



On a Particular Service

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CHAPTER ONE

John Pearce knew it was unreasonable to expect decent weather at this time of year. That being accepted, he held the opinion the Mediterranean, even in midwinter, was being particularly perverse in giving him constant headwinds. In addition, a continuous heavy swell, on a contrary east-running current, slowed his progress towards the Straits of Gibraltar, forcing the ship of which he had titular command to endlessly tack and wear which was tiring for the crew, while the heavy seas made the transport vessel *Tarvit*, lacking in ballast, pitch and roll like a cork.

Even if he bore no responsibility for the matter, it outlined to him the gaps he still had in his knowledge of ships and sailing. It was a requirement he should have examined and remedied. The vessel had come out from Britain heavily laden, packed with stores for the Mediterranean Fleet. She was going home as a hospital ship with human cargo, men suffering from various wounds and afflictions, so in terms of payload was seriously light.

The remedy, a common one for a merchant vessel, would have been to seek a cargo or take on quantities of gravel or lead with which to weight the hull. Michael Hawker, the master and the man actually sailing the ship, had not done so. Challenged as to why, he provided a ready excuse: the company who chartered *Tarvit* to the Navy Board had declined to provide him with the authority to purchase such necessities.

That lay in the hands of the company agent, a fellow called Tobias Fuller. He had met the most pressing needs of the vessel in terms of canvas and cordage, but had not been forthcoming with the funds necessary to buy ballast, as well as that needed to see it brought out into the anchorage to be loaded.

‘The ship is fully insured under its contract, Mr Pearce.’

‘How gratifying that must be for the owners, Mr Fuller, to know that they will not lose a penny if we founder. Not much comfort for those of us who will go down with her.’

Both had to take a firm grip on the edge of the table as the stern dipped into a deep trough caused by the ship wearing onto another tack, only eye contact being maintained with Pearce trying to keep the papers that lay on his desk safe. Everything of a furnishing nature had to be fixed in such a situation, but that did not apply to humanity. If the Pearce glare was not benign, Fuller declined to be embarrassed by the implication of laxity.

‘It may have escaped your notice, sir,’ he insisted, while seeking to reset his wire-rimmed glasses, dislodged by the panicky need to take a grip, ‘that I am aboard this vessel and as at much risk as anyone.’

‘Hardly enough to provide ease to the minds of either the crew, the passengers or the casualties we are tasked to take home and, hopefully, seek to deliver to their cure.’

Pearce was being a little disingenuous in that statement; the ’tween decks were full of injured men, some wounded in battle, most victims of a shipboard life endemic in the nature of its danger. Many more sailors expired from maladies or accidents than fell to roundshot, a musket ball or a slash from a cutlass.

The provision of medical facilities on station was not wanting; it was as good as the navy could make it, with treatment ashore at Leghorn provided where necessary, with the aim of rapidly returning men to a service in a fleet short of hands. What they had aboard *Tarvit* were the serious cases, incurables, the accumulated results of two years of sea service.

The ship was carrying home those who, whatever the cause of their confinement, were too badly injured to ever again be of use to the navy. It was assumed some would not survive the sea journey which, even with clement weather, was held to be inimical to a patient’s well-being, though the tossing about the ship was undergoing was thankfully relieved for the patients by hammocks. Once home those who still lived would, at best, be released as invalids. At worst they would lie in the naval hospital at Haslar and no doubt, in time, expire there.

‘The weather, Mr Pearce, cannot stay this way for ever. We all pray daily for alleviation.’

‘Since I do not pretend to believe in divine oversight, Mr Fuller, I will leave the begging for a better future to you. But

I will say this: if the weather deteriorates further, we may have to come about and return to Leghorn.'

'Surely a decision for Mr Hawker?'

'I, sir, am not on board for adornment. If the service insists on a naval officer taking a place aboard a chartered vessel it is, I must inform you, one of ultimate responsibility.'

That got a pinched look from a small fellow with ginger hair and bad, blotched skin. Pearce, taller by far, even sitting, was not about to admit it was a discussion in which he and Hawker had already engaged. They found themselves in agreement as to what might be necessary if the present weather showed any sign of deteriorating, although neither was happy to adopt such a course. Certainly they had no need to consult a fellow who was held to be no more than a counter of beans.

That said, the ship's master was an employee of the company and might be sanctioned by them for his actions, especially if the Navy Board sought recompense for a contract questionably executed. John Pearce had his own concerns, which made the notion of a return to Leghorn unpalatable. Yet right now he was more anxious to cover himself, given he was returning to England and an uncertain future.

'I require from you, sir, a written explanation as to why you declined to see to the proper trim of the ship. It has already suffered damage to wood, canvas and cordage, which will cost money to repair. That, given the cause, is not something that should fall as an expense to the King's Navy.'

'And I sir, decline to provide it. I have done my duty by my employers and that is where my obligation lies.'

'Then I must tell you it is a daily entry in my log and that will be true of today. Your refusal will be noted.'

That got a sly smile exposing uneven and yellowing teeth. ‘While I, sir, will record your threat. It is a habit among naval officers, sir, and a bad one, to think their orders are Holy Writ. The man who held your post on the voyage out shared the fault. I daresay you and your kind would flog me if you had the freedom to employ the cat.’

Pearce was thinking a ducking in the sea would do this irritating sprat the world of good, while being well aware he did not have the power to act in such a manner. In conversation with Hawker, it had been suggested that Fuller may well have pocketed the money that would have gone to pay for ballast.

In short, he could be risking the lives of everyone aboard for personal gain. If they got home safely his speculation might not be questioned, even in the unlikely event his employers discovered it; the matter would have to be kept from those paying for the charter.

‘I have good reason to think you believe in an all-seeing God, Mr Fuller.’

‘Who does not, sir?’

Pearce declined to reply ‘Me for one’, only to be interrupted in what he was about to say – that if anything untoward should happen, Fuller was bound for perdition. The outbreak of high-pitched wailing was a sound that struck at the Pearce heart but was not allowed to show in his features; indeed, he tried to appear irritated. Few aboard knew the crying infant was his own son, which meant a fiction of seeming indifference had to be maintained.

To all who had seen him since birth he was the child of the late captain and still living Mrs Ralph Barclay, given space in

the great cabin out of both sympathy and regard, as well as on the orders of Admiral Sir John Jervis, Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet. Fuller had pulled a face full of insincere concern at the sound of infant discomfort and, given their conversation had achieved nothing, Pearce was desirous of getting rid of him. The wailing ceased abruptly, for the baby would now be at his mother's breast.

His father liked nothing more than observing the way young Adam fed with lusty endeavour, but Fuller being present precluded it. The same sound brought Michael O'Hagan out of his pantry, to enter within seconds while having to take a good grip on a bulkhead in order to prevent a fall. He looked at Pearce in a way that seemed to imply he might want something and this provided a degree of amusement. If John Pearce was enamoured of his son, his friend Michael, who masqueraded as a servant, seemed to be equally stricken.

'Did you call, your honour? A cup of coffee, happen?'

'No, Michael, thank you.' The kindly look disappeared to be replaced by a glare, as Pearce's attention shifted from Michael back to the agent. 'I think Mr Fuller is about to return to his own quarters.'

Fuller's face was showing a hint of anticipation at the thought of coffee. That quickly resorted to a sour look when Pearce made it plain he wanted him gone. As he rose to depart, staggering unsteadily towards the door, he was gifted with an acerbic farewell.

'Do use the man ropes on your way, Mr Fuller. It would be very unfortunate if you fell victim to your own parsimony.'

'My proper sense of responsibility is to my employers, sir.'

'So you say.'

‘Sure he’s built for a purser, John-boy,’ Michael said softly, once the door was closed behind him. ‘Should I be askin’ if Mrs Barclay wants anything?’

The use of the Barclay name got O’Hagan a crabbed look, but nothing was said, there being no point. To Michael, Emily had always been Mrs Barclay. He maintained now it was necessary to still term her so, despite many requests by his friend not to talk of her in such a way. The grounds were that to make habitual any other form of address risked a slip of the tongue in public, which could make anyone listening curious if not downright suspicious.

‘I think I best see to that, don’t you, Michael?’

The huge Irishman smiled but there was disappointment in it too. ‘As you wish, John-boy.’

It had been edifying to observe his friend cradling Adam, as he had many times these last few days. Massive in his frame, a bruiser in his looks as well as his scars, and a man well capable of telling John Pearce he was wrong, it was a delight to watch a gentler side to him.

That great square face would soften, taking on a wholly different cast, eyes too, while to hear him intone soft lullabies was charming, even if it seemed totally out of character and was in his unfamiliar Erse tongue. Yet it had to be recalled that Michael came from a large family and had been the second eldest of his brood; he would probably have held and caressed his small siblings in the same manner.

‘Never fear, Michael; Emily would not wish that you should miss a chance to sing to our son.’

‘Which would have me say, as I have afore, she is, for sure, near a saint.’

Tempted to reply she had not been so virtuous and glad of the fact, Pearce held his tongue. Strong in his papist beliefs, it was doubtful whether Michael saw their affair as a sin – Pearce had never asked him – but there was a whole world out there prepared to do so and take great pleasure in the social condemnation that would thus be inflicted.

They had first become lovers in England and, to avoid both scandal and the nefarious machinations of her late husband, Emily had come out to the Mediterranean with him. The journey was blissful, but the term ‘plain sailing’ could not be applied to what had happened subsequently and that was before she became pregnant, especially when that became very obvious. The lax morality said to pertain in Italy did not extend to the British community, whether serving officers or resident civilians, and Emily felt keenly the risk of disgrace from such a quarter.

Pearce suspected many people might have guessed at their association but held their tongue. The likes of Lady Hamilton and her husband Sir William had openly condoned their liaison and aided both where they could. But there were others who had to be kept in the dark and the recollection of such people, most recently the ladies of the English community in Leghorn, as well as the steps he had taken to avoid their censure, went some way to dent the good feeling he had just experienced.

As of now he and Emily were in limbo, as much for being aboard ship as any other reason. But waiting for them, as soon as they landed anywhere, was a seemingly insoluble difference of opinion. Within the cabin, as long as there were no visitors, they could act as what they were, although

intimacy was barred by the time needed to recover from delivery. Both avoided the subject of what would come later, taking advantage of this interlude.

‘Mr Pearce, your arm if you please.’

On hearing the call, Pearce executed some well-measured steps over to the sleeping cabin and threw open the door. Emily was sat up in her swaying cot, with Adam laying on her now clothed breast. He helped her up and guided both into the main cabin, where she assured herself no one else was present. Then she smiled at Michael, accepting that he too should escort mother and child to the safety of a casement seat.

O’Hagan was quick to fetch the cushions which, laid on one side, would protect them from a fall when the ship dipped its stern. Pearce took up his place on the other side to look down into a pair of large blue eyes intently examining his face, made more obvious when Adam was passed into his arms where a presented finger was tightly taken.

‘He’s a strong fellow, Emily. What a grip for his size.’

Pride was not allowed to overcome necessity. ‘He needs to be winded, John.’

Having just raised Adam to his shoulder, and about to pat his back, Pearce was annoyed to hear a knock at the door, which meant he had to immediately pass the child back to his mother. It should never be intimated that he was anything other than an acquaintance; to be seen winding the infant would not fit with such a pretence. He was back at his desk before he shouted that whoever had knocked should enter.

‘Mr Hawker?’ he said as the master’s large frame filled the doorway, his face far from happy.

‘A sail has been spotted to the south of us, Mr Pearce. A

fair way off, mind, but I reckon it would serve if you were to examine it.’

Hawker threw a very swift glance at Emily before bringing his gaze back to his naval counterpart. As a way of saying what had been spotted portended possible danger, he could not have been more explicit. Ladies, as was the custom, must not be alarmed. In Emily he had misread the person; she was as fearless as any man John Pearce had ever met.

‘I will join you presently. Michael, stay with madam and the child and see to their needs.’

‘Happy to, your honour,’ came the reply, as the Irishman gathered up the required outdoor clothing.

At moments like this Pearce sought to check whether the subterfuge was holding up. Were the crew, from Hawker down, curious or suspicious of the relationship? The woman they knew as Mrs Barclay was still in the full bloom of youth and strikingly beautiful; the lieutenant sent to sail with them was a tall, strong-looking cove, handsome with it, as well as confident.

If they had doubts as to the association it bothered him not one whit, but it would mortify Emily if they were seen as anything other than strangers. For a brief moment their previous dispute upon a shared future bubbled up in his mind, but the way Hawker was looking at him left little time for such contemplation. He took his boat cloak and hat from Michael, nodded to the master and, with irregular steps, followed him out of the door.

The motion of the ship made getting to a secure place on the deck impossible without the use of the rigged manropes. Once on the quarterdeck it was even harder to employ

a telescope with the kind of application needed to keep it steady. In addition, the ship Pearce sought, given the heavy swell, had to rise on a wave at the same time as the deck on which he was standing.

The first sight was of a streaming pennant, and that, being red with a crescent on it, brought from John Pearce an angry curse. 'Barbary.'

Hawker had his mouth pressed to the Pearce ear to confirm that had been his first conclusion; he had to in order to be heard over the whistling sound of the wind in the rigging. His listener continued to blaspheme, for he had been afflicted by the sight of such an ensign too many times in the last couple of years.

As both ships rose on the swell at the same time, he could see and examine more than the flag. Now there was the sight of the hull and it was substantial which, being brief, told him little of real substance, which had him divesting himself of his hat, cloak and finally his uniform jacket, the chill on his skin through his cambric shirt immediate.

'I must go aloft for a proper sight.'

The look on Hawker's face said *rather you than me*. To climb the rigging on a calm sea was not without risk, proof of which was occupying some of the hammocks below: men who had fallen from yards and the like to be seriously maimed. Given the way the ship was acting now it was not really sensible. Yet Pearce knew he had no choice; if there was a threat, he needed to know in detail what it was.