



THE BLACKBIRDER

JAMES NELSON

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

Thomas Marlowe, former pirate and captain of the *Guardship*, lives prosperously on his tobacco plantation near Williamsburg with his lovely wife Elizabeth. But when King James, the huge ex-slave who is in command of Marlowe's sloop, kills the crew of a slaveship – a blackbirder – and makes himself the most wanted man in Virginina, Marlowe is forced to go and hunt him down.

Setting off in pursuit of the blackbirder, struggling to maintain control over his crew – rough privateers, set only on plunder – Marlowe follows James's trail of destruction all the way to the shores of Africa. There, in the slave port of Whydah, James and Marlowe face a common threat – and their final showdown.

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THE BLACKBIRDER

Book Two of
The Brethren of the Coast

James Nelson

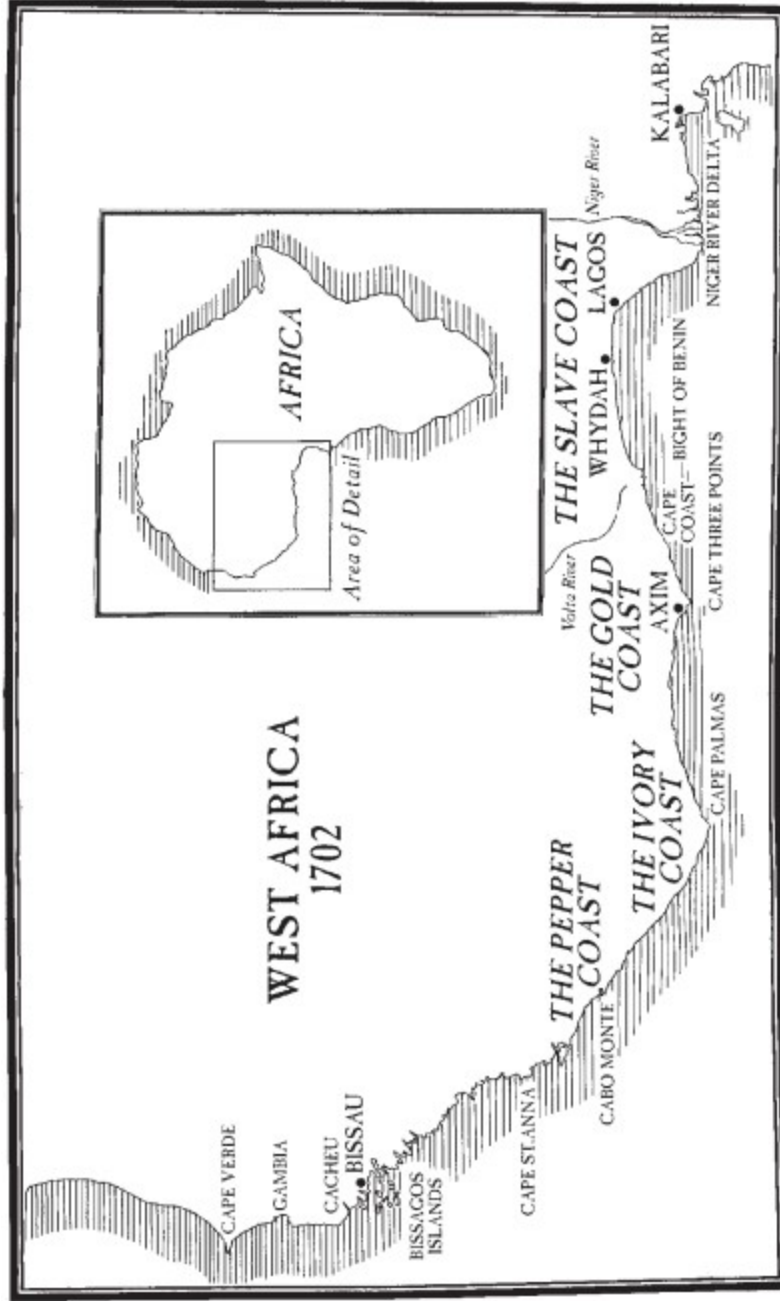
*To those millions of people stolen from Africa and
upon whose long-forgotten backs this country was
raised to greatness*

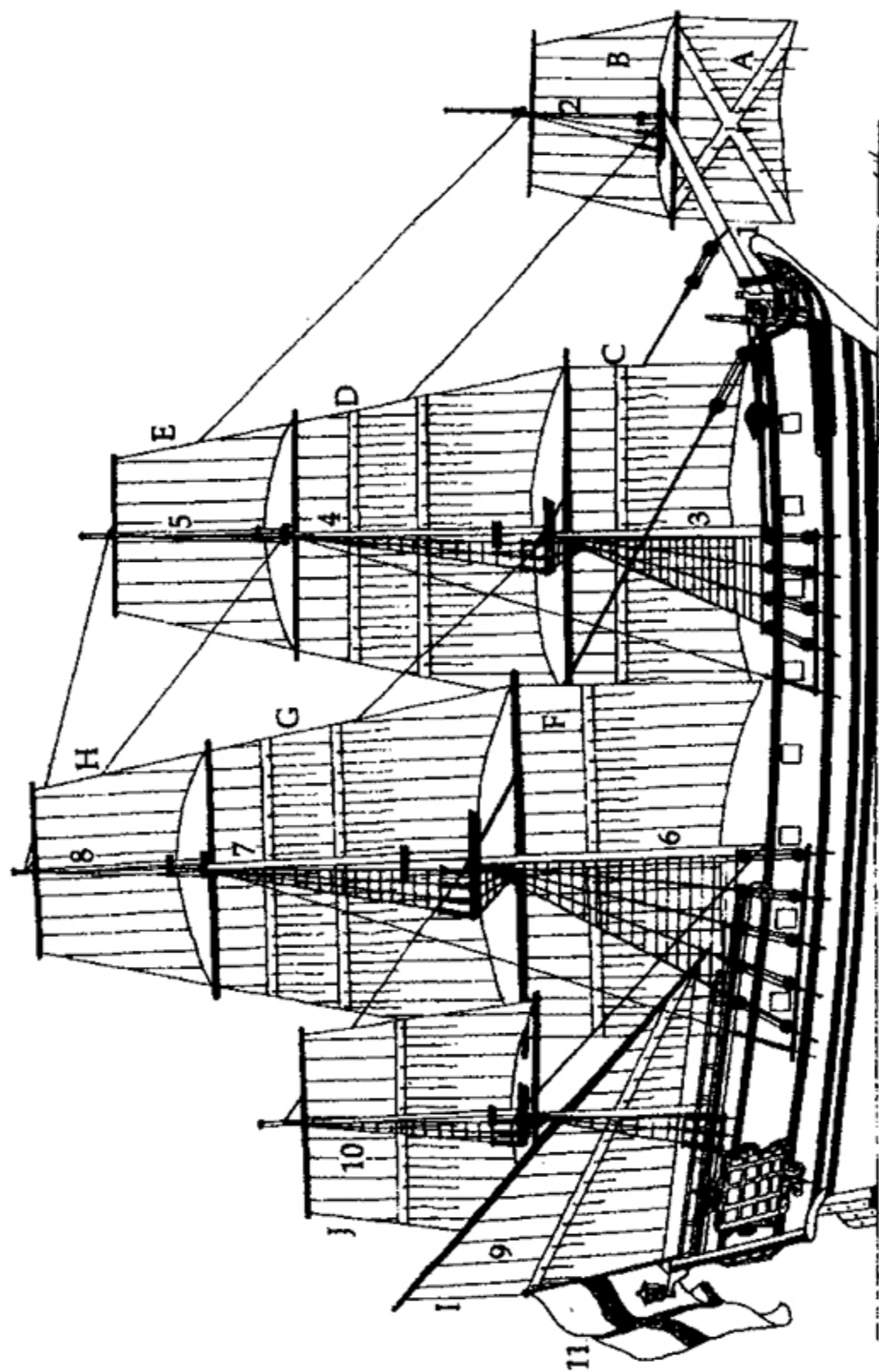
Pirate – a sea-robber, or an armed ship that roams the seas without any legal commission, and seizes or plunders every vessel she meets indiscriminately, whether friends or enemies.

Privateer – a vessel of war, armed and equipped by particular merchants, and furnished with a military commission by the admiralty, or the officers who superintend the marine department of a country, to cruise against the enemy and take, sink, or burn their shipping, or otherwise annoy them as opportunity offers. These vessels are generally governed on the same plan with his majesty's ships, though they are guilty of many scandalous depredations, which are very rarely practiced by the latter.

– William Falconer

An Universal Dictionary of the Marine





ELIZABETH GALLEY

SAILS

- | | |
|---|----------------------------|
| A. Spritsail | F. Mainsail or Main Course |
| B. Spritsail Topsail
(pronounced <i>tops'l</i>) | G. Main Topsail |
| C. Foresail or Fore Course | H. Main Topgallant Sail |
| D. Fore Topsail | I. Mizzen Sail |
| E. Fore Topgallant Sail
(pronounced <i>t'gan's'l</i>) | J. Mizzen Topsail |

SPARS

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Bowsprit | 6. Main Mast of Main Lower Mast |
| 2. Spritsail Topmast | 7. Main Topmast |
| 3. Foremast of Fore
Lower Mast | 8. Main Topgallant Mast |
| 4. Fore Topmast | 9. Mizzenmast |
| 5. Fore Topgallant Mast | 10. Mizzen Topmast |
| | 11. Ensign and Ensign Staff |

CHAPTER 1

The church was all heat and white sunlight, dust and the smell of dry grass and manure pushing in through flung open doors. Flies swirling, lighting, black specks on white painted pews.

Sunday. June 14, the Year of Our Lord 1702.

In the pulpit the preacher droned, on and on.

Marlowe shifted, felt the sweat running under his heavy coat and waistcoat and shirt. Realized he had had no thought for ... how long? No thought, just consciousness. Like an animal.

The preacher waved his arms, entreated God.

The air was close, oppressively hot. The church was nearly twenty years old, built when the now-burgeoning Williamsburg was still a backwater called the Middle Plantation. People crammed in like hands of tobacco prized into a cask. A blessing in winter, a misery in summer.

Marlowe looked at his shoes, then over at Elizabeth's legs, the outline of her thighs just discernible through layer upon layer upon layer of silk and taffeta. She had to be even hotter than he was. But she would remain proper, because she needed to feel proper after her many years of secret impropriety.

Propriety was why he was there in the first place, in his own pew. Not in front of the communion table; those pews had been sold long before to the first families of Virginia. Their pew was behind the vestry, which was still perfectly respectable. The important thing was that everyone, today's newcomers and yesterday's, knew they *could* afford a pew in front of the communion table, were one available.

Marlowe had purchased the pew – at no little cost – because Elizabeth did not wish to jeopardize their place in Virginia society. She did not wish to risk losing this new life they had carved for themselves in this new land. They had position now in tidewater society, and people with position spent Sundays in their own pews.

As a merchant seaman, Marlowe had had Sundays off. He'd had no duty, save standing watch, unless the ship was run by some petty tyrant who could countenance no idleness among those to whom he paid wages.

What had it meant when he was on the account, among the Brethren of the Coast?

Nothing. As often as not they hadn't any notion of what day of the week it was. It did not matter to the lawless and the godless, whose hours called them only to slothfulness and debauchery.

Marlowe realized his legs were cramped. He stretched them out full length, flexed the muscles, savored the relief. Stole a glance at his friend Francis Bickerstaff, seated on his other side. He was dressed in conservative, unadorned clothes. He held a Bible in his lap, sat rigid, his eyes intent on the preacher. He looked as if he might have been a preacher himself.

Bickerstaff was a pious man, after his own fashion. A former tutor, fluent in Latin and Greek and all those things that the overeducated and underemployed seemed to know. He appeared to be absorbing every syllable of the preacher's harangue.

But the preacher was, to Marlowe's certain knowledge, a fool. He doubted there was anything the man could say that Bickerstaff would find enlightening. He concluded that Bickerstaff was as far removed from the sermon as he himself was, but that Bickerstaff, as usual, was better at hiding it.

Three years. Three years they had been coming to that cursed church.

He lowered his head, hoping it made him look pious. It had not been so bad before, with the old Reverend Hathaway, who was a good man, godly and thoughtful, and could spin a sermon that was not so oppressively dull. But he had taken fever and died a year back, and the Right Reverend Ezekiel Trumbell had taken his place. What the congregation had done to deserve him, Marlowe could not figure.

His thoughts wandered away from those considerations as his eyes wandered to the hem of Elizabeth's dress, then slowly up her leg. He pictured her thighs under all that cloth, the smooth white skin, the flat, lovely stomach, the curve of her hips, the way she looked lying naked in their big bed.

He felt himself becoming aroused, had a vague sensation that that was not appropriate in church. And then the warm sensuous drowsiness lapped over him and he felt his eyes close, felt delicious sleep pulling him down ...

Felt a sharp elbow in his ribs that jerked him back to church.

'Stop that, Thomas,' Elizabeth hissed, never taking her eyes from the preacher, her expression of pious attention never wavering.

'What?' Marlowe felt himself flush. He wondered, did she mean his falling asleep, or had she guessed at his salacious thoughts?

'I do believe Reverend Trumbell is speaking to you, dear.'

Marlowe straightened and focused on the Reverend's words. Trumbell's head was turned in their direction, and his eyes flickered toward the Marlowe pew, like fingertips testing a hot griddle, then pulling away fast before they are scorched.

Oh, God. Will you not even look me in the eye, you little worm?

It was the speech about the danger of free Negroes again. Dressed up with some nonsense about Cain and

Abel, but at its heart it was the same old speech. Marlowe wanted to curse out loud.

‘And the precursor to Cain’s sin of the blood? Was Adam’s failure to obey God’s command to keep dominion over all the beasts of the field, yea, all the living creatures.

‘And so today, like Adam, are we not commanded to have dominion over all the beasts of the field, and all the heathen creatures, be they man or beast, who have not the benefit of knowing God? It is our duty as Christians to prevent the wicked idleness into which man must fall if the Godly do not keep dominion over them. We fail in our duty if we do not hold the reins tight. And most especially must we keep dominion over those poor children of Africa, whose childlike innocence ...’

‘Oh, God, I pray, preserve me from such blather ...’ Marlowe said, a bit too loud. A few heads turned, Elizabeth’s sharp elbow struck home.

It was his slaves, of course. His former slaves, actually, the ones that had come with the plantation he had purchased from the estate of Elizabeth’s late husband. He had freed them all and then employed them as wage labor.

It was not a popular decision in the tidewater.

Marlowe saw Trumbell’s attention shift from his pew to those in front of the communion table and he followed the Reverend’s gaze. In the second pew back sat Frederick Dunmore, arms folded, listening with great care to the words. He had the entire pew to himself. He had no family that anyone knew of.

Of course, Marlowe thought. Check with Dunmore, the Lord and Master, make sure you’re delivering the speech the way he told you. How had Bickerstaff put it, from one of his plays? ‘Speak the speech, I pray, as I pronounced it to you ...’ That was Dunmore.

He was dressed in white, as he always was: white silk coat and waistcoat, brilliant white breeches and socks, a great white river of ringlets from his periwig cascading

down the front of him. He blended into the pew like a deer blends into an autumn field. He looked as if he were trying to dress like God himself.

‘You dog ...’ Marlowe muttered, and then to Bickerstaff whispered, ‘It is that dog Dunmore that is behind this blather, you know.’

Dunmore was a newcomer to the colony, late of London and just turned plantation owner. In the year he had been there he had wormed his way into the House of Burgesses, had somehow arranged that enviable pew. It took a vast sum of money, spread judiciously and thick, to achieve all that.

Marlowe sighed, purposely loud, leaned back, arms folded, and thought of old Reverend Hathaway. He had been a man of his own mind, a man who led his congregation and would not be its puppet. In fact, he was one of the only men in the tidewater, he and Bickerstaff, who supported Marlowe in his decision. He believed it was God’s will that the blacks be free – the same reason Trumbell was now using to insist on their bondage.

Dunmore carried his support of Negro bondage with missionary zeal. When he heard what Marlowe had done he had gone apoplectic, had been waging a silent war on Marlowe ever since. He had seen to it that the laws concerning Negroes carrying firearms – laws that had been hitherto rarely enforced – were strictly adhered to.

He hired minions to keep up a loose surveillance of Marlowe House, hoping to find some cause for complaint, some clear breach of the law. Marlowe knew that Dunmore was investigating the legality of his freeing, then hiring, his former slaves, was considering bringing suit.

And, of course, Dunmore had convinced Trumbell to speak from the pulpit on that issue. He had somehow arranged to have his own opinions flow from the Reverend’s mouth.

Cowardly little bastard, Marlowe thought. His anger was a smoldering thing, a glowing spot in a pile of coals, not the hot flash that made him act without thinking, that led to so much trouble.

But what could he do? He would have happily called Dunmore out and put a bullet through the man's head or a sword through his chest – Dunmore's choice – but Dunmore always maneuvered his way around blatant offense, like a lady stepping carefully through a stable. He was clever about never doing anything that would give Marlowe cause to demand satisfaction.

People were standing now, shuffling out of pews. Marlowe looked up. It was over, thankfully over. His thoughts had carried him through the end of the service, had put one more torturous Sunday morning in his past. He stood, stretched, and smiled the first genuine smile of the morning.

'Come, my love,' he said, extending a hand to Elizabeth, 'let us have dinner and then get us down to the river. I am with child to see her with her topgallant gear sent up.'

'You saw her yesterday morning.'

'But then she did not have her topgallant gear sent up.'

'Thomas, you are insufferable,' Elizabeth said, but the end of the service and the prospect of the sight that awaited him at the river were making Marlowe giddy, reckless.

'And you, my love,' he said in a voice so low that only she could hear, 'are so beautiful I wish nothing more than to give your arse a good squeeze, right here.'

'If you do, I shall cut your throat in your sleep,' she said with the sweetest of smiles as she brushed past him and stepped down into the aisle between the long row of pews.

Marlowe followed docilely behind his wife as she wound her way out of the church, flashing whitetooth smiles to those she passed, receiving smiles back from the women, appreciative glances from the men.

Appreciative but furtive glances, a quick up-and-down and then eyes averted. No man in Williamsburg wanted to offend Thomas Marlowe. Men who had done that had died. Men who had once tried to bring him down by bringing Elizabeth to shame had died brutally. His fellow gentlemen-planters viewed Marlowe as a pet tiger: tame, domestic, but still wild inside, dangerous and unpredictable. He knew it and encouraged it.

Elizabeth led them to a side entrance, not through the main doors where Trumbell was greeting the parishioners as they made their exit. They stepped out of the little Jacobean-style brick building and into a small garden that served as a buffer between the church and the dusty Duke of Gloucester Street.

Marlowe squinted against the brilliant sun. It blazed in a clear blue sky and bounced its light off those patches of granite not shaded by the small maples lining the arbor. He savored the smell of jasmine baking in the sun. A cardinal flashed by, a streak of red, calling with its odd liquid voice.

He breathed deep, taking the warmth and the jasmine into his lungs. The heat felt good, not the close-pressed heat of a packed church but the full, honest warmth of a perfect summer day in Virginia.

'Hey, Marlowe, there you are!' Hartwell Page pushed his way between two saplings and came huffing up, his round face red with the heat, in startling contrast to the white sculptured wig that sat on his head.

He wore a brocade coat with an intricate pattern, the weight of which was causing the sweat to run down his cheeks. Under his left arm he carried his hat, which would never have fit over his wig. With his right arm he worked a walking stick as if it were the bilge-pump handle on a sinking ship. He was built like a cannonball and carried himself with as much subtlety.

'Thought I'd catch you here, Marlowe, didn't reckon you'd wish to shake hands with that rascal Trumbell!

Beating around the bush this morning, about your Negroes, eh? Not going right at it like last time, the dog. He's as mad on the subject as that Dunmore! Ah, Mrs Marlowe, charmed!' He bowed as much as his ample waist would allow, just as Mrs Page struggled up behind him. She was much the same shape as her husband, though quiet, as if she were forever bowled over by Hartwell's effusiveness, as, indeed, most people were.

'Well, I reckon Reverend Trumbell is entitled to his opinion, as is any man,' Marlowe ventured.

'Oh, balls, Marlowe, beg your pardon. Wasn't a man of the cloth you'd have put a bullet through his head by now, eh?' He gave Marlowe a suggestive jab of the elbow. Page seemed to enjoy the proximity to danger that being with Marlowe suggested.

'If he wasn't a man of the cloth he would probably keep his mouth shut,' Bickerstaff said, squinting off at some distant point. 'But the greater coward is Frederick Dunmore, who puts the words in his mouth and makes great speeches when Thomas is not about. I don't know what is more craven than cowering behind a collar. Cowering behind a woman, perhaps?'

'Well said, Bickerstaff, well said!' Page gave Francis the elbow jab.

'This is a new thing for you, Francis,' Marlowe said. 'You have been quite reserved in your judgment of the Reverend and his handler before now.'

'Let us say just that my cup of tolerance runneth over.'

'Right, well, now,' said Hartwell, tiring of that line of talk, 'reckon I know where you're bound, after dinner.'

'I was thinking to head down to the river ...'

'Course you were, course you were. But I must insist that you dine with me and the wife. Have 'em laying out a feast for the king himself down to the tavern. Pray, bring your lovely wife here and the good Dr Bickerstaff and join me.'

Bickerstaff had told Page on at least three occasions that he was not a doctor of any kind, but Page either could not recall or could not be convinced.

‘We would be delighted, I believe,’ said Marlowe. Page was a bit much, but he could be amusing, and he did not exaggerate the quality of food he would have ordered up. The straining of his waistcoat against his midriff bore silent testimony to his proclivities where food was concerned.

But, of course, accepting the invite would mean ...

‘And after dinner, then, Marlowe, if it ain’t too much bother, I’d be honored if I might accompany you down to the river. Haven’t been down since you stepped the masts. But even then, magnificent! Navy could never do the like. She ain’t another *Plymouth Prize*, I’ll warrant.’

Marlowe thought of the decrepit, half-rotten *Plymouth Prize*, his former command. ‘No, she ain’t the *Plymouth Prize*.’

‘I’ve a mind for something along those lines myself ...’ Page added. ‘So, what say you? Dine with me?’

Why not? It was hard to refuse Hartwell Page’s invitation, which he gave with such force.

‘Delighted. And we should be pleased to have you along afterward, Hartwell. I would welcome your advice.’

‘Ah, Marlowe, you are a lying dog, but I thank you. You know I’ll give advice, whether I know a thing or not.’

And advice he gave, through a protracted dinner of hominy, hashed beef, squirrel, asparagus, red herring, and sallet, advice on everything from plantation management to growing tobacco to Marlowe’s current enterprise.

And Marlowe and company listened, ate, laughed, drank, enjoyed themselves thoroughly. Page was one of those few who could pull off an hour of running monologue without being insufferable.

That fact aside, it was still a relief when the two parties took to their separate carriages for the seven-mile ride to

Jamestown and the docks that thrust out into the James River.

They settled in their seats, Marlowe, Bickerstaff, and Elizabeth, the first private moment they had had since morning, and Bickerstaff said, 'I am sorry, Thomas, that you must suffer that idiot Dunmore. And of all things, for freeing your slaves. I have said it before, it is the most decent act you have ever committed.'

'I thank you, sir. I know that you suffer no delusion about why I did it. Purely selfish reasons, didn't care to live surrounded by a great crowd of people - clever people, and stealthy, you know, can come and go as they please - who wish to cut our throats in the night.'

'I think it no exaggeration to say that our people love us for what we did, paying them, treating 'em like human beings. We're the only plantation owners in the tidewater that don't lay awake nights worrying about an uprising. I know from my ... former days ... what men in bondage are capable of.'

'Well, whatever your motives, it was a decent thing. Though it seems to greatly offend this Dunmore, the upstart little bastard.'

There was no more that needed saying on that subject, so as they rolled south Marlowe and Bickerstaff talked of preparedness, of future plans.

Elizabeth participated a little in the talk, then fell silent, looking out the window at the green fields and patches of oak and maple and yellow pine.

Marlowe glanced her way a few times, but she did not notice. Whatever was troubling her, he would hear about it before he slept that night.

And then they were there. The coachman gave a shout, a command in some African tongue, punctuated by a flick of the reins. The horses stopped and Thomas and Elizabeth rocked forward and the loud clatter of hooves was replaced by the whine of insects and the ringing of a single hammer.

That would be King James, Marlowe thought. King James, former prince of the Kabu Malinke, former slave, now Marlowe's majordomo, captain of the *Northumberland*, the plantation's river sloop, which he could see tied to the quay.

King James. His comrade in arms. No day off for him. He would be too impatient to get to sea to observe the Sabbath.

Marlowe was on his feet and out the door, anxious for an uninterrupted look, anxious to take her in before Page struggled out of his carriage and began talking.

He strode forward, toward the dock. Heard Bickerstaff behind him, giving Elizabeth a hand down from the carriage. Doing his office. He would apologize later; she would understand.

Thomas stopped, breathed deep. Jasmine, pine, brackish water. Fresh-cut wood and tar and new cordage. Paint drying in the hot sun.

She lay tied to the dock, floating on a perfectly even keel, the slow-moving river breaking around her bows and sweeping aft, giving the illusion that she was already under way.

Marlowe's eyes moved up, slowly up, sweeping along her lofty rig, now rising to its full height with topgallant masts in place. Her spars were tapered like a woman's leg, her masts raked at a jaunty angle, as if she were fully aware of her beauty and did not feel the need to flaunt it. Marlowe made a low, guttural noise in his throat.

She was eighty-four feet on her waterline, one hundred and twenty-three feet sparred length, from the end of her bowsprit, on which sat the little doubling of the spritsail topmast, all the way aft to the big lantern that stood proudly over the taffrail.

The black muzzles of guns, eight along each side, jutted audaciously out of their gunports, gleaming in the sun. Fore, main, and mizzen masts rose from her decks, bright

oiled wood crossed by black spars. Gangs of thick black shrouds sprouted from the doublings and ran down and aft, terminating at their deadeyes with symmetrical perfection.

One hundred and eighty tons of fighting ship, laid out to Marlowe's specifications under his oppressively watchful eye.

The *Elizabeth Galley*. His savior, financially, spiritually. His private man-of-war.

CHAPTER 2

Old King Charles was dead. He had missed ruling over Spain's greatest era by two generations, had weakened his country further with his relentless fighting with Louis XIV of France. And now he was gone.

It seemed odd to Marlowe that the death of one old man he had never met, in a city that he had never seen, could have so profound an effect on his life, but there it was.

King Charles had died leaving behind no offspring, no one to occupy that place on the throne of Spain on which his royal arse had sat for the past thirty-nine years.

But in his last days he had declared Louis XIV's grandson, Philip, his heir. Philip, great-grandson to Spain's Philip IV. Philip, a Frenchman and a Bourbon.

With that one declaration the old man had ended years of maneuver and haggling by the nations of Europe, dashed the ambitions of the House of Hapsburg in Austria, shown England the frightening visage of France and Spain united under Bourbon rule.

It was unacceptable. It meant war.

For thousands of officers and gentlemen from England, from France and Spain and the Netherlands and Bavaria and Savoy and a handful of others it meant glory, promotion, the majesty of leading men in a noble fight.

To those people who stayed at home and dealt in weapons, cloth, and food, it meant high prices for guns, uniforms, and barrels of salt pork and salt beef.

For the tens of thousands of men who filled the ranks of the armies it meant mud and hunger and disease, bitter

nights and mornings of terror and death in distant countries for causes they only vaguely understood.

And to Marlowe, standing in the bright sun, two thousand nautical miles away from that unholy quagmire, in a land which, on a day such as that, was as close to Paradise as one might find on earth, it meant privateering.

It meant venturing forth on the great ocean, his element. An end to the monotony of domestic life, the possibility of great riches. Action. It meant a letter of marque and reprisal, a license to play the pirate against half the shipping in the world.

Before him was the ship. On the morrow he would receive the letter of marque. In a week he would be at sea, stalking the fat merchant ships, as he had so many times before. But this time it would be legal. Patriotic, in fact.

'Damn me, damn me!' Thomas felt Page's meaty hand slap him across the back; it made him stagger forward a step. 'Lovely, Marlowe, damned lovely, this ship!'

'Thank you, Hartwell. Will you come aboard, allow me to show you around?'

'Delighted, delighted. Mrs Page will wait in the coach. But look, son, you see to your little lady there, reckon you've put her nose out of joint. None of the old flourish tonight, hey? Hey?' The elbow struck home. Page walked toward the gangplank, chuckling all the while.

Marlowe turned, too late to help Elizabeth down from the carriage or across the broken ground, Bickerstaff having served those functions.

In the past she had forgiven him these lapses, but as the moment of his sailing approached she was becoming less and less understanding. He could see from her face that he had misjudged her present mood.

'Pray, forgive me, my dearest one. In my enthusiasm I have quite ignored you,' Marlowe said, as obsequious as he could be.

'Quite.' It was a humorless response.

‘What think you of your namesake? Is she not beautiful enough to carry your name? The most beautiful ladies in the New World, both Elizabeths and both mine.’

Such silly flattery would not move Elizabeth Marlowe in the best of times, and it did not now. ‘I know little of such things. If you say she is beautiful then I take your word on it.’

‘Will you come on board? Allow me to show you her finer qualities?’

‘No, Thomas, I think not. I shall go and keep company with poor Mrs Page, who has been so heartlessly abandoned by her husband.’

With that she turned and walked quickly back to the carriages, leaving Marlowe and Bickerstaff alone on the dusty landing.

‘Well, Bickerstaff, it is you and me alone again. Let us go aboard before Page is able to do too much damage.’

They stepped up the gangplank and through the gangway into the waist of the ship. The new-vessel smells overwhelmed the competing scents from the land and the river, marsh and warm pine needles yielding to tar slush, pitch, resin, and varnish. It was a welcome change. Marlowe preferred those scents over any that God and the land could provide.

He paused, leaned back, looked aloft. A reflex action, the first bit of business when coming on deck. Meaningless, really, with the ship tied to the dock, the sails lying in great bundles on the quay.

Still, his eyes ran up the masts and along the yards and down the black standing rigging, looking for some flaw, something that needed correcting – running rigging led wrong so it might chafe through, deadeyes not perfectly aligned, any bits of rope hanging loose – but there was nothing. Just as there had been nothing the last time he had engaged in that exercise, early morning of the day before.

‘Very good, Marlowe, very good!’ Page came stamping up. ‘Tell me again where you found her. Boston?’

‘New York. She was a merchantman, of course. Named *Nathaniel James*. Owned by a merchant of the same name who got a bit overextended. Invested in some fool pirating nonsense to Madagascar, or some such. In any event, lost nearly everything. This ship had been dockside for two years, something of a wreck from the gunnels up. But sound, you know. In her heart, sound.’

‘Shame you couldn’t have started from scratch. Man-of-war built from the keel up.’

‘Ah, Hartwell, I am not so rich as you that I could do that!’ Marlowe said, though it was a lie. He could have, had considered doing so, but big-ship building was largely unknown in America, and all but non-existent in Virginia.

That meant England, which would have taxed his resources too greatly. At thirty-six years old, or thereabout, he was not so reckless as he had been a decade before. He might gamble most of what he had, but he would not gamble it all.

What was more, Marlowe did not care to linger around London’s waterfronts, with the chance of being spotted by one of his old associates, or, more dangerous, one of his old victims.

‘She is sturdy, nonetheless,’ Marlowe continued, leading Page to the bulwarks. ‘Stripped her down to the frames from the waterline up, redid it all with live oak, two and a half inches thick. Now she is all predied for a fight. Should do for what I have in mind. We’ll not be fighting the French navy, you know. Fat, slow, underarmed merchantmen are what we are after.’

‘Marlowe, you make me sick, sick, sir, with envy. Oh, the adventure of it all, not to mention the damned money you shall make! You’ll be back within the year and you’ll buy us all out, make yourself king of Virginia!’

Marlowe laughed. But the idea had merit.

Page slapped the barrel of one of the guns, grown hot under the insistent sun as if it had been fired again and again in some sea battle. He squatted, sighted down the gun, grunted as if he had gleaned some information from that exercise. 'Salvaged off the wreck of the *Plymouth Prize*, are they?'

'Indeed they are.' The *Plymouth Prize* was Marlowe's last command, his first legitimate one. She had been the guardship on the Virginia station, sent there by the Royal Navy to protect the colonies against pirates. Governor Nicholson had asked Marlowe to replace her corrupt and incompetent captain.

The cat, as it were, asked to guard the canary.

In fact, the cat had tricked the governor into giving him that enviable assignment, but that truth had never been discovered.

Marlowe's foray into command of a Royal Navy vessel, decrepit as she was, had ended the year before, when the *Prize* and the pirate she was fighting had both blown apart like twin volcanoes, fire touching off their powder magazines.

Less than two dozen men had come through the explosion with their lives. Marlowe had been one. Had come through not just with his life, but with his reputation and fame secured for the bold act of fighting and beating the pirates who had laid waste to the countryside. Less publicly known, he had come through with a fortune in loot, secreted away in his Jamestown warehouse, taken from the sea robbers he had arrested.

It had been a successful year. He was eager for more of the same.

'How'd you raise them?' Page asked. 'Grapple for 'em?'

'No, I had my people dive for them. Some of them are prodigious great divers.'

'Your Negroes?'

‘Yes, indeed, my Negroes. They were able to slip harnesses around them, and we hauled them up.’

‘Don’t know how you manage it. They’re terrified of the water, those Negroes, most of ’em. Pagan African water gods live there, or some nonsense. I don’t reckon I could get any of my niggers to dive like that with all the whipping in the world.’

‘I shouldn’t imagine you could,’ Bickerstaff interrupted. Such talk annoyed him greatly. ‘But if you treat them as men and pay them wages commensurate with the danger, you would be surprised what they might do.’

‘Well ... indeed ...’ Page’s voice trailed away into a cough.

‘Nicholson’s let me have the guns on loan – still government property, of course. Reckons it official thanks and all that.’

‘Damned hard to come by, great guns. I imagine I’d be privateering myself, but for want of great guns.’

The hammering, to which their ears had grown accustomed, stopped and a moment later King James stepped up through the hatch at the forward end of the waist.

He was dressed in a sailor’s loose pants and linen shirt, with a leather jerkin over that. His shirt and the waist of his pants were soaked through with perspiration; it looked as if he had been standing in the rain. The thin material clung to his chest and arms and the small of his back and accentuated the bold lines, the curve and ripple of muscle, the only benefit he had derived from years of heavy forced labor in the fields.

In his right hand he held a five-pound maul. With his left hand he wiped the sweat from his face, ran his hand back over his short cropped hair, took a chestful of the fresh air.

‘Here’s that buck, King James!’ Page exclaimed. ‘Might have guessed it was him doing all the pounding away, the eager dog!’

James looked over at the three men, noticing them at last. 'Ah, Captain Marlowe, good day, sir. I didn't hear you come aboard. Misser Bickerstaff, Misser Page.'

'James, what are you about, pounding away, and on the Sabbath, no less?' Marlowe asked.

The black man smiled, a conspirator's grin. 'Jest setting a few drifts to rights, Captain. Under way by week's end and it all gots to be done by then.'

'Well, in that case I forgive your irreligious activities,' Marlowe said. For the past three years he had been taking James along as a seaman. He would ship aboard the *Elizabeth Galley* as boatswain. He had already proved his worth as a fighting man.

James was as eager as Marlowe to get under way, to plunge into that life again.

'I do not know as Reverend Trumbell would forgive you, though, James.' Marlowe continued his ribbing. 'He did not sound overly forgiving at sermon this morning.'

'Don't matter. Reverend Trumbell listens to that Dunmore, and that Dunmore don't think a black man got any more immortal soul than a rock. When I sees him praying for a rock's salvation, then I'll listen to what he gots to say to me.'

Page was beginning to wander off, and Marlowe, aware of his social obligations, said, 'I will leave off your soul for now, James. I must show Mr Page the rest of the ship.'

With that he led Page and Bickerstaff forward, under the overhang of the foredeck, where the big brick oven housed gleaming copper pots, just abaft the foremast. They poked through bosun's lockers and sailmaker's stores, and then climbed down to the lower deck, where even the five-foot-four-inch-tall Page had to stoop a bit to avoid striking his head on the deck beams.

They made their way aft, stopping to peer down through the main hatch to the hold below. Marlowe showed his guest the tiny cabins of the minor officers who would sail