purser frowned. "Pig in a poke? I do not know this expression." His accent, like the proprietor's, was hard to describe, soft and yet direct, with rolled *R*s and muted vowels.

Barnabas explained. "Ah," said the Purser. "I see. You want to know more before you commit. Wise practice, in trade and in . . . ventures such as these. There is no time to tell you everything, even if I could. Like you, I am a man of business, responsible for logistics not policy. The Learned Doctors can answer the deep questions but you must win through to Yount to speak with them."

Sanford looked through the nearest window over a tiled roof across the mews, above which he could make out the tops of masts in the distance. A rook's shadow glided across the roof.

The Purser continued. "Long ago there was a great change in our worlds. We do not fully understand it but in strange ways your world and ours became linked. We call it the Great Confluxion. It is not natural, has potentially disastrous consequences for both our worlds."

Barnabas and Sanford listened closely. After years of negotiating business deals, however, they knew better than to swallow whatever they were told without chewing more than once. Sanford remained suspicious that the book, the key, and this visit might be a swindle. Both men were poised to "clarify," as if they were assessing the quality of tea auctioned at the East India Company House in Leadenhall Street or were querying the Khodja merchants in Bombay about the quality of pepper and cassia-bark for sale. Yet something had overcome their usual scepticism the morning the box arrived, and something had propelled them to the coffeehouse. They had read throughout the week from the book secreted in the McDoon library, belief alternating with disbelief. The book contained references to the "Great Confluxion," but neither man could make sense of it.

Barnabas wondered if it had something to do with Freemasonry or with stories he had heard in the Orient about multi-armed goddesses and dragons with beards. Sanford thought perhaps it had to do with the lost tribes of Israel or with the ships of Tarshish mentioned by Isaiah and other prophets: "Cross over to your own land, O Ships of Tarshish, this is a harbour no more. He has stretched out his hand over the sea, he has shaken the kingdoms . . ."

The Purser said, "All our science has not availed to separate our worlds. There is something deeper at work than science, something you and I might call 'magic,' a primitive term but all we have. We have discovered that someone from your world must help us. I do not know how, except that the key is involved. The history of the key is too long to recount now. Have you heard of Tlon, Uqbar, and Tertius Orbis? Of Xiccarph? Of Carcosa and Hastur? No? Well, if you make it through to Yount, you will learn more, you will understand what the key can do if used by the proper hand."

A shadow slid across the rooftop again, catching Sanford's eye. The Purser leaned even closer, lowered his voice. "The key can do other things if it is used by . . . other hands. It has great power."

Sanford looked out the window again, thinking he heard a sound from the mews below. Barnabas stroked his vest and said, "The Wurm fellow the letter spoke of!"

"Yes," said the Purser. "'The Wurm fellow,' as you call him, is—how shall I say?—more than dangerous. He is . . . He wants power. More power than your Napoleon—yes, imagine that!—and he will never stop hunting for the key. Strix Tender Wurm changes guise, so it is hard to say who and where he is. We've heard him called The Yellow King, the one who wears the Pallid Mask. He may be the one called Professor Moriarty—have you heard that name?—rumoured to head London's network of thieves and villains. Others say he is Doctor Silvano, the art connoisseur, who you may remember tried to poison the Duke of Umbershire and then disappeared. That is how Wurm is here in your world. He is even worse in ours. He is in our oldest legends, an owl larger than a man, with eyes of fire and

a beak like a sabre. He haunts our earliest memories after the Great Confluxion."

The merchants of McDoon & Associates were most struck by the Purser's matter-of-fact delivery of this information. Sanford contemplated the possibility of a man, if man it was, alive since the Flood. He reached in his mind for Michael's sword and Gabriel's trumpet. Barnabas was torn. All thoughts of pepper, smilax root and mastic gum had swirled out of his head. Yount was in trouble. He did not know why, but the key had come to him, so he must help Yount. More: he sought the love he had surrendered. The letter said someone in Yount might be able to help him. So, he wished himself to go. But the story the Purser told was preposterous.

Barnabas said, "Sir, what proof have you of what you say? Why, who are you anyway? You have our names, but we do not have yours. For all we know, you might be a scheming Turk or Parthian!"

The Purser did not look affronted. "I am Salmius Nalmius Nax. Purser First Class, Commissionary for the Royal Fleet of Yount Major, and Deputy Attendant for the Fencibles Squadron." He pronounced his name "Salms Nalms" but wrote it, Barnabas and Sanford were to learn later, "Salmius Nalmius." Something, he told them when they first saw it written, to do with old family custom and Yountish protocol. *Like the "k" in "knife,"* thought Barnabas and left it at that. Salmius Nalmius Nax continued. "I know my story is strange to you, and you have every right to doubt me. Indeed, you would not have been called if you did not doubt. I can only assure you that what I say is true."

"Beans and bacon!" said Barnabas. "We are no pouts fresh taken from the nest! Come, you offer no proof, only pure assertion."

Salmius Nalmius Nax remained impassive, except for a flicker right around his eyes. "I think," he said, "it must be—how do you put it?—that the proof of the pudding must be in the eating."

"Which means no proof at all right now!" said Barnabas. "With pardon, sir, but you seem no more trustworthy than a bishop in Barchester. What *exactly* do you propose?"

Sanford nodded in support but had half an eye on the window. He felt something was in the mews. He did not like the shadows that wove across the rooftops, even knowing that they belonged to rooks.

Salmius Nalmius Nax adjusted his skullcap before responding. "You must voyage to Yount. Soon, weather to permit. With Mr. Sanford here, if that is your wish and his. There will be . . . challenges along the way and then again when you arrive. That is all I can say."

Barnabas and Sanford stood still. They wanted to do this business but these were not standard terms and conditions. Barnabas asked, "You are devilish hard to discuss business with, Mr. Nax, sir! The giants on the Guildhall clock are more reasonable! Were we inclined to go on this journey, what assurances could you give us of our return? And how should we conduct the business of McDoon & Associates in the meantime?"

"No assurances whatsoever, Mr. Sanford," said Salmius Nalmius Nax. "None can be forthcoming, this is not risk such as you might have underwritten at Lloyd's. As for your firm's business, we would run it on your behalf."

"Ridiculous!" said Sanford.

"Nonsense!" said Barnabas. The idea that a total stranger would run McDoon & Associates was so infuriating that Barnabas, for once, was at a loss for words. The merchants of McDoon & Associates left the Piebald Swan.

The proprietor and the Purser watched Barnabas and Sanford stalk away. The skullcap slumped on Salmius Nalmius Nax's head as he whispered something in another language to his companion. Both men looked pained. "We expected this," Salmius Nalmius Nax said. "But it is hard all the same."

Barnabas spat out, "Buttons and beeswax!" over and over again as he and Sanford stormed off. He so deeply believed in Yount that his anger was all the keener for the Purser's laconic half-statements and ludicrous proposition. Sanford was even angrier about the possible truth of the Purser's assertions about Wurm ("For their

worm shall not die," he quoted to himself. "Their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh"). So upset were the merchants of McDoon & Associates that they failed to notice two things. The first was that, as they moved down the mews towards the alley leading to Finch-House Longstreet, the Piebald Swan seemed to shift or elongate slightly, like fruit seen through a cut-glass bowl as one walks around it. The second was that, as they made their way down the Longstreet back to the City and their home on Mincing Lane, a figure detached itself from a doorway and followed them.

Chapter 3: Eyes in the Dark

Sally's dreams were vertiginous and filled with a crying in the air. She read feverishly from the book, sharing what she could with Tom. She missed many meals (to the cook's distress but no one else's) and even missed her lessons once, which normally would have elicited comment, but neither her uncle nor Sanford noticed. She wondered if they had read the book too, and how it was that they had gotten the book in the first place. She tried to dismiss her fears but recalled similar dreams from childhood. Once, when she was twelve, Uncle Barnabas had called for the doctor. The doctor had patted her hand and said to her uncle, "A mild form of oneiric hysteria, related to an eidetic imagination—a common affliction of the gentle sex, particularly when they read and engage in other activities unsuited to their temperament." But the nightmares had continued and now they were back.

She did not confide in Fraulein Reimer or in the cook, not wanting to cause them concern. Her only comforts were Isaak her cat, her commonplace book, and her visits to the partners' office

when no one was there. She had rescued Isaak from a group of boys on the street, who had bound the kitten and were about to smash it with stones. She'd given it the German version of "Isaac" because she felt there weren't enough uses for the letter "k" in English. Then it turned out that Isaak wasn't a boy-kitten after all but the name had already taken. As a sacrifice saved, Isaak loved Sally utterly. She had long golden fur, with a tail that stood up like a plume when she galloped, and pantaloons that flounced as she bounded onto Sally's lap. She—Isaak, that is—stood guard at the top of the attic stairs, hissing and spitting at all comers. Everyone else in the house was terrified of Isaak, except Yikes, who ignored her, and the cook, who gave her the run of the kitchen and fed her milk from a chipped saucer. Isaak curled in Sally's lap as she—Sally, that is—copied extracts into her commonplace book: snippets from Cowper, Gibbon and Pope, passages from Shakespeare, Thomson and Mrs. Barbauld, her own translations of Novalis and Tieck, and much else besides.

For as long as she could remember, Sally had visited the partners' office once or twice a week, usually in the evening, whenever all the male members of McDoon & Associates were out. The mahogany furniture gleamed because, except on the warmest days of summer, a fire was always kept there. The clock ticked. Yikes slept by the fire, Chock sat in his cage, Isaak eyed them with contempt and stalked shadows.

On the walls were pictures she lived in. She imagined herself among the tiny figures in the paintings of the East India Company's fort at Madras and the European and American trading factories at Canton. She could name each kind of ship in the mezzotint prints: chalks and galliots beating up the Trave at Luebeck, cats and pinks in the Danish Sound, schooners coasting off Dantzig. On the main table sat a bone-china punchbowl with a picture of the East Indiaman *The Lady Burgess* captioned "Launched September 1808 for the Honourable East India Company, God Speed and All Success!" Sanford had insisted that all visitors be reminded how necessary such wishes were: he had hung pictures of the shipwrecked

East Indiamen *Grosvenor* and *The Earl of Abergavenny*, though Barnabas had re-hung them so that the opened door obscured them ("Damned unpleasant having to talk business with those poor souls staring at you.") Sally had studied every feature of the distressed crew members, memorized the details of spars and half-submerged rigging.

The print next to the shipwrecks drew Sally even more: a white boy stunned in the water, attacked by a grey shark with jaws agape, his shipmates desperately trying to haul him in, a black sailor overseeing the rescue from the boat. She often lost herself in the trinity of white boy, grey shark and black man.

Even more than the pictures, Sally knew the smell of that room, could summon it at will, a deep aroma of pipe smoke, coal ash, leather and ink, shot through with the scent of sandalwood from a carved box that Barnabas had treasured home from Bombay. All the way home, thought Sally. Home.

Isaak, commonplace jottings, and the redolence of that room were some defence against her fears, but soon were tested. Her uncle and Mr. Sanford had been exceptionally distracted at breakfast on St. Fiona's day, and then had gone out on some business errand. When they returned, both men were in foul humour, which added to Sally's anxiety. The following days were ugly at McDoon & Associates. Barnabas and Sanford were curt with everyone, especially Tom, whose work the rest of that week never seemed to please the partners. An error in a remittance from a ship chandler in Wapping caused a huge row. A letter from the Landemanns in Hamburg was full of more bad news (salt shipments were being held up by the French army blockades). The cook even burned the kippers at breakfast one morning, adding to the general malaise.

"Burned the kippers," muttered the cook, scraping the remnants into the sink. "Well, I never in all my time!"

"Scorched 'em quite wholly," observed her niece.

"You'll mind your mouth or you'll be cleaning this pan yourself,"

replied the cook. Her niece dared a smile, and moved up to lend a hand with the drying. Aunt and niece worked side by side in silence.

When the cleaning up was done, the cook leaned against the sink and sighed. She pointed to a potato-mallet hanging above a chopping block. "I'm like that old beetle," she said, meaning the mallet. "Beetle-headed anyhow. Piece of wood through and through. I ought to have seen this coming."

"What coming, aunt?" asked her niece.

"Whatever's coming, niece," said the cook, dusting off a soup tureen from the blue pheasant service, though the tureen already sparkled. "I can feel something, like chickens in the coop when there's a stoat slinking about outside. You see, you needs to get to know the ways of a house, know 'em right proper. Take Mr. McDoon, for instance, he is very particular about how his vests are pressed and laid out."

The maid nodded. She had only recently come to the house on Mincing Lane.

"And Miss Sally," said the cook, moving from the tureen to the mustard pot. "Upstairs in her room, dreaming and daffling and reading in all them books. She is looking for something, only she doesn't know what."

The cook's cloth found invisible dust on the toast forks and rinding knives as she continued her tutorial, "Our Mr. Sanford now, Norfolk bred just like we are, he has his little ways too. Likes goat's meat. How he loves goat's meat. Ever since he and Mr. McDoon came back from their great trip to India, which was the cause of all the trouble with the Old McDoon. I will gladly fix it for him English-ways, but no, he must have it with pepper and spices from India, or it isn't good enough for him! I have tried my best but, to speak wholly true, I just don't hold with that foreign way of dealing with an honest meat."

The cook looked up from her dusting, and said, "So my point, and maybe I got a smittick off the point, but now I will come back to it. The point, my niece, is that a house has its ways and, if you

listen and watch, you can see when those ways have been disturbed, sometimes even before others know it themselves. So, something is a-coming, I says."

The maid thought again of strangers in Dunster Court. The cook wagged a great runicled finger, and then shooed the maid away from the kitchen, saying, "Be watchful, my niece!"

Sally kept to herself, but no one except Fraulein Reimer and the cook sought her out anyway. All the men were exercised with their work and had no time. Her classmates seemed even more frivolous than usual. At every opportunity, she spirited the book to her room for reading by candlelight, poring over it as closely as the Sibyl of Cumae studied scrolls in the print above the chiffonier downstairs. *Journies and Travells to Yount and the Realms Within* was a compendium of disjointed details from many sources. Some passages were translations, such as those "from the records in Persian held by the customs-house at Bandar Abbas on the Straits of Hormuz" or those "being originally in Arabic from the port city of Muscat." Memoires archived at St. John's, the Jesuit college in Goa, were referenced, likewise manuscripts at the University of Leiden and at the presidency offices in Madras, surveys commissioned by the Royal Observatory at Greenwich and by the *Casa de Contracion*, the trade college in Seville, and so on. Sally knew something of Alexander Dalrymple's hypotheses on the existence of a great southern continent, which helped drive Cook on his famous voyages, and of Lord Macartney's embassy to China in 1792. But she had not heard about Matthew Flinders's voyage from New South Wales to Capetown in 1797, or the exploits of Jabez Haverstraw, a sailor shipwrecked south of the Nicobar Islands. Sally read about whales run ashore in Mozambique and albatrosses tangled in the rigging of Dutch East Indiamen, about "the Great Confluxion," eddies in the cosmic ocean, the haunted roads leading to Yount.

Throughout the book ran notes of warning: references to mysterious forces, a grasping hand, suffering voices on the wind . . .

Sally almost felt she understood the threat, but not quite. The name "Strix Tender Wurm" snaked its way through the text. Sally struggled to make sense of the hints and allusions, but the book itself seemed to thwart her. Although she refused to believe it, Sally felt that the text shifted from one reading to the next: sometimes a section she had read the day before seemed to have disappeared, no matter how carefully she looked for it, sometimes the entries seemed to change order or the wording to elide subtly.

Sally, when not engrossed in the book, gazed out her attic window. So she had always done, trying to know the world beyond the house but not able or allowed to join it. She cradled Isaak for hours, looking down to the street, observing the sarabande of traffic, tracing patterns of pedestrians in cat's fur. She wondered what passersby were thinking, where they were going. Yet the greatest fascination of all was above the rooftops. Sally looked to the sky, especially at night, seeking the moon above London's fume. Tom not infrequently asked Sally what phase the moon was in rather than look it up in the almanac. She was always right, no matter how much fog and smoke hid the moon. "Our own lunatic! Our captains could tell the tide by Sally," said Tom.

She began to notice an odd man and an even odder bird in the street. Mincing Lane was heavily trafficked, so she could not be sure, but at dawn there seemed to be a man loitering near the corner of Dunster Court. Not loitering exactly, but busy in an aimless sort of way, she thought, someone affecting one task while actually on another errand altogether. She became aware of him on Thursday, January 16th, the feast day for St. Nigel-le-Blayne, which is how she remembered, because the church bells were muted on that day in honour of the saint's deafness. Friday he was there, also Saturday . . . at least it seemed to be the same man, though the distance from her window down to the street, and the constant stir of the crowd, made it hard for her to be sure. She noticed him primarily because of his old-fashioned overcoat, like something from the engravings of a time before King George III. To match a coat that out of style,

he really might have worn a bag-wig. The coat was remarkable not just for its cut and length. It was made of a reddish material that glistened as the man moved about the street. The coat almost seemed to writhe. Sally pulled back when she thought that, rubbed her eyes, and felt queasy. When she looked out again, the man and the coat were gone. She thought about telling Fraulein Reimer, but decided even Fraulein Reimer would find Sally's suspicions absurd. In any case, the man in the coat was absent on Sunday and on Monday. "Silly," she murmured to Isaak, who pressed up against her. "It's just a man on his way to his employment. Must pass this way every day, only I have not noticed before."

The bird she saw a day or two after she first saw the tall man. Sally observed many details from her bower: dray horses lumbering up to merchant warehouses, gentlemen in their cups late of an evening, the knife-grinder making his rounds, the baked potato vendor with his brazier, rooks disturbed from their perches by chimney-sweeps. Nothing escaped her gaze, certainly not the wren flitting from window to window across the street. A wren in the country is too common for mention, but a wren in the city is—as Mr. Sanford would put it—a thing out of its place. The wren seemed to be flying systematically from one house to the next, perching in crannies and cornices, almost as if it was searching for something. Sally laughed off the thought but there was the wren now positioned opposite the McDoon comptoir, its head rotating in a most un-wrenlike fashion.

She laughed again at her fears, looked out, the wren was gone. No, the wren was fluttering at *her* window. Sally started back. She caught its tiny eyes, black and dull as currants. Isaak leaped at the window, teeth bared and claws extended. The wren flew off, but for several days Sally saw it sitting on the eaves across the street. Isaak patrolled the attic window, growling at the wren. Convinced that the wren was spying on her, but too ashamed to admit such fears to anyone, Sally withdrew almost entirely to her room. Still no one paid much heed, so absorbed were the other members of the McDoon household in their own concerns.

Concerns drove every one but Sally out of the house Tuesday evening, January 21st. Tom went to Drury Lane. Barnabas and Sanford, seeking to slough off the oppression they still felt from their meeting at the Piebald Swan one week earlier, were at a coffeehouse off Cornhill. Fraulein Reimer was visiting a friend at Wellclose Square. The cook and the maid had their fortnightly evening two streets over with fellow Norfolk expatriates, the "bishy barnybees" as the women called themselves.

Sally normally enjoyed an evening on her own but tonight she wanted company. She sat for a while in the partners' office, but the smell of sandalwood in an empty room only intensified her melancholy so she retreated to her garret. The evening was still and very cold, the atmosphere heavy with river mists. Shadows thickened, her fears grew, and her shame of the fear mounted along with the fear itself.

As an antidote, she tried reading something by fussy, finger-wagging Hannah More (mostly to please Sanford, who extolled More's virtues) but, wait, was that a creaking on the stair? Sally bent all her will to the book. A muffled voice in the hallway? Sally shut the book, closed her eyes, murmured, "Sankt Jakobi, Sankt Nikolai, Sankt Michaelis, Sankt Katharinen." Since childhood, Sally had chanted the names of Hamburg's churches as a charm against fear, picturing as she did Fraulein Reimer standing next to her, pointing at each church in the print of the Hamburg cityscape on the wall outside the library. "See the tall spire of the Michal?" Fraulein Reimer would say. "And Sankt Jakobi with the *wunderschoen* organ that Johann Sebastian Bach played?"

For a minute, Sally heard the Bach melody that Fraulein Reimer hummed, smelled the good mustiness of her black dress, and Sally felt the fear recede. But only briefly: wasn't that a creaking near the door? It couldn't be Yikes: that dog never left the hearthside. "Sankt Jakobi, Sankt Nikolai . . ." She could stand it no longer. Fear circled her. "Sankt Michaelis." Sally got out of bed. "Sankt Katharinen." She heard the clock strike eleven. Sally went to her door, summoned the kestrel within, and yanked the door open.

She saw nothing and laughed with relief. Then she did hear something: not a creak, but a rustling, like someone shuffling through papers. A rustling of paper in a counting house is too common for mention . . . except as midnight nears and one is alone in the house. Could Tom be back? No, she thought, especially if he stopped for claret or port on the way. Besides, Tom was noisy and, more to the point, would avoid the outer office whenever possible. She suppressed a giggle thinking of Tom working at his ledger books at midnight. Once more, the rustling came from below. Fear closed round again. She clutched the well of her throat but crept downstairs, Isaak padding beside her with tail flared. Sally passed the print of Hamburg on the wall outside the library, used the spires of the churches to anchor her resolve. The rustling was heard more clearly now, and also the treading of feet. "Chock," sounded the parrot . . . and someone *hissed* in reply. She went down the back stairs. *Oh*, she thought, *why doesn't Yikes bark or attack?* But she knew better than that: Yikes would sleep through the match between Gog and Magog. She meant to slip out through the kitchen and she should have done so, but something stopped her. Her fear choked her but she felt anger as well.

Before she knew what she was doing, Sally was at the door to the outer office. The door opened, arresting her advance. Isaak howled. Two men stepped forth. Vicious eyes. A yell, another (Sally's or theirs? She was not sure). Running. She grabbed a toby-jug from the hallway stand, the jug commemorating Trafalgar, and swung it with wild strength. The first man crashed to the floor, cursing and clutching his nose. *Another victory for Nelson*, she thought. A short-lived victory as the second man caught her just before the door to the yard behind the house. He hit her hard. Sally was more shocked than hurt. The first man came up. "Here's one from me," he growled, using his free hand. Sally almost fainted from the pain this time. "Let's go," she heard, as they trampled over her and through the door. Her head smashed onto the floor.

"Halt!" said a voice. In the yard, just beyond the door, was a short,

stout figure, hard to make out in the closing darkness. Easily seen, however, was the pistol in its hand, held steady and chest-high, the barrel glinting with light from the snowy half-moon. Sally passed out.

The clock in the coffeehouse tolled eleven. Discussion ebbed as clients began to leave. Barnabas and Sanford had revived their spirits, even if the news was depressing, about the ever-increasing price of corn, Luddite riots in Lancashire, and the unsolved mass murders the month before in Ratcliffe Highway (one of those murdered had served on an East Indiaman whose captain was well known to Barnabas and Sanford, so small the world could be, even in the great metropolis). Above all, the talk was about the war with Napoleon's France: the victory last fall in Batavia, Wellington's opportunities in Spain, parliamentary debates over the Orders in Council, rumours of Russian anger about the Continental System. The French, Napoleon, well, at least they were real, not phantoms. An honest Briton could do something about them. Barnabas and Sanford had nearly put "that Yount business" out of their minds as they put on their hats and left.

Few folk were on the streets. Drizzle mixed with snow covered the cobblestones. About three streets from home, they crossed one of the crooked alleys so typical of the City. A single streetlamp sent out a weak light, the oil wick sputtering. Before they realized what was happening, somebody ran up from behind and pushed them. The merchants of McDoon & Associates staggered forward. A second man slammed them into a wall of the alley. But Barnabas and Sanford spun round together with backs to the wall, as they had done together more than once in Bombay when Sanford was supercargo for Barnabas's uncle and Barnabas shipped out with him. Both wielded heavy walking sticks.

"Come on, villains!" yelled Barnabas.

A bass growling stopped all four men in a weird tableau: Barnabas and Sanford prepared to strike, their assailants nonplussed at the failure of the attack, fists and canes raised in mid-air. The growling

echoed off the bricks. From around the corner of the alley it came. And was followed by two red eyes in the dark. A dog's head the size of a wolf's came into view around the corner, dusky red, with huge teeth. All four men flinched. Into the weak, guttering light, hard to see in the mist and shadow, stepped a man holding a leash to the dog. His eyes glinted reddish, but probably that was a reflection from the dog. Or from his long coat, a raddled confection from a bygone era (even in this situation, Barnabas noticed that). He had a peaked hat. His teeth shone white.

The first of the two attackers cursed and bolted, then the other. Barnabas and Sanford were prepared to accept the newcomer as their rescuer . . . until they saw the dog and realized why the two footpads had fled. As the man in the glistening coat moved around the corner, so did the dog on the leash. Rather, the dog flowed around the corner, an impossibly long body that bent and formed itself around the corner as if hinged. Its forelegs were at a right angle now to its back legs and still it oozed around the corner. The growl intensified. The man in the antique coat was about to slip the leash. Sanford saw that the dog had ape-like hands.

Sanford gripped his cane for a blow before going down. Shouts erupted from the other end of the alley. Two figures raced by Barnabas and Sanford, shouting in a foreign language, and brandishing very large pistols. The dog, or whatever it was, barked loudly once—a hoarse, wet sound as if its tongue was too large for its mouth. Darkness swallowed man and dog. A few seconds later, the two newest newcomers returned out of the darkness. In the gloom, Barnabas could just make out a magenta flash on each of their skullcaps.

"Salmius Nalmius Nax!" he shouted.

"At your service."

Half an hour later, seven people crowded into the partners' office at the McDoon comptoir: Fraulein Reimer, Sally, Barnabas, Sanford, the Purser, the proprietor of the Piebald Swan, and Tom. The cook

and the maid had returned just before Barnabas and Sanford and, after determining that Sally was well enough to talk, and that the kitchen was un-invaded, they made for their room in the back-house. "Poor brave little smee," said the cook. "The German miss with a pistol! Housebreakers! Niece, you bar that window!"

While the cook and niece barred the windows of their room, the seven in the partners' office were in an uproar. Only Yikes seemed unflapped, looking on from his position by the fire. Sally lay on a chair, Isaak licking her face. Sally was bruised and her right arm in a sling, but she smiled grimly at her brother. ". . . and then," she continued, "right outside our back door, up pops Fraulein Reimer."

"Fraulein Reimer!?" exclaimed Tom.

"Yes," said Sally. "Cool as can be, with this huge great pistol, yelling '*Halten Sie jetzt*!' or 'halt now,' I don't know exactly because I was in shock on the ground." Everyone looked at Fraulein Reimer, a plump woman whose hands now held needlepoint, and who steadfastly refused to look at the others, though she was blushing. Shaking his head, Barnabas asked the fraulein what had happened.

The fraulein stopped working the needlepoint, looked up shyly, and said, "Those, those . . . *boese Leute* . . . bad men, they stopped only for an *Augenblick*, a moment, and then they ran around me, jumped over the wall, were gone." She paused, looked down again at her needlework. "It is the most shockingest thing, the most shockingest thing." Her undertone suggested, however, that she would have shot the burglars if necessary.

Barnabas and Sanford added this news to the evening's growing list of wonders. Fraulein Reimer chasing off burglars was as remarkable as their rescue by the Purser and the proprietor of the Piebald Swan. "Oh," grinned Barnabas. "Isaak tried to bite one of the attackers, isn't that right, Fraulein?" The fraulein said "Ah, *ja, stimmt*," and all members of McDoon & Associates. agreed that Isaak probably would have slashed the man to death had she only been a little bigger or the man a little smaller. Barnabas turned to Salmius Nalmius Nax and asked once again for an explanation of the evening's events.

Salmius Nalmius Nax cleared his throat. "It has to do with Yount, and with the key, and the danger that surrounds the key." Though her head and arm throbbed, Sally strained to hear every word. Tom hardly breathed. "We have watched McDoon & Associates for a long time. I have been in London since just before your sister died, Barnabas." (Salmius Nalmius made a gesture with his left hand that the McDoon household understood to be a sign of respect and mourning.) "I am also known here by another name, as the merchant Oliveire de Sousa, a trader who left Amsterdam during the revolution in 1795, a trader with connections from Smyrna to Lisbon, from Antwerp to . . . Hamburg. I have not been alone. This is my brother, not merely the proprietor of a coffeehouse but one of Yount's greatest military leaders, Captain of the Fencibles: Nexius Dexius Nax." He pronounced it "Nex Dex Nax." He spoke of the Piebald Swan as their hidden base of operations, a haven from those who wished them harm. He said that those same foes had taken an interest in the McDoons, which is why the Naxes had sent for the McDoons earlier than expected.

"It's Fraulein Reimer!" Sally blurted out, looking away from the drowning men in the prints of the foundering East Indiamen. "Fraulein Reimer has been our guardian all this time . . . isn't that right?" The others turned towards her. Fraulein Reimer blushed and quickened the pace of her needlepoint.

"Yes," said Salmius Nalmius. "The fraulein is a long-time ally of ours. She has a more varied experience than you can guess. She has been our chief source of news about you, and your chief guardian all these years. You recall who recommended her to you at the start of her employ?"

"Why, the Landemanns," said Barnabas. "Of Hamburg."

"Yes," said Salmius Nalmius. "The Landemanns. We have worked with them for two generations now, father and son. Both on the matter of Yount, and incidentally on purely mercantile matters. Oliveire de Sousa has done some profitable business with the firm of Landemanns, if I may say so, especially in the matter of salt from Cagliari and Setubal."

"We know something of that business, sir, indeed we do," said Barnabas. "So you were the mysterious investor, the undisclosed capital, that Lindemanns spoke of. Don't I feel a capital chub-gudgeon for not knowing anything about any of this! Buttons and beeswax!"

Sanford felt order returning, patterns reasserting themselves. Sally, from another point of departure, felt the same. She stared at the white boy threatened by the grey shark in the mezzotint, while she said: "So what were they looking for here tonight?"

Salmius Nalmius spread his hands, his skullcap bobbed, its magenta embroidery catching the candlelight. "The key," he said. The room fell silent, except for the "chock, chock" of the parrot. Sally and Tom looked at Barnabas and Sanford. Barnabas quickly told them about the entire package, was surprised (but not much) to hear that the book was known to them.

Sanford stirred. "The dog, the man?" he asked.

Salmius Nalmius moved to reply but his brother the soldier put a hand on his arm. Speaking in a low voice, Nexius Dexius said, "We call him the Cretched Man, on account of the coat he wears."

Barnabas interrupted, "The Wurm fellow? Is that him?"

"No," said Nexius Dexius. "But the Wurm's chief lieutenant. Very dangerous. The thugs he used tonight, both here and in the street, were just common London criminals. We were lucky."

"I saw him!" Sally cried, relieved that her "eidetic imagination" had not been so fanciful after all. "In Mincing Lane last week. Ugh, his coat seemed to move on him, gleamed almost." The Nax brothers nodded. The tall man's rusty virgated coat was his trademark. The fraulein said something that sounded like a prayer, of which Sally caught in German the words "a cloth of wonder with strange figures in-woven."

Nexius Dexius went on: "Very dangerous, the Cretched Man. Also, his creature . . . very dangerous. Almost never brought here, to your world. The Wurm's need is great. We call the beast 'shaharsh-harsh.' In your language, that is 'knuckle-dog.' Scholars say they are

the Hounds of Tindalos. As may be . . . knuckle-dogs."

Barnabas and Sanford thought of the wolf-thing sliding bonelessly around the corner, gripping the paving stones with simian hands.

"'Outside are the dogs and sorcerers . . . and murderers and idolaters'," recited Sanford under his breath.

"A bird," Sally yawned and winced but wanted one more question answered before sleep took them all. "I saw a wren last week keeping watch on us."

Salmius Nalmius replied, "Ah, a wick-wren, a hyter-spirit. Another one of *their* creatures. Not really a bird. A phantom made flesh. A spy."

As if she understood, Isaak arched her back at the description of the wick-wren. Salmius Nalmius nodded in her direction: in Yount, cats were given special honour. Turning back to McDoon & Associates, he said: "It is late. My brother and I withdraw for the night. But please, let us talk again tomorrow." Barnabas and Sanford agreed, convinced now of a threat but still uncertain of its origin, and how best to meet it.

At the door, Salmius Nalmius said, "They will try again, and soon. Please, I beg you: the key must leave London. The key must go to Yount."

"Chock," said the parrot, and then the house fell silent.