



VINTAGE

LEMPRIÈRE'S DICTIONARY
LAWRENCE NORFOLK

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About the Book

It is eighteenth century London and John Lempriere, a young scholar, is writing a dictionary of classical mythology in an attempt to exorcise the demons raised by his father's bizarre and violent death. While tending to his father's business affairs, Lempriere discovers a 150-year-old conspiracy that has kept his family from its share of the fabulously wealthy East India Company. But as John begins to untangle the years of mystery and deceit, people begin to die, in ways that mirror the very myths he is researching .

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About the Author

Lawrence Norfolk was born in London in 1963. He read English at King's College, London, graduating in 1986. He began teaching, studied for a Ph.D., and worked as a freelance writer on a number of reference books, contributing articles and reviews to magazines and journals including the *Times Literary Supplement*. He has written three novels; *Lempriere's Dictionary*, *Pope's Rhinoceros* and *In the Shape of a Boar*.

ALSO BY LAWRENCE NORFOLK

The Pope's Rhinoceros

In the Shape of a Boar

TO
S B-H

Lempriere's Dictionary

Lawrence Norfolk

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Barbarus hic ego sum, qui non intellegor ulli

1600: The Voyage Out

Schtlaumpp!

THE YOUNG MAN dropped the book. The boat would wait for him. He rubbed his tired eyes behind their spectacles and looked out across the river. A gull skimmed over the water, measuring the wind. He wrapped his coat more tightly about him and glanced quickly down the quay. The chest on which he sat shifted slightly, unbalanced on the rough planks of the jetty. She would not come now. In front of him, the pacquet pulled gently on its hawser. A crewman was hard at work stacking crates towards the stern where the rigging obscured his view. Not here and not now. He cursed in silence. The crewman cursed too, the boat would wallow like a pig under the load. Morning sunlight shone down on them all, casting shadows that shortened towards midday. The young man felt it warm on his back. Inside, he was cold and his thoughts grew bitter. *I have been brought to this. It was not my doing.* The book stared up at him from between his feet. Sunlight glinted off his eye-glasses. *Not my doing.*

The gull was gone, but the Thames had other sights for him. Watermen paddled their wherries back and forth between the banks and shouted abuse at any vessel within earshot. A pacquet, identical to the one moored before him, had misjudged the tide and was now anchored a hundred yards downstream. A pinnacle tacked hopelessly against the breeze. As the sun rose higher, the river water warmed, then sweated and stank. A fine haze lifted from its surface. The dark mud of Blackwall began to dissolve behind it, a widening strip as the tide turned and began to ebb.

Upstream of the jetty, the *Nottingham* sailed slowly into view, new canvas crackling in the light wind. It passed him, sliding through the black water, until its stern turned, the sound of its sails growing quieter to be replaced by the sound of the water lapping at the jetty.

But the solitary figure on the jetty did not want to let it go and his gaze trailed in the wake of the Indiaman, shimmering now in the haze as it edged around the bend. The far bank cut across its prow and he saw then, in its slow glide, its massive disappearance, the other ships, the very first of them that had never been his to see before but only to read of, to learn of at a distance, to track belatedly to port. And here, the very wharf on which he stood, was where it had begun. His thoughts reached back after that first day, along the secret trail of years that had directed his steps to this point and extended back long before that; a trail of faded markers, faint signatures. His countenance changed and the bitter memory rose in him again. *False modesty! Those names were strong enough to play me like a puppet . . . Not only me, all of us. All of our lives, mine, my father's, his father's and his before him, all the way back to Rochelle. The bloody succession led me here and from here I trace it back to the first of that long line. To you, François, my ancestor, who thought yourself master and ended as victim; to you and your legacy.* His bitterness turned to anger at the dead man as he berated him silently from the other side of the grave and the sun glittered on the black water as it sped towards the sea.

The book lay between his feet. He bent to pick it up and as he grasped the cover its pages fell open and the dead man's testament slipped from between the leaves. The sun drove its rays down onto the jetty. A gust lifted the folded parchment and pushed it over the rough planks like a tiny sail towards the edge. Let it go, he thought. The tide would carry it away, away down the river. Let it go.

But he could not. He watched for a moment then bent once more to retrieve it. The parchment was stiff as canvas, crackling as he unfolded it. Away down the river. Out to sea. He adjusted his spectacles. Across the sea, a port they had left too long and too late waited for them in vain. Rochelle, the mistake they could not put behind them, the hard mark his ancestor could not erase. His head dropped and the neat characters stared up at him.

"I, François Charles Lemprière merchant, to you my descendant, whenever you may read this whosoever you may be, welcome.

Perhaps you are my son or grandson but I think not. I fear this business will take many generations and more years to reach its settlement. But should you read this then that settlement will be close and writing to you here in this City of London, my refuge and my place of exile, I rejoice that you have come at last.

I ask myself how much will you know? More I think than I know myself. Tomorrow I go in search of them, to take back what they took from me at Rochelle. Tomorrow too I begin my search for you. I abandoned my first family when I left Rochelle, my six children and their mother Anne-Marie pregnant with a seventh. Now I must leave my second family on Jersey to settle the account and so I must leave you too, my unborn descendant. Now, while I write these words, I can only hope that you will find them.

Of my partners and our Company I will say little here. If you are reading this you know already how we took it from the Englishers. They were good years, when we stood firm and fought our battles together. But they are finished now, finished with the siege and forgotten with the dead at Rochelle. You will know much of that too, and of my own escape to press our cause in England. I could only watch from these shores as Rochelle sickened and starved, as rendition became defeat, and my promise to return the

conqueror was proved a mockery. I could only wait for the slaughter of my family, my partners and all the citizens of that fated city. At the last I sent my partners word that they should flee for their lives and flee they did. But the manner of their flight I never could have guessed and that debt is yet to be settled. Tomorrow I go to square the account. Should you come to read this, the final tally will be made.

You have travelled a strange road to find these words, my message to you; strewn with the corpses who fell before you and trammelled with trials and hard labours. Perhaps you have journeyed from Jersey, perhaps the very house I built at Rozel. Like myself you have left home and family behind and perhaps you have grieved for them as I do now. But now you have come to join me. My old promise can still be kept. Together we may yet return to Rochelle as her conquerors. Once again, to you my unborn descendant, my successor, welcome."

The young man stared after the last words. So the final tally was made, and he had lost. The debt was owed him, but by dead men and if he was to dun them now then he must find them first in hell. He folded the parchment once more and replaced it within the pages of the book. The debt stayed and he had lost. She would not come now.

From further down the quay, the young man seemed the centrepiece in a picture of calm. The boat with its busy crew, the jetty, the river rolling by; they might all have been arranged for only this purpose. But within him, his recriminations grew with a life of their own as the memory of the distant day he sought took shape and the man he pursued stirred him to anger. The seeds were sown on the day the ships had sailed. *For you would have been here, François, casting your shrewd eye over the ships under cover of the crowd, gauging their holds and the voyage ahead of them, weighing risk against profit. You could not know how many would pay at the last, nor how much. And you could not know the ultimate course your trusted*

colleagues would take. Yet you began it, even in ignorance you began all of it. . . .

The long years of the feud and the twisted path he had taken back to its beginning came to the young man then as an image: a line of grey faces falling away at his approach, dead flesh, and behind the last of them a countenance that was alive and that he knew as he knew his own. His knuckles whitened as a vein of grim satisfaction rose to find its voice from within his anger. *I found you out, François. I followed you back through every one of one hundred and eighty-eight years, losing all I cared for, watching your failure revisit my every step without knowing it, not even knowing my object until here, at the root of it, at the very beginning, I found you.*

And while he sat on the jetty, he counted back through the catalogue of all that had happened, his inner anger growing until he truly mourned the death of the man he harangued for it meant that his ancestor was safe in the grave and could not be killed. He was cheated even now. But this time he would not be gulled and he would not be denied his recompense. *For your ignorance François, and the innocence of those that followed, for the fact that she will not come, not now, and for my father I take you and that time both in payment, the beginning of it all: all I have left.*

He cast his eye again over the dark swell and the wherries paddling hard against the tide which dragged the sluggish water down its channel. The water moved blindly as he looked into it, turning and wheeling upon itself as the unseen sea hauled in its net. The tide gathered pace as it always did, sucking the river down as it had always done, this day as every other. This year as all the rest, he thought, drawing it down the long line of all those years and he with it, all the way back to the time he had sought and found and now held in his mind's eye, to see then what was there for any to see on the day the trail had begun.

A day, bright and chill as this one, the century newly struck, an air of promise and the ships, four of them, bobbing slowly at anchor, masts swaying with the river while behind them, on the packed quay, the crier ascends the platform, draws out his parchment and, shouting over the din of the crowd, begins to read,

“CHARTER GRANTED BY QUEEN ELIZABETH TO THE EAST-INDIA COMPANY, Dated the twentieth Day of *April*, in the forty-second Year of Her Reign, *Anno Domini*, 1600. *ELIZABETH*, by the Grace of God, Queen of *England*, *France* and *Ireland*, Defender of the Faith, &c. To all our Officers, Ministers and Subjects, and to all other people, as well within this our realm of *England* as elsewhere, under our Obedience and Jurisdiction, or otherwise unto whom these our Letters Patents shall be seen, shewed or read, Greeting.”

To you too, thought the figure on the jetty, welcome. *Finis exordium invocat*.

The crowds shout louder, drowning him out. He continues inaudibly from the platform, waving his arms. No-one watches. All eyes are on the ships, the *Hector* and the *Ascension*, the *Susan* and the *Dragon*, yard arm and yard arm, decked with pennants, sides rising steep out of the water. Newly caulked, waist and wales encrusted with gingerbread, the closest onlookers can smell Stockholm tar and beneath it the vinegar used to scrub the decks. Below those decks, the stench of the ballast still mingles with both. The hard work has already been done. Sailors scamper up and down the ratlines for show and the junior officers preen. Good order prevails. The crowd has been here an hour and grown no quieter but their enthusiasm is more perfunctory now. They are waiting for a signal to prompt their wildest cheering and from the poop deck of the *Dragon*, Captain James Lancaster is almost ready to send it.

He leans over the side of the ship to direct the tying on of the row-boats' hawsers to the bowsprit of his own vessel and shouts encouragement to the men who strain like galley slaves at the oars. Gradually, so slowly, the prow begins to

turn. Captain Lancaster raises his arm and shouts to the men on the aft winch. He feels a slight tremor through the ship as the current catches it. He drops his arm, the men haul the anchor and the crowd erupts. The voyage has begun. The *Hector*, then the other two follow as the *Dragon* moves its slow bulk into midstream. The wind catches their sails, but it is the tide that moves them as the ships gather momentum. The sailors wave stiffly. From the shore, they already look like marionettes, tiny figures as the show moves further down the river. The crowds around the docks and the surrounding wharves wave back. Their shouts reach thinly across the intervening water. The sailors can barely hear them now, barely see them as they begin to undrape the bunting festooned about the wales, the ships emerging from the gaudy decoration, vessels of hard oak headed out in line for the East.

Along the riverbank, the curious have already begun to drift away. A vague disappointment that the spectacle is at an end works its way through the crowd, dividing it into twos and threes, little clumps which move awkwardly through each other as they disperse. The riverside wharves begin to clear, revealing those with reason enough to stay until the ships disappear around the river's bend. A little way down the quay, the aldermen congratulate themselves on the smoothness of it all. Invited dignitaries criticise them in an undertone. The investors look tense. Was it madness? The risk of it all, will it pay? True venturers, they tell each other not to worry as their money floats down the river. And a close-knit knot of men there, eight or nine of them, set off a little, out of earshot. The orator is audible again as the crowd's din becomes a buzz, a hum, a thousand private conversations.

“. . . that they and every of them, from henceforth be, and shall be one Body Corporate and Politick, in Deed and in Name, by the Name of The *Governor and Company of Merchants of London, Trading into the East Indies*, really and fully, for us, our Heirs and Successors, we do order,

make, ordain, constitute, establish and declare, by these presents, and that by the same name of *Honourable Governor and Company of Merchants of London, Trading into the East Indies*, they shall have succession, and that they and their successors be and shall be, at all Times hereafter, Persons able and capable in Law, and a Body Corporate and Politick, and capable in Law to have, purchase, receive, possess, enjoy and retain, Lands, Rents, Priviledges, Liberties, Jurisdictions, Franchises and Hereditaments of whatsoever Kind, Nature and Quality so ever, they be to them and their Successors."

The nine men seem to pay close attention, looking away from each other, heads tilted to catch the words, an act. They do not care what he says. They have reached their decision and the purpose of their long journey from Rochelle is clearer to them. They too have thought of risk. They have counted the hazards of the journey that has just begun. The events that have led them to consider a venture on these hateful shores are unclear even to them but, despite the show of calm as they stand in silence together, the fact of their being so distant from home bespeaks the depth of their need, their restraint and their patience. For they will not invest in this voyage. They have counted the risks and now they count upon them. They will wait for the voyage to founder, for the ships to meet their fate. They will wait for the investors' nerve to break and the Company to fail. They have their own idea as to what the scene they have witnessed might eventually mean.

Their hopes of failure sail on, the four of them, drawn by the tide past Gravesend, by the wind a little closer to the east and its dream of riches. They move downriver to the estuary, thence to an anchorage off the Downs to take on victuals. The barter goods are already stowed. They set sail again and news of them grows scarce. Tiny segments of their long journey drift back in the few ships that pass them on the open seas, from traders who have passed through the ports in which these ships berth. Stories that might tell of them, strange incidents without context or meaning which, as days turn to weeks, are seized upon as proof of

their continued existence, if only that. The master gunner of the *Ascension* died after falling from the main yard and a shoal of flying fish swam by. A French vessel brought back his belongings. They had witnessed his burial at sea. And the two that resulted from it, for the firing of the ordnance had been careless. A stray shot had killed the Captain and the boatswain's mate.

News turned to anecdotes, anecdotes to rumour, to flotsam carried on the sea-surface, altered and washed up in the port of London where the investors combed the wharves for whatever they might find until they were forced to admit that the gleaned scraps told them nothing. Thereafter, they contented themselves in discussion and plotting the desired course on maps. Their carefully drawn lines soon reached the area where the coasts became speculation and their apprehension grew.

They need not have fretted, thought the distant figure on the jetty. Almost two centuries later, he had read Lancaster's log and observed in its terse catalogue of incidents and bearings a continuing acknowledgement of his fleet's endeavour. Lancaster himself had emerged as a man built upon an inflexible determination to carry the voyage and all else before him or perish in the attempt. As the ships sailed on, the task entrusted to him became all his being and he saw each day's progress as an additional, strengthening fibre in the fabric of himself.

The fleet had sailed south, reaching the Canaries on the seventh of May and the Tropic five days after that. Scurvy held off till August, then claimed a round hundred. They doubled the Cape on the first of November. A storm saw them through the Christmas of 1600, taking two anchors with it. They weathered that and those that followed, but the shoals of Adu almost claimed them. Hedged about by rocks with barely four fathoms, the pinnacle was sent out to find a channel; found one, praise God. May came with fair

winds and a sighting of Nicobar. June gave them Dachen and Dachen would give them their first boatload of pepper.

As the fleet sailed into the mouth of the Malacca Straits on the evening of the last day of June, the mariners saw the light of a hundred fires ranged along the coast. They burned all night and on the morrow Captain Lancaster took the row-boat ashore. The king of Dachen welcomed Lancaster and his men with fresh fruit and mutton roasted over charcoal. Lancaster gave the king a silver tray and showed him his letters of patent. The king sent his greetings to her Majesty in return and gave Lancaster an elephant. The Dutch were a surly lot, thought the king, and haggled well. He would do business with the Englanders. In August, Lancaster discovered the root of their fulsome welcome. It lay in Bantam, only a few days' sail through the Malacca Straits. The king of Bantam had pepper to sell too; at a third of the price. An adjustment was proposed in Dachen and a new price negotiated. The English were as surly as the Dutch, concluded the king, and he resolved that henceforth the traders would be denied the hospitality of his table. The elephant was returned.

The four ships sailed between Dachen and Bantam, bartering for pepper, buying when they had no choice. The sailors liked the easy days' sailing between anchorages while the merchants complained of delays, lading pepper into the holds and counting, always counting. The Dutch, when encountered at all, seemed almost to encourage them in their dealings. Their complaisance aroused Lancaster's suspicion but he could discover no deeper purpose behind it in the weeks that followed; besides, trade was good. The summer and winter passed this way. A trading post was set up on Bantam and in the following February, with the holds full to bursting, Captain James Lancaster decided that the time had arrived to begin the long journey home. On the twentieth day of April 1602, the four ships raised their anchors, fired off their ordnance and set sail for England.

In London, the investors had relapsed into helpless calm. They had not given up hope, and they had not given up waiting. But their expectancy had turned in on itself when it could no longer be contented with news. Now it was only the elapse of time. Although they met frequently enough, they no longer spoke of the four ships. They had heard nothing for two years. Their encounters were tense, hearty affairs, each singly aware of what now seemed their joint failure. Their thirst for adventure had diminished considerably and it appeared that nothing might revive it.

Their pessimism was to prove ill-founded however, for two oceans away, the roof of the world was lifting over the Indies. As the pressure dropped it drew in the winds and sent them gusting across the Indian Ocean where Captain Lancaster recognised them for what they were and hoisted all the canvas he had. The monsoon would carry them home.

First word of the fleet's return arrived in unspectacular fashion by way of a French merchant who arrived in London to buy tallow. Tallow was not Julien Beaudeguerre's usual line and England was not his usual market. Ordinarily, he bought carpets from the Moriscos, selling them to the wealthier burghers of Provence. Tallow was his cousin's business, but he had fallen ill a week after landing the contract for a lodge north of Arles. A misfortune for everyone, but in particular for Julien. He had been prevailed upon. He had succumbed. He was here. Tallow was tedious stuff and his Morisco friends had not been pleased. They had proposed sending their rugs and carpets by ship to be collected by him in London. They had heard that a small fleet was making its way up the coast from their trading partners in Africa. Julien should seek news of them in London on the off-chance that this unlikely plan might work. Three days after his arrival, Julien duly began repeating what his Moorish friends had told him and he bent the ear of every mariner, water-man and wharf rat he could find. No-

one could confirm or deny the five words that he laboriously spread about the port but when his phrase reached the ears of Philpot, De Vere and the other investors it lit their resigned acceptance of loss with a faint glimmer of hope. 'An *Ector* and tre others' was Julien's only English.

The process by which the fleet had faded from sight to rumour and thence to nothing had begun to reverse itself along with the Trades that were bringing them home. Beaudeguerre's scrap was followed by others. All four were safe, said one report. All three, said another. Their holds were full and their holds were empty. Their crews were dead men kept alive by a strange light on the mast-head and they were pulled through the sea by mermaids. Word went around that a Frenchman had got ten guineas from Philpot and De Vere for his news and a flourishing trade sprang up in Shadwell where plausible stories were concocted to be sold to the waiting investors. The investors saw through these fabrications but paid anyway. They mentioned them casually to each other, laughing at the more fanciful. A report that the *Saint Anthony* had been captured and a cargo of silver taken proved popular enough to be sold twice. News grew more frequent in the weeks that followed Beaudeguerre's arrival and the more blatant contradictions and wilder flights of fancy diminished. There were indeed four ships. And their holds were full to bursting. On the twenty-first day of September 1602 they were sighted off the Downs. The investors no longer tried to contain their delight. Surely, their boldness had paid off. Two days later, they learned for the first time that the cargo was pepper and knew then that their original daring, the assiduous maintenance of their hope and new expectation of its fulfilment were as nothing, not even dust, to the devious reversals of fate.

The four ships sailed up the Thames on the morning tide like women of strong virtue. A thousand seducers had courted them with destruction and they bore the scars of

rebuffal proudly to prove it. Their masts were split, their sails patched and their sides a motley of leaking and replaced planks. The sea was an insistent lover. Aboard the *Dragon*, Captain Lancaster led his four vessels to where the pilot met them and picked a course through the shoals and sandbanks of the Thames. They moved slowly upstream towards Blackwall, whence they had set out almost three years before. He thought of the pepper which filled the holds, one million pounds of it, and the price it would bring. Eight shillings for every one of those pounds. The men had almost mutinied during the return and the ship had almost fallen apart, but they had returned intact and his heart was full of England. The crowds that had sent them off in such magnificence were no longer there, but London looked much as it ever had. As did his sponsors, the investors, whom he could see on the quayside as he approached the dock.

Philpot, Alexander Smith, De Vere and the others had met that morning and travelled together to Blackwall. When the four ships had set out, three years before, the investors had imagined all the possible fates which might befall them. They had foreseen shipwreck, mutiny, disease and death at the hands of natives. Their dreams had been of ships sinking in every imaginable circumstance: driven onto rocks, colliding in the night, attacked by whales and turned to funeral pyres by fire on board. They had thought that should the ships return with their holds full, there were no more perils or disasters to be considered. But now, as Captain Lancaster ordered all hands on deck to oversee their final negotiation through the entrance to the docks, he noticed a downcast air about the investors that had not been apparent from further down the river. How could they have known that the fate of the expedition lay not in the treacherous shoals off Adu, nor the storms around the Cape, nor even in the murderous whim of some distant, black-faced pashar? The fair winds and calm seas that had brought the expedition home safely had not benefited them

alone. Scarcely a vessel had been lost on the East Indies route all that year; a fact which had helped keep hope alive in London. The Dutch fleet had brought back a cargo only weeks before that exceeded Lancaster's many times over. Coincidentally, or perhaps not, it too was pepper, and in quantities that could only be described as a glut. The market had held for a week, wavered, faltered then dropped like a stone. Eight shillings a pound? One was the best price on offer, and hardly a buyer then. As Captain Lancaster bounded down the gang-plank to greet his colleagues in their triumph, it was all the group on the quayside could do to look him in the eye. The cargoes of the four ships that docked at Blackwall after a journey of two years and 22,000 miles were worth little more than sand and the Honourable Company less than that.

In the days that followed their initial, bitter disappointment turned to the deepest gloom. The price fell further and the few remaining buyers departed for the continent. Worry visited each of them and, hard on its heels, their creditors. The part-paid shipwrights, chandlers and victuallers learned soon enough of their difficulties and became nervous in turn. They called daily upon the investors and became brusque in their demands. The investors assured them that buyers had been found, it was only a matter of waiting. The creditors did not want to wait; they wanted their money. One million pounds of pepper lay in a warehouse at Poplar, unwanted. The investors met to resolve their difficulties but could decide on nothing. They would stand firm together and reaffirmed their faith in each other as good fellows and venturers worthy of the name. But solidarity would not pay their debts. What should they do? None of them knew.

No, thought the figure on the jetty, none of them knew. Ignorance and disarray: the beginning, when the Rochelais would wait no longer. The trail began to break up. He could

find only brief scenes after that, glimpses of what must have taken place.

By the spring of the following year they would have known no more. The creditors would have called less frequently, not at all when they realised there was nothing to be had. The investors had been relieved, even knowing that the courts could not be far behind this respite. Alexander Smith had filed his bankruptcy in March. They could do nothing but wait for salvation without expectation or hope of its arrival and in this desperate conviction they were, as before, quite mistaken.

No-one would have paid any attention to the nine men walking down the gang-plank in April of that year. They exchanged small talk in an undertone. No-one heard what they said. Lodgings were taken above Lombard Street, but they were not seen there, nor at Saint Paul's nor even at the market. They did not frequent the taverns. They stayed four days, then left. All nine had waited patiently since the day when they had watched the fleet set sail from Blackwall. Three years later, their business in London was brief and to the point.

The solitary figure imagined their boat sailing away, hazy, out of sight, as it ever was. Out of reach, even of the investors who were left then with their averted ruin and the sense of mutual betrayal that was its price.

Their solidarity had only existed by default. They had no choice but to maintain it. No buyer had split their unity because there were no buyers. Then, out of the blue, came the meetings. Arranged through intermediaries, mention of a small proposition, curiosity driving each to receive his visitor. Dark, foreign accents, courteous. All alike, save one. Then the offers for the stock, nominal amounts, accepted immediately, their company and its debts transferred at a stroke. Solidarity and their common cause would not save any one of them. Singly and unaware of the other, identical

meetings, they would each have signed the agreements. Business was business. They were not children.

Fools and their money, thought the lone sitter. Even centuries away, he recognised the stealthy discretion of the Nine. It could only be theirs. He shivered in the cold sunlight.

Rochelle! A boat sliding past the twin turrets to enter the harbour. The long wait over, the stratagem brought to a close. Nine men breaking silence at last, laughing down the quay. They had what they wanted. Their leader, Zamorin, white hair standing out from the dark of his fellows. The end of one campaign and the beginning of another. A new spirit, a slogan to take them further; the resolution of their secret comradeship and a name for it. A joke to begin with, perhaps. Later only the truth.

He mouthed the name, heard for the first time only days before. He had not laughed. New to me as you, François. Or was it your creation? The new proprietors of the Honourable Company of Merchants trading to the East Indies would call themselves the Cabbala. He rubbed his eyes again. The trail was all but gone, rag-ends and splinters.

Other years, other voyages. Mounted by their new-found agents, bound in silence by betrayal, in honesty by fear. And profit. No, they were not children. The riches piled up as you knew they would. Very shrewd, François.

The crew had piled crates as high as they would go, forming a low tower in the packet's stem. The last few would be lashed down in the bows. A sailor was leading a woman down the gangplank, leading her by the hand. The *Nottingham* had disappeared and the last fragments of his vision flew after it. But it is mine still, he thought. You are still mine, François. The woman stumbled in her nervousness. You are mine or nothing, all of you. His face was grim again.

Riches even beyond their calculation. Influence even beyond their needs. The nine of them, moving further and

further out, never looking back and never thinking that Rochelle itself might be where fortune would take her due. A fatal flaw, waiting for them in their neglect.

A single cloud passed high overhead, darkening the water, the boat and the jetty. The tide was running faster. He could hear it rushing against the wooden piles that supported the jetty beneath him. The woman had recovered her step. He thought of the lost girl. Not here and not now.

His anger seeped back in slow waves which rose and fell against the memory of the episode he had summoned up and whose recession seemed to invite it on. They lived on in his outrage and it was their story still. *Forgive them*. Father? Another unavenged. He thought of the tableau by the shadowed pool, high trees reaching up for the last of the summer sky and the water, red on grey, anger on forgetting. My own beginning, he realised. The beginning of my story, sea-fringed granite, red island in the grey-green sea, home. It seemed so distant, more distant than the Indies. And so long ago! A year, he told himself, only that. But a year like an age and its passing, far older than the first voyage. Impossible time. The young man felt his anger draw back, revealing slow puzzlement beneath. He recognised it as the onset of curiosity which had led him here, guiding his steps through a maze they had planted about him. But as he grasped it in this way, it too dissolved and fear rose to take its place. Then he realised that it was he who was falling, through the succession of his feelings and their memories, crashing through the decks of himself. Fear of pain, fear of blindness; childhood terrors, he dismissed them. Fear of the dead and his own guilt, closer, fear of death as the hard hand pushed him forward, the knife an inch from his throat, fear of losing her. He reached out to grasp the memory, but she slipped away, receding as fear fell away too, carrying her off and he was left alone. On the very lowest deck in the pitch dark and not a sound to be heard. Solitude was the last stage before the cold sea below. Solitude was a familiar.

A young boy of four or five, pretending to read the Greek script, motionless over the page for hours on end, looking into himself. Older, surrounded by the rustling voices of his books and their protective murmur. A lie. The last deck splintered, gave way under his feet and he was falling through into the cold hands below that waited, wanting only to show him the secret beyond solitude, but he was not ready for that, not yet, and he would wait a little longer as the water tried to close over his head, rising up and shuddering back to cold flesh and bone, alone on the jetty.

My life, he thought with dispassion, hardly distracted by the shrill cry from further up the quay. My own beginning. Jersey was still his, even if all else was gone. He could recall it at will. His parents' house slid back easily to him, and the nights that he knew he would now find eerie, for the intervening year had changed him. High above his head, the cloud passed on, freeing the sun's rays to dazzle him and the crewman shouted up. The last one left. He started, but he would not give up the memory. He rose, sunblinded, and felt it flood back into him. Stooping for the chest, he looked up as the quay emerged from white, breaking in on his thoughts for a moment, then falling back to the remembered island's dark and he saw a slight figure waving, impossibly distant through the depth and silence of Jersey's night as it came down upon him. Where he had embarked and his journey had begun, his beginning gathered about him as the sailor shouted again and he would not let it go, not then for the love of God, not there for the wealth of the Indies, nor ever save for her and the last call to the voyage out as it reached him across the waves on the island of his childhood.

'All aboard!'

Caesarea

THE WINDS BLEW high over Jersey, clearing the sky for the stars to glimmer down on the island below. Its gentle beaches and high cliffs were barely distinguishable from the dark water. The moon had sunk from view hours before. Some nights it shone bright enough to read by, but not tonight. The oil lamp which stood on the desk at which he sat threw a soft, yellow light. A book lay open before him and he studied it intently, his face only inches from the characters. His head followed the movement of the lines, turning slightly from left to right and back, moving slowly down the page. Outside, the murmur of the waves just reached his ears as they washed in and slapped against the cliffs of Bouley Bay.

After some time, the hunched figure brought his head up from his labours and rubbed his eyes with his knuckles. His tall, angular body was cramped, legs twisted around the chair, elbows seeking a resting place amongst the clutter of papers on the desk. He shifted position awkwardly. When he brought his hands away from his eyes, the room had dissolved. The patch of dull red he was able to make out would be his bed and the lighter area beyond it the door. The floor he could feel with his feet and the window he identified by the slight gusts and breezes which blew coolly against his face. At this distance, yards rather than inches, the rest was lost to him in a flux of shadows; nothing but 'air deprived of light'; he recalled the formula. Lucretius, matter

of fact and unhelpful. As the objects about him drifted, disappeared and shaded into one another, John Lemprière felt the slight panic in his stomach to which he had become inured, an unwelcome sensation even now. He bent to the page, trying to focus his eyes once again.

The blurrings of sight had begun when he was fourteen or thereabouts and grown more and more frequent as he had entered his late teens. The world came to seem as it did now. Objects fogged and merged with other objects. Outlines broke and seeped into their surroundings. His myopia dissolved the world in a mist of possibilities and its vague forms made a playground for his speculations. His youthful panic had later become acceptance and, later still, something akin to pleasure. Only the faintest vestige of unease remained and he allowed his speculations, his daydreams and his visions free rein. The island itself could not compete with the routs of demi-gods and heroes, the noisy unions of nymphs and animals, with which the young scholar populated the fields of his imagination. His head had only to leave the pages of Tully, Terence, Pindar or Propertius to see their most delicate or lurid descriptions made flesh in the wavering dusk outside his window. Galatea had made sport with Acis in that land of visions. And Polyphemus had made sport with them both. There the last Punic war had been fought and lost by the Poeni whose Carthage burnt for seventeen days before twenty miles of its walls crashed in to quell the flames. Scipio Africanus was nothing but a trickster, but got the consulship he craved. *Delenda est Carthago*. So it was. Achilles sulked and raged for Patroclus, Helen awaited the nightly pleasures of Paris's company. What matter if she were only the most beautiful of *mortal* women? Paris tasted better than any golden apple. Deiphobus better than both. The ancient kings whose lives flickered between natural and supernatural worlds, the ordinary loves of shepherds touched for an instant by hands that transformed flesh to wood, hamadryads and nereids,

what vision was it that saw in the simple flames of an Athenian hearth the gory torture of Prometheus, in the nightingale's song the rape of Philomel, in every tree a face, every stream a voice? And behind them lay the ukases which commanded not with reason, but with the simple certainty that it was their place to do so; perhaps the gods too were victims of that savage simplicity, he wondered? Victims to that clarity with its steel logic, its sentence without redress. Princes and heroes, nymphs and satyrs stalked the antechambers of the young classicist's mind, disporting and dismembering, playing and replaying the scenes he chased through the pages of the Ancients.

'He tripped over a bucket. It was plain in view, Charles.' His mother's querulous voice brought his head up from the page of Thucydides and the Greek characters swam as his ears caught snatches of the nightly dialogue.

'What of it? Did he hurt?'

'Must he snap a leg before you'll see it, Charles? You're as blind as the boy.' They spoke in the hush reserved for worry or intimacy. Lemprière's fingertips brushed the chalky surface of the page before him. Three feet from his face he could not read it, inches and the letters were hard-edged and distinct. His parents were not intimate.

'He'll be a fine scholar, perhaps the finest of his age. What need for him to step over buckets?'

'It's the reading's ruined his eyes. Ruined *him*.' This last hissed, answered by Charles Lemprière's snort of disbelief.

'He's grown strange to us Charles, you know it.'

'He's simply fond of his studies, the balance will come in time. I was the same, I remember it well.'

'Oh yes, the Lemprières have ever been the same, that much I know. Nothing changes, does it Charles?' Her voice was bitter.

Lemprière caught only muffled words after that, his mother's soft sobbing. The debate was a familiar one to him. He stayed awake waiting for it, enjoying his central

role. He felt intimate with his parents as they unknowingly told him all they felt regarding him. Normally his mother seemed to understand little of what he said, while his father held himself in reserve, harbouring feelings his son could only guess at within a stem outward aspect. This, however, was to be the last of these particular discussions for the next morning it transpired that a resolution had been reached. John Lemprière was to have eye-glasses.

So it was that a week later two figures could be seen making the four mile trek across the island from Rozel to Saint Helier. Taller, and walking half a pace ahead of his son, Charles Lemprière picked his way through the ruts of the road with a practised ease. An occasional glance at the sky reassured him that though they would be spattered with mud to the knee, they would at least reach their destination dry. His son stumbled frequently and each time he did so Charles would forbear to look back but would stiffen and wince inaudibly to himself. His wife was right of course, but blindness, of the eye or mind, had its benefits. It was possible to see too much. The path was passing through a wood. He ducked an overhanging branch and lifted it for his son. The pair walked on. Passing Five Oaks, they gained the brow of the slope and Charles saw St Helier laid out ahead, beyond it Elizabeth Castle improbably afloat in the harbour. It was only five years since Rullecourt and seven hundred men had got the governor out of bed to sign away the island. And, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he had signed. Elizabeth Castle stood firm then. Poor Moses Corbet, running through the marketplace with musket balls peppering his hat. There were more Martellos than cottages now.

His son heard Saint Helier long before he saw it. The town clamoured at him, open arms brushed at his jacket and the din of human voices as they transacted, bickered or greeted each other, enfolded him in an anonymous, urban welcome. He caught his father's arm and was hurried through the crush as its sounds crested and broke over his head. Charles