

Prologue



We are becalmed, rolling on blue-green seas. The moon hangs as a well-honed blade in a blackening sky. I've gone topside to see it, and now I am returning to my cabin, wondering will I take again to the *Malleus Maleficarum* or will I cut fresh pens and write away the night.

Headed astern, down the dark corridor that separates our two cabins, I hear her singing o'er the sounds of the ship, and vying with the song of the sea.

*Over my head, I hear music in the air.
There must be a God, somewhere.*

I stop. I pleasure in the song.
I near their cabin door. It is latched by its hook-and-eye, but the sea swings it open, just so.
Lanterns light the scene; suspended from a beam, they sway in sea time. Light like ink washes o'er what little I see. Till there, *there*: a gilded, mirrored square, fixed low to the wall, shows me more. I see them. She singing, he standing before her, openhanded. Into his she places her

hands: blackbirds atremble in an ivoried nest. She sublime. He well made. Naught but a few years stand between them.

She sings on, slowly, the two lines only. With whispers he asks her to stop. She sings on, defiantly, the two lines only; and limns them for a strength he does not hear. Deaf with lust, he is, as he lowers his lips to her neck. Now I see only her back, clad in yellow gingham: a sheet of molten gold. I take it for a kiss; till the inconstant light catches the bony glare of his teeth. Biting her. Somehow he smiles all the while.

Roughly he spins her. The two face me in the mirrored dark. I fall back from the door. Knowing I ought not to spy, knowing I ought to go. Wanting to watch. Having to.

Hand on the jamb, I steady myself. I sink to a crouch.

From between the teeth it comes poking, prodding like the red member of a randy cur: his tongue. The light shows the sticky trail of his licking kiss. His arms enwrap her. His hands rise to her throat. Her head tumbles back to the crook of his neck. She is shadow. With fish-belly fingers he frees her breasts. I hear fabric tear.

I draw from the dark breath enough to live. The sea cannot toss me from this door. My tingling body tells me, *Stay*.

On she sings. Till he takes from his waistcoat pocket a child's toy. A sling-shot, it is. No: strapping suited to falconry. No. . . . I do not know the thing for what it is until he fits it to her face: a ball of bunched fabric within her mouth, and two leather straps he ties off behind her head.

She stands naked to the waist. Enshadowed though she is, I see her skin is light, showing but slightly her African blood. Her head is back, her eyes clenched tightly as fists. It is pleasure she takes from his touch. This I tell myself; for I know no other way to tally the sum of flesh-on-flesh.

He cups her full breasts, pulls them forward by their blackest tips. She shudders. Her shoulders hunch. With her bound mouth she can neither smile nor scream. His hands roam: up from low on her belly to her hips, and higher. They settle—fingertips first, then the whole fan of his hand—on the curves of flesh beneath her breasts. Sweat shimmers. His fingers rise to his own lips for licking.

With a hand that is and is not my own, I seek my correspondent parts. Beneath this swaddling, beneath this costume . . . : will I find some odd, unknown locus of delight?

From within the cabin, a command: to hold her own breasts high.

The two lovers—so I deem them, still—shift, slightly, toward the mirror

and thus toward me. Stillness. My blood courses too quickly. I hear it. *Now* is when I will pull away. . . . *Now* is when I wait, and watch; as:

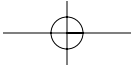
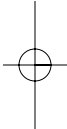
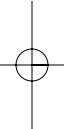
From off the galley table he takes a glove. Fits it to his right hand. To the side of the table he slides . . . what? Some instrument of iron. A tiny stove, it seems, more tall than wide. I see its shimmering heat: a furnace. From it there extend several . . . no. *No*. (I taste blood upon my bitten tongue.) He takes from the forge the first of the finger-length rods. Its sculpted tip shows an orange glow. Closing behind her, he begins to buck, slowly. We share the mirror: he and I watch his careful work. Dumb I am to the risk of discovery. Dumb, stunned by all and everything.

Only when he takes her left breast in his ungloved hand, only when he lowers the brand to her skin with his right, only then do I fall from the door. Only then do I flee. But not before I hear the searing hiss, *feel* it, and see her neck snap rigid and her eyes go wide. And not before I see her fired eyes in the mirror, finding mine.

In my cabin I vomit. Not from the toss of the sea.

No less freighted was the stare with which she seized me a second time, when finally we made landfall. At Rockett's Landing: Richmond: state of Virginia.

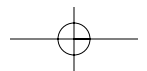
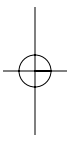
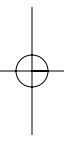
1826, that was; late in the month of September.





art
One





1

The Interior Port



As I watched from the wharf, my stomach went sour; for here she came, down the bouncing gangway, in a collar and chains.

They were five in the debarking party: Celia, in a violet dress, with her matching eyes of amethyst; her wrangler; and two other men who'd come aboard to carry the stretcher bearing Celia's shivering, stammering master. He called himself Hunt: a name to shield him from scandal. Tolliver Bedloe, he was; possessed of plantations on the western shore of the Chesapeake, properties in Baltimore, Annapolis, and Richmond, stock certificates in banks and incorporated companies all down the seaboard, the lot of it inherited along with herds of livestock and some two hundred slaves. Of which Celia was one.

They made their way down a steeply set plank at the bow of the boat. The stern was already aswarm with stevedores and the like, the boat's holds thrown open, pulleys and slings and ropes swung into place. The gangway was set with strips of timber, meant for footholds; but they were placed to align with a man's stride, and so it was I watched

Celia stumble. Her step was stunted. She showed none of her grace. But it was the odd sway of her full skirt that told it: she was shackled at the ankle as well as the wrist.

What had she done? Yes: I'd witnessed certain acts in the cabin across from mine, but of late I'd heard not the least discord. With Bedloe growing ever sicker—a touch of *le mal de mer*, I thought—all had been quiet.

Yet here she came, enchained. The collar—more like a yoke—around her long, lissome neck was of canvas, stretched drum-tight upon a wooden frame; through it poked iron prongs, upraised like beckoning fingers. The manacles were of rusted iron, and glinted red in the late-day light.

Midway to the wharf, Celia raised her head slowly. Her jeweled eyes shone o'er the scene: Richmonders abuzz; bees in the hive of commerce. No one seemed to notice her. No one but me.

I stood staring, benumbed, fifty paces distant. I was all but a statue when her eyes found mine. My heart rattled the cage of my chest. My eyes fell low from habit—the habits of shyness and shame and secret-keeping. Too, she simply overwhelmed me with her beauty.

I fought to raise my gaze to her; but my hand rose quickly, of its own accord, and I waved down the length of the wharf. Hello? A sort of salute? I'll say only that it was an inappropriate gesture—one she did not, could not, return; but I'll excuse myself by asking: What gesture is appropriately made to one so debased? Still, I'd recognized her: she had her witness; and this seemed to content her: only then did she turn away. Once she'd descended to the wharf, I lost her, could not see her through the crowd. All was confusion; without and within.

We'd shared hardly a word, though we were twenty-nine days sailing from my homeland; from the port of Marseilles, in particular. If Celia knew me by name, it was not my true name, which is Herculine. This I'd shared with no one.

No, we'd not spoken freely, despite the fact that life at sea, in close quarters, will breed a certain . . . familiarity.

There were only two cabins on the *Ceremaju* outfitted for comfort. These sat astern and were not intended for paying passengers, as the *Ceremaju* was a merchant brig. Bedloe and I had let these cabins, for reasons all our own. Our doors stood ten paces apart. Between them ran that ever dark and ill-used passageway. As I say, the doors of the cabins did not close well from within: the hardware was insufficient; and even when fastened the sea would cause

the doors to clap. When first we were seaborne, often my shipmates propped their door open. This I did not do; rather, I settled some square-bottomed, blunt object at my door's base, to hold it fast. . . . What I mean to establish, simply, is this: I was not in a permanent crouch in the shadowed corridor, peering into a quite private space not my own. It was not like that; leastways not all the time, and not at first.

(O, there's shame in this, yes. But shame is a suit I've worn before. I'll don it again, here, in service of the truth.)

Returning to my cabin, I'd pass the pair in theirs. At first, I would but nod if noticed. I said nothing, and invited no friendship. Instead, I would return to my table, piled high with books on the Dark Arts, my manuscripts and magical paraphernalia, the lot of which I'd gathered as I'd traveled down the length of France, from the Breton shore onto the plains of Provence.

In my cabin, I read and wrote through the night, lowering my lamp as the sun rose. At dawn I'd retire to sleep away the day. I'd rise at noon or just after to take a meal—seagoing fare: salt beef, or Bologna sausages and biscuits, and tea. Perhaps I'd venture topside to sample the sea air. At sunset I'd return to my cabin and arrange the night's study: ready my pens, pour my ink, refill the lamp with that malodorous whale oil; having chosen my books, I'd cut the pages of those that were unread, and arrange the lot of them. When I was not reading, I wrote. I'd set myself a mission: I'd write the story of my life, even though I was—by as close a calculation as can be made—not yet into my twentieth year; or so. I'd cull sense from recent, strange events; and in so doing I'd discover—so I hoped—who and what I was.

For I'd recently been told I was . . . singular. I'd been told I had talents.

You are a man. You are a woman. You are a witch.

Oddly, I was not long overwhelmed at discovering myself a witch. . . . Witchery: it was a tradition I'd tackle o'er time.

Neither was I overtaken by the truths I'd learned, truths that would set the popes spinning in their sepulchers. These truths were somehow beyond me; . . . of me, yes, and of interest, but beyond me.

Of far greater interest to me, then, was my *sur-sexuelle* state. This I had to explore; it was a physical imperative. My mind was sufficiently limber from years of hard study, and was fast growing accustomed to the mental acrobatics requisite to the study of the Craft, et cetera. But my body? All my life I'd lived . . . *entombed* in strangeness. And though now my strangeness had a name, it is one I disdain.

I'll say only that I was, *am* a child of Hermes and Aphrodite. It was this physical truth I sought to understand. To do so, I turned to Celia.

Indeed, I made of her a mirror; for what had any *true* mirror ever shown me but shame? My self reflected was a thing I was loath to see: an odd confluence of the common sexes. A duality, indeed; for in me, you see, the two sexes are entwined. Neither this nor that, I am both. I am . . . a third sex, with a body, a being, a self that had only recently been disclosed to me. *You are a man. You are a woman. You are a witch.*

Yes, it seems to me quite logical that I sought to define myself in terms of opposition, and so turned to Celia.

She was dark. I was light.

She was petite. I saw myself as tall, ungainly, and graceless. True, the men's dress I wore concealed and excused some of my traits: large hands and feet, and my height; but it set others in relief: my smooth skin, overly fine features, and a throat that showed no manly apple. Still, it had been wise to travel as a man, to leave behind the fripperies of female dress (for a while, at least).

Celia wore her hair tight to her head: a bun of woven braid. My blond plaits had recently been cut to further my manly guise.

Celia's figure was deliciously full. My much smaller breasts I wrapped in a length of white muslin; and lest my silhouette betray me, I favored shirts as blousy as fashion would allow.

In short, Celia was beautiful; and I longed to both *be* and *possess* her, never once considering the fate to which her beauty had doomed her.

As I knew it must, the offer of conversation had come our second night at sea.

As I passed my neighbors' cabin, eager for my own twilight room and a night's work, the offer came: Would I step in and take a pipe? I demurred. Tolver Bedloe looked at me askance. I lowered my voice, and furthered my excuse: I said I was ill. O, but one needs a sounder excuse than that if one is to deny a Virginian's offer of tobacco; and so I came to find myself within both Bedloe's cabin and his conversation, each of which were deeply shadowed; and from neither could I extricate myself.

Bedloe stood as tall as I; gesturing to the cabin's low, timbered ceiling, he joked that it would be safer for us to sit. This we did, in matching armchairs covered in green baize. Between us stood a table, its top a painted game board. Celia sat as far from us as the cabin allowed, reading by the light of a single candle. This, then, seemed to me not the least bit odd. I wondered

not *how* she was reading, nor what kindly criminal had taught her. I wondered only *what* she was reading.

“Chess?” offered Bedloe, when quickly our conversation flagged; for I barely had the confidence to meet his gaze, let alone converse in an untried tongue.

I declined, said again that I was ill, and attributed my discomfort to the sea.

“Sherry?” he tried; appending, “Some sherry will set you right, sir.”

“Please, yes.” To decline yet again would have been rude, conspicuously so.

Celia was summoned from her corner. As she bent to place the silver tray—regrettably set with two, not three tiny flutes of crystal—upon the checkered table, I saw her eyes, shimmering in defiance of the dark. I smile to wonder what I might have done had she trained them on me fully.

Before we’d raised sail, I’d seen her, yes—her skin, her hair, her hips so much broader than mine—but here she stood in glorious detail. . . . The fruited scent of her skin. The tight curl of her lashes. The dark stream of her neck, flowing down unto an ample bosom. The tiniest booted foot peaking out from under the bell of her skirt. (She wore the dress of yellow gingham that first night, its bodice low-laced and its hem *parsemé* with cherry blossoms.) I wanted to speak to her. Perhaps would have tried to speak to her, had not Bedloe sent her back to the corner from whence she’d come. “You’ll sup, I trust?”

Again, I declined his offer, saying I’d already dined and had a quantity of work awaiting me.

“And what is your work?” asked Bedloe, turning in his chair to face me.

He was handsome in his way, I suppose. His brownish, longish hair was threaded through with blond, and worn tied back into a pig’s tail. His face was angular; and though it seemed well suited to severity, he was not severe now, seated in the relaxed confines of his cabin, in the company of a woman he owned and a man he did not know. *O, pray let him see me as such!* thought I; as a man, merely.

He trained his colorless eyes on me and asked after my work:

“The captain and I have wondered about our busy shipmate. What is it you’re working on with such diligence, if I may be so bold as to enquire?”

I did not respond. I was distracted by Celia, busy in that galley crowded with apparatuses seemingly better suited to the scientific than the culinary arts. Too, an English response (and a lie at that) stalled in my mind.

“Pardon my conjecturing,” said Bedloe, “but in my mind I’ve formed the

facts of our fellows: the captain, certain distinctive crewmen . . . yourself, certainly. A biographical game, if you will; harmless, I should think. . . . One has so much time on a voyage such as this, you understand. And so little company." At these last words, I turned toward Celia, verily begging an introduction.

"Ah, yes . . ." said Bedloe.

Melody, he called her; and he spoke of her as one would any prized possession. She bent at the waist, said something salutatory. I said nothing in response; and was glad to have shown as much sense as that; for my tongue was all atwist.

Bedloe swirled his sherry in the lanterns' light, coating the crystal to its rim. He breathed the aroma in, deeply, and said, "Of you, sir—again, take no offense—my *facts* are these: you are sailing to Norfolk, perhaps on to Richmond, from whence you will proceed overland to teach your native tongue at Mr. Jefferson's . . . at the *late* Mr. Jefferson's university?" He sat forward, eagerly: a gamesman. "Tell me: do I have any of that right?" His smile was more sly than full. His jaw: squared and stubbled. I remarked the broad plane of his chest; and the hairs—like shaven gold—which overflowed the lacings of his shirt.

"You, sir," said I, "are quite astute. Indeed, I do hope to teach." Of course, I had no such intention; but as plans went, it seemed as sound as any other. In truth, I'd not yet considered how I was to earn my keep in Norfolk, Richmond, Charlottesville, or elsewhere. Happenstance had landed me in this state named for Elizabeth I, the virgin queen. Happenstance, too, had us sailing on a river named for her kinsman, James; and I remember marveling that I might well have been upon the Nile, the Tiber, the Thames, or any lesser river of the world. See, some weeks prior, I'd found myself in Marseilles, desperate to do what my discoverer, my Soror Mystica—Sebastiana d'Azur—had told me to do: put out to sea. And the first captain who'd have me had set sail for Virginia. "*Oui*," said I, "*c'est ça*: teaching."

"Ah, you see, my darling Melody, I am right! He has plans to teach, our Monsieur—" Bedloe stopped midsentence. I was silent.

Despairing of ever having my name—I'd not yet chosen the first of my many American names—still Bedloe spoke on. His words were a quite generous offer intended both to show his stature in the commonwealth and secure my shipboard company, such as it was. "If it's a recommendation you need, sir, you must simply ask. Mine is a name well known at Monticello." He mused further: "Shameful, don't you find it, that so great a man should die indebted?"

“Surely your countrymen will remember him for more than his monies owed,” I suggested. But this the planter could not grasp; to him, success accrued as coinage.

“Rather a lawless place, the university,” said Bedloe, twisting the issue of Jefferson’s legacy. “No doubt more so now that the great man is gone. It’s not a half year past, I should think, that a professor found himself at the working end of a student’s pistol.”

“I shall take great care,” said I.

In point of fact, all I took—then and there—was a green-eyed inventory of the room in which I sat. I didn’t envy Bedloe his surroundings as much as I was angry at having been deceived by our captain, who’d said mine was the premier cabin. O, but where were my crystal glasses, my silver flatware, my mole-hair divan and gilded mirrors?

I stood. I’d excuse myself, steal a glance at Celia, and go.

Instead I found myself taking from off the table a fistful of objects. I’d mistaken them for game pieces. What sort of game? I wondered; for these were heavy in the hand: thin rods of iron, no longer than a finger, at the tip of which were tiny, well-wrought figures. Letters? Pictographs? Their handles were wrapped in black wicker. The dark denied me a closer inspection. So, too, did Bedloe, who rose to snatch the rods from my hand. His eyes narrowed, and sapped the flame from a nearby candle. Meaning only to be polite, to compliment something before taking my leave, I’d misstepped. But how?

Bedloe cast his fiery glance toward the cabin door. I left.

I’d see Tolliver Bedloe again; would watch him, even; but those were not occasions for speech. And soon he fell sick; and sickened the more as we neared shore.

When first I’d espied them, we were still some weeks from the American seaboard. I’d watched them once, twice, perhaps three times more. Always unseen. Or so I thought. And what I saw distracted me terribly: wanting to read or write, I’d sit instead in my cabin passing my fingertips o’er candle flame. What was it I’d seen? What was it within me had stirred at the sight?

I did not witness any scene too shockingly similar to the first; but I saw enough to confuse me further. I saw them in various states of undress. I heard her reading him to sleep. I saw her asleep, too, curled on the floor at the foot of his sickbed. I saw her on a bedside stool, tending him as he worsened. Rarely did I hear them converse. Oddly, the mirror was often

down from the wall. Only once more did I scent . . . well, I thought I caught the scent of seared flesh.

Eventually, the threat of conversation passed; for Tolliver Bedloe, midway from Marseilles, had begun to grow ill. The two of them withdrew. By the grace of that same movable mirror, I saw the prone Bedloe but once more. He lay asweat and shivering beneath too many blankets. His hair appeared plated to his head. His eyes bore a glaze. Candlelight trembled in the sweat pooled at the hollow of a neck which had appeared to me so strong when first we'd met, but now was fallow. Through cracked lips he moaned, nay keened: a sound that bespoke death, and soon replaced Celia's sorrow song.

One evening, near the crossing's end, as I came from topside—where the sun had just set in kaleidoscopic display—I stopped, listening in the dark corridor. No song. I moved nearer their cabin door. It was unlatched, half open; from within there issued a sickly smell the like of which. . . . Well, I supposed it was the scent of sickness: a sweating off of fever; but later I'd learn this had been compounded by the specific stench of Bedloe's sickness: suppurating gums had rendered his breath rank as steam seeping from some infernal fissure.

I looked first to the mirror, but found only the bare wall. What possessed me I cannot say, but I did not proceed to my own door, nor did I knock on theirs. No: I simply pushed their cabin door wider, wider; till there she sat, at the table, head bent o'er that mirrored square which I knew by its gilded frame. Was she writing on its back? In her hand was a stylus, or a palette knife, or something similar. On the table before her stood the small iron stove, a circle of grillwork affixed to its top. A browned apple sat before her. On the scale of ripeness, it measured far nearer Marseilles than Richmond.

She did not start when finally she saw me. Neither did she speak.

Already she'd risen and stepped to a bushel, from which she drew another apple. Said she, "Master wants his roasted apple when he wakes. Always." And she nodded behind me: *Go*.

Thereafter, for what sea hours remained to us, Celia kept their cabin door closed.

I returned to the tasks I'd set myself. I kept Celia from my wakeful mind as best I could. Hour upon hour I wrote. I hardly slept; but when I did, Celia reigned o'er my dreams.

When next I saw her, she had come home. Chattel. In chains.

. . . .
I pushed nearer the bow of the *Ceremaju*. There were barrels to step around, bladed things to skirt, people pushing. . . . When finally I achieved the gangway: nothing. I thought I saw them: *there*, disappearing behind a tallish building of brick. I thought, nay would have *sworn* I saw a swish of violet and. . . . No: doubtless it was a shadow I'd seen. Celia? She was gone.

I stood near the river's edge, my legs jellied, my knees and heart knocking. Through the warped boards of the wharf I saw the silty, butter-colored churn of the James. All around me the song of this new city played on—the mercantile buzz and hum, the grind of the rapids upriver, the shouting in a language not my own. . . . I dared not look up; for I knew I'd not see her, and she was all I sought. Moreover: if the breeze from off the river caught my tears, well. . . . tears would belie my pose; which was this: *here stands a man, newly come to a new land*.

As I stood stifling, swallowing those salt tears, there came a tapping upon my shoulder.

I turned fast; but found no one there.