

Cruel Coast  
by  
Scott Mackay

*The Village Swarts, Cape Colony, Southern Africa, 1806*

Mrs. Page was shocked to see me again after so many years. She sat on a garden bench outside the widow Doorenspleet's farmhouse, seven years older, a scrape on her forehead, a bandage on her hand, her locks now devoid of the fussy ringlets I remembered so well from our courtship days. So astonished was she to see me again that she stared as if I were a carriage-and-six thundering straight at her.

As she struggled to recover herself, she said, "I of course heard of your civil advancement in Swellendam, Commissioner Rivers, but never expected to find you here, on this cruel coast. What tricks fate will sometimes play."

I regarded her evenly. "I must confess, I had some warning you'd been a passenger aboard the *Ancaster*."

She arched her pretty brow. "A ship's manifest was recovered, then?"

"Not a manifest, madam, but your old music book, *Un Concert de Famille*, the volume I gave you for your twenty-first birthday." An ungenerous tone crept into my voice. "Do you remember the pencil inscription I made on the title page?" I shook my head with elaborate self-effacement. "How silly of me to make such a solemn

profession of love, especially when you turned out to be so inconstant.”

She glanced away, disconcerted by my accusation, not responding to the charge but instead focusing on the unexpected marine salvage of her music album. “We had so many lovely hours playing from that book. I’m surprised it didn’t deteriorate in the seawater.” She paused. “I suppose the governor sent you to investigate the wreck, commissioner?”

“He did.”

She clasped her hands together. “Then have you heard any word of my husband? I’ve been ever so anxious.”

I adopted my official tone. “I’m afraid I have some bad news on that score, Mrs. Page. I regret to report that your husband did not survive. He came ashore without breath, and without life. My deepest sympathies for your loss. Villagers in Swarts recovered his body this morning.”

She took this upsetting intelligence with a lifting of her hands to her mouth. I gave her a few moments, then delivered the rest of the unhappy details.

“Madam, it is also my grim duty to inform you that my constable in Swarts has determined that your husband’s death was suspiciously different than the deaths of the thirty-nine other deceased passengers. And so, as well as investigating the wreck, I’ve been commissioned by Governor Baird to deliver a full accounting of your husband’s troubling demise.”

Color climbed to her face. She leaned forward, her spine straightening, the corners of her lips pulling back, her doll-like blue eyes growing wide with incomprehension. “I fail to understand, commissioner.” Her voice shook as she struggled for control. “Did the sea not claim him like so many others? Was he not drowned and washed upon the shore?”

“Madam, though he was, as you say, washed upon the shore, both my constable as well as the doctor in Swarts have

determined that he was not drowned, but died while still aboard the *Ancaster*. They've concluded it wasn't the sea that killed him but something of a more sinister nature. The doctor checked his lungs and found no seawater, so he couldn't have drowned. And because of the singular manner of your husband's arrival upon the shore, my constable suspects not a watery death but one more likely caused by human foul play."

This brought several seconds of fretful silence. "And, pray tell, commissioner, in what manner did my husband arrive?"

I gave her the last sorrowful fact. "Madam, he arrived in a box."

She paused, her eyes widening. "A box?"

"The postmaster's mailbox, to be precise. The doctor in Swarts tells me he was dismembered with his own surgical saw so that he would fit, this after he was dispatched with one of the ship's fire-axes. It grieves me deeply to bring you such news, madam."

Her color turned from its previous rosy shade to the paler hues associated with the wild mushrooms we used to hunt together in the forests fringing Table Mountain all those years ago when she had purportedly been in love with me.

In a stiff tone, I said, "Madam, I'll fetch water."

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I retreated to the farmhouse.

The widow Doorenspleet, a stout, sturdy farmwoman of sixty, submerged the dipper into the water pail for me. I brought the dipper back to Mrs. Page.

She continued to struggle with the tragic news. For several minutes I said nothing, delaying the questions I had to ask and the inquiries I had to make.

When she was at last ready to drink, I handed the dipper to her and she took small distracted sips. I told her I had to pose some questions to her, ones that might upset

her, but which as the king's representative in the District of Swellendam I was duty-bound to ask.

"Of course, commissioner." She returned the dipper to me. "This is all so distressing. I feared he was dead, but not dead in this particularly upsetting manner."

I put the dipper on the bench. I studied her. I could hardly believe I was sitting next to her again. Did she have any idea of just how much I had once loved her, and how dashed I had been when she had finally thrown me over for Sergeant Mason? I suppressed these thoughts and feelings, and struggled to maintain my official tone.

"Can you tell me the last time you saw Dr. Page?"

She cast an anxious glance toward the hawthorn hedge where, behind the leaves, I made out the azure sea. "The night of the storm. He'd gone to sickbay to see to our patients." She elaborated. "Our patients are of a special order, commissioner. We were transporting four of them, each with various mental maladies."

"And Molly Morris among them?"

Her eyes narrowed. "You've learned she was saved?"

"I have." Yes, that was better. Stay on track and forget what happened between us seven years ago. "My constable in Swarts tells me she's staying here at Doorenspleet Farm with you. I'm so happy she survived."

Anne Page nodded, but now seemed distracted, and even disturbed. "Of the four, Molly is perhaps our most difficult patient." She looked at me with sudden urgency. "She's a violent patient, Commissioner Rivers. So violent, we could no longer handle her at our hospital in Mauritius. And that's why, along with the other three, we were transporting her."

"And where, precisely, were you taking her?"

"To Bethlem Royal Hospital in London."

"Bedlam?"

"Just so. My husband has had to use a firm hand with Molly on several occasions, Commissioner Rivers, and I'm

afraid Molly has come to resent it.” Her voice took on a more pronounced tremor. “And in light of the way you tell me how my husband has died, I now feel I should point out that there has been a recent escalation in Molly’s resentment toward the doctor. Molly often hit the doctor, and the doctor has had to respond with his cane. In fact, I should tell you that there occurred two particularly regrettable exchanges in the hours before the storm. During the first, I was next door in our stateroom. I went to assist.” She touched the scrape on her forehead. “I received this injury when Molly pushed me against one of the ship’s supporting timbers.” She motioned at the hawthorn hedge where, through a gap, I spied a large woman pacing back and forth. “There she is now.”

I looked. Molly Morris wore a bonnet and a striped frock that looked borrowed from the widow Doorenspleet, was in her late thirties, stocky, broad-shouldered, with tiny, close-set eyes, a head that was disproportionately small to her large body, and expansive mannish hands.

Mrs. Page said, “She means to be gentle, commissioner, but sometimes she simply can’t control her temper.”

“And so you and your husband regained control of her during the first encounter?”

“Yes.”

“And then there was a second incident?”

“Closer to the time of the storm. The doctor had been playing cards with officers from the King’s 87<sup>th</sup> Royal Regiment of Sappers and Miners. I was in our stateroom. The doctor had told me previously that after the card game, he would check on Molly again. I’m not sure what happened, but in light of what you’ve told me, I can’t help thinking Molly might have killed him. She’s certainly large enough to wield the fire-axe.”

“Has Molly told you anything?”

“Only that she argued with the doctor the second time.”

“Nothing else?”

“No.”

“What about this card game? You say your husband was playing with some officers from the King’s 87<sup>th</sup>.”

“Yes.”

“I heard that one of those officers survived. Corporal Edward Ridgway.”

A smile came to her face. “I was so happy to learn that he was saved. The rector says he’s at Dundas Farm recovering from a broken leg.”

“You don’t suppose he was playing cards with your husband on the night of the sinking? He could be a witness.”

“As I say, I was in our stateroom.”

“When your husband came to check on Molly the second time, did you hear any disturbance from sickbay?”

She shook her head. “By that time, the gale was rising. All I heard was the wind.”

“And did you grow concerned when your husband didn’t return after a reasonable time?”

She nodded. “I went to look for him. I was surprised to find sailors climbing the ratlines and unfurling the sails. The wind was rising. They told me the captain was concerned that the *Ancaster* was drifting too close to the reef, and that he wanted to make headway into deeper water before we ran aground. We’d been stuck there a week waiting for a weather change to take us west. As the sailors were up on the ratlines, the wind grew ten times stronger. The captain rang the alarm. The first big wave struck. The ship was thrown upon the reef and I heard a crack below. I saw Sergeant Dobbie, another of the officers from the regiment, lowering the port-side lifeboat, and thought my husband might be with him, but he wasn’t.” She paused.

“Tell me, commissioner, is there any sign of Sergeant Dobbie? When the rector informed me of Corporal Ridgway’s survival, he had no news of the sergeant.”

I shook my head. "Alas, Mrs. Page, the search for Sergeant Dobbie continues. Did you find the doctor anywhere about the deck?"

"No."

"Nor in sickbay?"

"No."

"Was Molly in sickbay?"

"Yes."

I jotted this in my notebook. "Did you see any evidence of a crime in sickbay?"

"The whole was flooded with seawater from the large waves by then." She shook her head, tears coming to her eyes. "Then we suffered another great knock against the reef. I was thrown to my knees. Corporal Ridgway, who by that time was lowering the other boat, saw my distress and came to assist me. He locked his arm around me and removed me to the second boat. I begged him to help find my husband, but he said the ship was going to capsize any minute." She took out a handkerchief, dabbed her eyes, shook her head, and wept. "Little did we know that half of us would be drowned."

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Molly Morris, perhaps drawn by the sound of Mrs. Page's weeping, emerged from behind the hawthorn hedge.

"It looks like Molly is concerned about you," I said.

Mrs. Page looked up from her weeping. "Yes. She dotes on me."

"Could you call her over, please?"

"Of course, commissioner."

Mrs. Page called Molly and she approached us, head bowed.

"Molly, this is Commissioner Rivers. He's come to ask about the wreck." With a catch in her voice, she said, "And he also has some questions about my husband. It appears Dr. Page might have met his end before the *Ancaster* sank. The constable in Swarts is suggesting foul play. What that

means, Molly, is that someone might have killed the doctor.” Mrs. Page’s voice took on an accusatory tone. “And as you were the last to see him, and as earlier in the day you attacked the doctor not once but twice, we believe you have some explaining to do.”

The poor simpleton wouldn’t look up. “Ma’am, I didn’t lay a finger on Dr. Page that second time. All we did was argue.”

“Are you sure, Molly? Lying’s not going to help.”

“Ma’am, nobody hit anybody that second time. All I did was ask him for me opium because me head was hurting again. That first time, when you was there, he didn’t give it to me, did he? The second time, he gave it to me and I settled right down.”

I stepped forward. “Molly, do you and Dr. Page fight often?”

“Only when me temper gets the better of me, sir.”

“And were you fighting that second time he came to see you?”

“No, sir. Only the first time. And only because he wouldn’t give me my opium.”

I tried a different approach. “Do you know where Dr. Page keeps his surgical saw, Molly?”

The woman’s face filled with fear. “Course I do, sir. We’re all afraid of it.”

I pressed the point. “Do you remember having the saw in your hands on the night of the storm?”

Molly thought about this. “I don’t remember much of anything after the doctor gave me my opium. I go all rubbery and stop thinking when I have me opium.”

I paused to think. Perhaps in an opium-induced fog she had killed the doctor? “Do you remember putting him in the postmaster’s mailbox?”

Her brow rose in shock. “Sir, we’re forbidden to go anywhere near that mailbox. The doctor said he’d cane us if we did.”



I glanced at Mrs. Page. "The postmaster's mailbox was in sickbay?"

She nodded. "The *Ancaster* is of the barque class, commissioner, and so quite small. Sickbay did double duty for many things."

I turned to Molly. "Molly, a grave capital offense has been committed, and it's my responsibility as the king's representative in Swellendam to get to the bottom of it. I want you to search your memory carefully. If after a day you have some recollection of how the doctor met his end, please send for me." I glanced at Mrs. Page, then back at Molly, deciding that it was perhaps time to conclude my visit at Doorenspleet farm. "I'm staying at the inn. God is watching you, Molly, and a confession from you now might make His judgment more merciful when it comes time for your last reckoning with St. Peter."

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As Mrs. Page was unable to determine whether Corporal Edward Ridgway had been at the card game, I had no choice but to get on my horse and ride to Dundas Farm to question the man.

On the way, I tried to quell my unruly feelings for Anne Page. But as much as I tried, I kept recalling how she had thrown me over for Sergeant Mason; kept remembering how, near the end, whenever I came to visit, the servants always insisted she was out, even though I heard her playing the pianoforte in the music room; and I would never forget how I had caught Sergeant Mason kissing her that time under the acacia boughs in her father's garden the day before she finally told me I couldn't visit her anymore, that she was going to marry Sergeant Mason now and it wouldn't be proper.

Much to my consternation, Corporal Ridgway turned out to be a tall handsome officer of the Sergeant Mason mold. He had a lean face, sandy hair, and eyes the color of

the sea. His broken leg, raised on a few pillows, was taped in a splint.

The first words out of his mouth, spoken in an urgent tone, were, "Is Mrs. Page safe?"

With this, I couldn't help but regard him with some suspicion. "She is safe, corporal, though naturally shaken."

He sank with relief to his bed. Why the huge concern? I had to take note. How well did they know each other? Was this another soldier Anne had fallen in with? Or was my old heartache tormenting me with cruel imaginings again?

"I'm so relieved," said the corporal. "And by the way, what of Sergeant Dobbie? I saw him lower the other boat."

"Alas, the other boat has not been recovered. A half dozen fisherman are at sea right now looking for it."

The corporal's brow settled. "Then May God have mercy upon his soul."

I proceeded to outline for him how I was not only investigating the wreck, but also the unnatural demise of Dr. Page.

He surveyed me the way he might an opponent on the battlefield, wary, and with a degree of belligerence. "And you're sure the doctor was murdered?" His lips tightened and he looked out the window, where an old gray nag nibbled grass in the yard below. "I believe the victims came ashore in pieces, all torn up by the reef. Was not the doctor in like condition?"

I tapped my notebook. "We have irrefutable evidence, corporal, that he was murdered." I raised my chin. "I understand you might have been with him the night he was killed, and that you were perhaps one of his card-game companions."

The corporal composed himself and gave the matter some thought.

By and by, he said, "Yes, I was at the card table that night, commissioner. And some of the other fellows from the regiment were there as well. We were all bored. The wind

hadn't changed for a week. We were stranded, windless, by that infernal reef."

"And that was the last time you saw Dr. Page? At the card game?"

"Yes."

"And did there seem to be anything troubling him?"

"As a matter of fact, there was an unpleasant row between the doctor and Sergeant Dobbie. The row continued outside afterward. All quite suspicious, now that you tell me of his murder."

"And what was the row about?"

The corporal shrugged. "I'm afraid the doctor lost a considerable sum to Sergeant Dobbie, nearly twenty pounds. The doctor didn't take to it kindly because Dobbie has a notorious reputation as a cheat. He asked for his money back. The sergeant took exception and refused. The doctor left, telling us he wasn't a man to play with cheats. After that, Dobbie sat brooding for a long time, drinking dram after dram, getting drunker and drunker. He finally got up and said he had to put the doctor to rights, that he didn't appreciate having his good name smeared. Not that Dick Dobbie was in a blind rage, mind. No, he was frightfully controlled. But I've seen him put a man to rights when he's controlled, and it's never a pretty sight."

I jotted this down. "And that's the last time you saw the sergeant?"

"No, I saw him later, when he was lowering the other boat."

"And the doctor was nowhere in sight?"

"Quite vanished."

As I rode back to Swarts at sunset, I understood that over and above Molly Morris I now had a second suspect, Sergeant Richard Dobbie, of the King's 87<sup>th</sup> Royal Regiment of Sappers and Miners. After all, the sergeant had gone to set the doctor to rights, not in a blind rage, mind, but in a frightfully controlled and unpretty manner.

Yet I couldn't help thinking how easily Mrs. Page had blamed Molly, and how quickly Corporal Ridgway had then pointed his finger at Sergeant Dobbie. I also continued to puzzle over – and be suspicious of – the corporal's urgent concern for Mrs. Page, how he had asked me about her safety immediately upon my arrival at Dundas Farm. It made me wonder once again if Mrs. Page had thrown her lot in with another solider.

And it was all I could do to stop my hands from shaking.

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My suspicions about Mrs. Page and the corporal found substance in a most unusual manner the next day.

A large packet of letters came ashore in an oilskin sack, perhaps the exact letters ejected from the postmaster's mailbox to make room for Dr. Page.

Of these, one in particular implicated the pair, written by Mrs. Page to her sister, Elizabeth, addressed to her sister's home in India, a missive due for the return ship in Cape Town before the *Ancaster* set sail up the west coast of Africa for Britain. I shook my head with some melancholy. Elizabeth in India, Anne in Mauritius, and myself in Swellendam – how the old Cape Town crowd had sadly scattered.

I broke the letter's seal and read.

After reading some run-of-the-mill news about Anne's various daily concerns in Port Louis, I came to a most disturbing passage.

"I must confess, dear sister, I have formed a passionate attachment to Corporal Edward Ridgway of the King's 87<sup>th</sup> Royal Regiment." My hands tightened around the correspondence. I tried to push my own feelings aside and take a dispassionate view, but further along I read, "The love I feel for Corporal Ridgway is like the love I felt for Sergeant Mason, but much stronger. If only there was some way Eddie and I could remove the impediment of my

husband. Not that I would ever dream of such a thing, as Dr. Page was my pillar and support when he tried to save Sergeant Mason during the cholera outbreak. But I see now that I was perhaps a fool to fall in love with Dr. Page solely because of his efforts to nurse the man I really loved back to health. How I fancied the doctor a hero as he fought valiantly to rescue Sergeant Mason from the disease. And how foolishly I surrendered my hand to him after he had failed. Now I'm stuck with him, and feel toward him the way I felt toward poor old Harry Rivers. Do you remember Harry Rivers, Beth? He was much like a barnacle, wasn't he, clinging and clinging, and entirely obtuse about the way I wanted him to leave me be. I fear I now regard the good doctor the same way. I would rather he just vanish into these sea mists we've been having."

I couldn't restrain my anger. Or my alarm. Seven years ago, I had been under the impression Anne had held me in some affection. Now I was a barnacle? Now I was poor old Harry Rivers, clinging and clinging, when at one time I was sure I had been the man she would some day marry? Yes, Sergeant Mason had at last won that particular race, and tragic that the cholera should take him one short year into his marriage, but had I not even been a contender? Had she truly wanted me to leave her be when we had spent so many happy hours at the pianoforte together?

I looked at her handwriting and remembered all the brooding I had done in the last seven years, all the second-guessing, the torturous questions I had asked myself in the middle of the night, wondering if I had done something wrong, or whether it had just been plain cruelty on her part. I had made myself sick with it. Still did. Still tossed and turned till this day. And for what? So she could characterize me in this letter to her sister as a troublesome cirripede that wouldn't let go?

I shook my head and took the letter into evidence.

Despite the personal pain this correspondence caused, I had to put all the old Cape Town feelings aside. I had to be the ever-objective Commissioner Rivers and see this letter for what it really was: further proof that over and above my two existing suspects, I now had to count Anne Page and Corporal Ridgway as my third party of ne'er-do-wells

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I received word an hour later that Sergeant Richard Dobbie, the officer who had allegedly set the doctor to rights, had been saved, and, along with two other survivors, Timothy and Isobel Collis, children, was now returned to shore and receiving care and rest at a church in Pearly Beach, a village ten miles up the coast.

I arrived hot and dusty a few hours later, surrendered my horse to the stableman, and proceeded to the church.

The local rector showed me to a makeshift hospice in the church cellar, where I found my three survivors.

Timothy and Isobel Collis, eight and six, played with sea shells. Sergeant Dobbie was asleep, looking badly exhausted.

Leaving Dobbie to rest for the time being, I started with the children.

I learned they didn't know much about Dr. Page, and so weren't much use in that regard.

But much to my surprise, Timothy, the eight-year-old, gave me an entirely different characterization of Sergeant Dobbie than Corporal Ridgway had. To Timothy, Dobbie wasn't the controlled, homicidal, cheating soldier who had gone to set the doctor to rights, but perhaps the true hero of the *Ancaster* marine tragedy.

"He spotted my sister and me clinging to a spar, sir. The current pushed him toward us. He leaned out and pulled us in. Then the same current pushed us out to sea. There was nine of us altogether, seven children, one old lady, and Sergeant Dobbie. Sergeant Dobbie rowed all night and

finally brought us to an island. The fisherman found us on the island.”

“And where are the other survivors now?”

“On farms, sir. The sergeant saved us all.”

Dobbie woke an hour later.

He looked genuinely alarmed and saddened to hear of Dr. Page’s murder. “It’s a terrible shame, sir. Not a kinder soul one could find.”

“You were at the card game?”

“I was, sir.”

“And is it true the doctor accused you of cheating, and that you went to set him to rights after he had left the table?”

Dobbie’s eyes widened and he said, “Who told you that?”

“Corporal Ridgway did. He as good as accused you of murdering the doctor. He says you followed him onto the deck, and that you were going to set him to rights, and that’s the last anybody saw of him.”

Despite his debilitated condition, Dobbie rose on his elbows, and in a voice thick with indignation, said, “Corporal Ridgway is a liar, sir. It was Corporal Ridgway himself who went after the doctor.”

This, then, sounded more like the truth. “You saw the corporal go after Page?”

“I did, sir. And he was in a drunken rage. The fellows and me decided something had to be done about it before he hurt the doctor. Especially because it wasn’t just the cards he was mad about. So I went to put a stop to it.”

My brow rose. “Something else was bothering the corporal besides the cards?”

“Yes, sir. Mrs. Page. They were an item. Everybody on board knew except for the poor old doctor.” I had to struggle to maintain my composure. The sergeant continued. “The corporal confided to me that he was scheming to take Mrs. Page away from the doctor, and that the doctor was making it deucedly difficult for him, and that

he was planning to do something about it before the *Ancaster* docked in Southampton. He told me Mrs. Page was unhappy in her marriage and just wanted to get out of it anyway she could." Dobbie eased back onto his cot, a look of puzzlement coming to his eyes. "Strange, but I don't entirely understand what I saw when I finally found the corporal. Certainly he was nowhere near the doctor, so I'm not about to accuse him of murder, the way he has with me. But I did see something odd."

"And what did you see, sergeant?"

Dobbie's left shoulder twitched in a perplexed shrug. "The corporal was on the quarterdeck emptying packets of mail from the postmaster's mailbox into the bay. I says to him, 'Eddie, what in the name of Creation do you think you're doing?' And he says back to me, 'Dick, if you value your hide, you won't say a word of this to anybody.' So I ask him, 'But Eddie, why are you throwing the king's mail overboard?' Then he says some words I daren't repeat in front of these youngsters." Dobbie shook his head. "I have no idea why he was throwing the mail away, sir, but if you can't catch him on the doctor's murder, you can at least clap him in irons for tampering with His Majesty's post."

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The next day, I found Anne sitting with the elderly Mrs. Doorenspleet in the parlor at Doorenspleet Farm. The ladies were tatting lace. The only way I could control myself was to adopt the dour veneer of a bureaucrat, and to clamp down on the bitterness that was threatening to unseat me. I was here to solve a murder, not settle a score.

As the servant finished presenting me, and retreated to the kitchen, Mrs Page put her lace down, rose, and gave me a bow, inclining her head from the neck, sketching a curtsy with her skirt.

"Commissioner Rivers." She lifted her head, her eyes apprehensive. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"



I gave her a bow, holding my three-cornered hat under my arm, fighting to keep my emotions in check. “How do you do, Mrs. Page?” I turned to Mrs. Doorenspleet. “Madam, forgive me, but may I have a word alone with Mrs. Page?”

The old farm widow, detecting my seriousness, gave me a nod, and rose from her chair. “Of course, commissioner.” She gathered up her lace and left the room.

Once she was gone, I motioned at the divan. “Please, Mrs. Page. Sit. I fear you’re not fully recovered. Your complexion has grown pale.”

She stared at me, then took her seat. “Commissioner Rivers, what ever is the matter?”

I looked at her, saddened that I should still be so captivated by her. “Mrs. Page, some disturbing evidence connected to your husband’s murder has come to light.” She looked pretty in the sea light coming through the window. How could someone so enchanting be so cruel? “I’m afraid it implicates Corporal Ridgway.” I took a seat on the upholstered bench across from her. “And you.”

Her shoulders rose. She looked to one side, where on a mahogany shelf sat a collection of ceramic figurines, mostly dogs, a few horses, and one fisherman. She grew even paler.

She turned back to me, her clear blue eyes now fretful. “I have no idea what evidence you mean, commissioner.”

I shook my head. “To begin with, I found your letter to Elizabeth in a packet of mail that came ashore with the wreckage. You make explicit in that letter your romantic interest in Corporal Ridgway, and also reveal your wish to see your husband gone. Vanished into the sea mists, I believe were your exact words.” I shook my head. “In my official capacity as the king’s representative, and in light of what’s happened to your husband, I view this letter with grave concern.”

For several seconds, she said nothing. Then she mounted a weak defense. “My letter was meant for a private

audience of one, Commissioner Rivers. Surely it would be wrong to interpret it in an official capacity.”

I sighed. “Even without the letter, Anne, I’m afraid you and the corporal remain under serious suspicion.”

She blinked twice. “I hardly see how.”

I took a deep breath, feeling once again the old humiliation from when she had turned me away from her door that last time. I put my hat on the table, and sat back.

“Put simply, Mrs. Page, Sergeant Dobbie has survived. He’s convalescing in a church ten miles up the coast, and I’ve had an opportunity to talk to him. He’s proved a most useful witness. He says he saw the corporal throwing mail overboard from the postmaster’s mailbox on the night of the murder. He also tells me that you and the corporal became amorously involved on the ship, and that the corporal had plans for nullifying your husband as an impediment to your union before the *Ancaster* docked in Southampton. Furthermore, the sergeant informs me the corporal chased your husband from the card table after the game, and pursued him with the full intent of harming him.” I leaned forward. “Taking these factors into account, I believe your only option left, Anne, is to confess.” I shrugged. “I’m hoping you’ll tell me Ridgway acted alone.”

Her hands came together, and her eyes grew marble-like in their stillness. A few moments later, the corners of her lips pulled back, and distress suffused her pretty features. Her shoulders sank and she shook her head.

“You may understand why I was hesitant to tell you anything at first.”

It didn’t take me long to surmise what she was getting at. “Because of Sergeant Mason?”

She looked away. “I was cruel to you. I freely admit it. I led you on, and that was wrong of me. I should have considered your feelings more thoroughly. But you played the pianoforte so well.” I could hardly believe it. She kept me around only because I played the pianoforte? “I know

how badly used you must have felt, and so I wasn't sure that if I told you the truth about my husband you wouldn't somehow use it as a way to punish me for sending you away so callously once I accepted Sergeant Mason's hand."

I stared, then admonished her in my official capacity. "Just give up the corporal, Anne, that's all I ask. I know he must have acted alone."

After another few seconds, she rose and went to the fireplace. "I must revise my story, then, commissioner." She glanced at me, her eyes glistening with intensifying apprehension. "I misrepresented events at first, but only because I was so frightened of how, when we first met, you so pointedly told me how you had recovered my music album, *Un Concert de Famille*, and reminded me – again pointedly – of the sad inscription you had made in it."

I was stunned. My penciled inscription – a proclamation of my profoundest love – was sad to her now? Send me to Bedlam and throw away the key! "Anne, as long as you didn't have anything to do with the murder itself, I'll show mercy."

She wrung her hands. "As God is my witness, Harry, I never raised a hand against my husband." She paused to get her thoughts in order. "I'd gone to bed. My husband was playing cards with the officers – this much is true." She looked away. "Perhaps I tried to implicate Molly as the culprit. I did this only because I love the corporal dearly, and was afraid of losing him if he got caught. And so I rashly blamed our patient, hoping to divert you."

Maintaining my official role became more difficult than ever, especially because she had just professed her love for the corporal. In a dry and not particularly pleasant voice, I asked, "So how exactly must you revise your story, then, Anne? And where precisely does it diverge from your original one?"

She gave me a worried look. "It diverges where my husband went to check on Molly that second time."

Afterward, I heard Corporal Ridgway come along the deck. He and my husband got into a fight. This was a half hour before the storm struck. They were fighting about the card game. And me. I heard them from our stateroom. It was late. The conflict escalated. I finally heard my husband call for help. A moment later, everything went quiet. I put on my dressing gown and went outside. When I got there ...” Her voice grew tremulous, and her eyes moistened. “When I got there, I discovered my husband dead from an axe blow to the head.”

Mrs. Page now cast a glance out the window to the sea. For the longest time she wouldn’t move her eyes away, seemed entranced by the deep blue pan of the bay, the same bay that had brought tragedy to so many a short number of nights ago.

She finally turned to me. “What I’m trying to tell you, Harry, is that I arrived after the deed was done. I swear I did.” Her eyes gained the focus of twin storm lamps. “Eddie was the one who swung the axe, not me. Eddie was the one who killed him. I had nothing to do with it. Surely you can protect me under those circumstances. Oh, please, Harry, if our time together in Cape Town means anything to you, I beg you, spare me, for I’m innocent in the whole matter.”

But I couldn’t help thinking: How easily she was now throwing over Corporal Ridgway – as easily as she had thrown me over seven years ago. “What did you do once you found your husband dead?”

Blundering, with no real comprehension of the law, she said, “Corporal Ridgway asked me to help him.”

“And did you?” I raised my finger. “Take care here, Anne. Additional dissimulations will make matters worse.”

She nodded innocently. “I won’t lie to you, Harry.” She had apparently forgotten how she had lied to me about Sergeant Mason. “I helped Eddie drag Charles to the nearest scupper so his blood would drain overboard. I then covered him with some spare rigging so no one would see him. Then

Eddie told me to leave. He didn't want me to have anything else to do with it. He wanted to spare me. He loves me, you see. And I love him."

I tried to stay on track, but with the utterance of these last words I lost all proper rein over my jealousy. Only with the greatest effort was I able to ask one last germane question. "Why the postmaster's mailbox, Anne? Why not just throw him overboard?"

She now looked back to the bay, and in a softer voice said, "Because Eddie was nervous about disposing of him so close to Swarts. We were barely a mile out. Had Eddie dumped Charles by the reef, the doctor might have drifted to shore, and we would have been discovered. So Eddie decided to wait. The ship's barometer was falling and he said we were due for a change in the weather soon. With fresh wind we would be on our way into deeper water, and we could dispose of him then. Little did we know that this weather change would sink the *Ancaster*."

I took a few moments.

From an absolute moral standpoint, I should have shown clemency. She was a silly love-dazzled young woman who had come under the sway of a scoundrel. I should have granted her God's great mercy. And maybe if I had never met Anne Page in Cape Town seven years ago, I would have been a more merciful man. But my bitterness had festered, had become all-encompassing and I now convinced myself on the technicality, the unmitigated fact that she had participated, had moved her husband, and covered him with some spare rigging. Since such was the case, I judged that the Crown must have its vengeance.

Whether it was fair or not didn't matter to me at that moment.

The Crown, I decided, would teach her a lesson once and for all.

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In the village square, where the Atlantic and Indian Oceans met, I saw two gallows rising into the air. From these, my dear Anne and the wretched Ridgway twisted gently in a salty offshore breeze.

A cape griffon, a local species of vulture, landed on Mrs. Page's gallows.

"Ho, there!" I clapped my hands. "Off with you!"

The bird lumbered into the sky, losing a black feather in its ascent. I watched it retreat until it was a speck.

I then rubbed my fingers over Anne's music book, *Un Concert de Famille*. I opened the book to a selection called "Dance of the Wood Nymphs" where I saw in faint pencil Anne's precious marginalia, notes to herself on how the piece should be played. I studied one comment in particular, "Harry adores these eight bars." I hummed the eight bars. In that music I recalled all the sweetness of my time with Anne. It brought to mind her father's music room in the Pampoenkraal District of Cape Town: the caged canaries in the corner, the walnut box-grand pianoforte with the faded ivory keys, and the smell of Anne's rosewater-scented hair under my nose as I turned pages for her.

I closed her music book and held it close to my breast.

I felt like I was holding Anne, and that I was now going to hold her forever.

Love was so blissful when possession was complete. And it was especially blissful when it was made irrevocable by death.

I looked out at the sea, my indifferent accomplice.

I gave it a nod of gratitude for finally bringing Anne home to me.

At sunset, I had farmers take Mrs. Page down.

I decreed to these same farmers that Ridgway should hang for another three days, and that no one was to keep the griffons away from him.

END