



A Close Run Thing

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CHAPTER ONE

John Pearce scooped up his uniform coat and naval hat, aware of the need to move swiftly. At the same time he registered someone had made a basic and very foolish error: whoever had command of the detachment sent to arrest them should have been more restrained. Clattering on the door, which sounded as if it was being done with the hilt of a sword, while shouting that it should be opened in the name of the Revolution, was pure folly.

An old stone-built house, in a border fortress town like Gravelines, it had been constructed with a sturdy, inches-thick oak door, naturally fitted with substantial locks, so all the idiot did was alert his quarry. Not that such knowledge provided reassurance to Pearce or his fugitive companion, the fellow he knew as Samuel Oliphant.

‘National Guard or soldiers?’ he asked, as he slipped into his silver-buckled shoes.

‘It makes no difference,’ Oliphant snapped. ‘Unless our host has a way out, we’re trapped.’

The person alluded to came in to the kitchen at a bustle, one not so very different to his previous mode of behaviour, to then indicate that his guests should follow him. He was a fussy sort of fellow of indeterminate years, not young, stooped in posture and wearing a set of spectacles, which seemed at risk of falling off his nose – the very opposite image anyone would apply to a dangerous conspirator.

Both men were quick to tail his disappearing frame, but not without grabbing slices of the fresh-baked bread, which had been part of their breakfast. On the run, and they were surely that now, who knew when they would eat again? They found the man's young and appealing daughter, Eugenie, was already in the stable yard, wearing a hooded cloak to cover her blonde hair. She was carrying a large, bulging canvas bag and looking, Pearce thought, unnaturally calm.

More angry shouting and thumping had him glance at the substantial double gates that enclosed the yard, relieved to see the long sharp metal stakes that arced outwards along the top of the wall. These doors too were made of thick oak and, added to the heavy wooden bar set across the join, meant forcing them open, or overcoming them, would be difficult.

They were led into the sole empty horse stall, in which the straw on the floor, as well as the raised banks around the edges, lay undisturbed. The servant who'd taken their mounts the day before, they now curious onlookers in the other stalls, was holding the panniers that had been given to them outside Paris. They had been repacked with the military uniforms in which they had travelled, added to personal items plus pistols. He also held their swords, which were handed over.

At a command from his master, a section of one of the straw banks, pulled out, revealed a trapdoor, quickly if not easily lifted by a metal ring, the morning light exposing a set of steps leading down to a tunnel. Lowering himself, the servant struck at a set of flints to light a lantern, this handed up to his master, who then beckoned the men and his daughter to join him in the descent. Once everyone was down, the trapdoor flap was quietly lowered, with the daughter pulling on a line as soon as it had been secured with heavy metal bolts.

An enquiring look from Pearce elicited the information that the rope would haul back into place the bundle of straw and hide their escape route. Though it would not remain undiscovered, the concealment would buy precious time, as would the need for axes to smash the trapdoor itself.

Pearce spoke softly, in French, addressing the girl. 'You are abandoning your house and everything you possess?'

'What do you suggest they do?' was the querulous enquiry, in English, from his companion, 'Hand us over?'

Their still unnamed host might not speak the language but, having understood Pearce's sentiment, he obviously got the sense of what Oliphant was saying in response, his rejoinder in his own tongue brusque.

'We must move quickly, there is no time to explain matters.'

That said, he was off, servant and lantern to the fore, his daughter at his heels, Pearce and Oliphant following, like them, at a crouch. The tunnel, which had several tight turns to both left and right, was low and narrow. The old man stopped for a moment, raising a hand to check on

something. Coming closer, Pearce picked out a rope basket full of rocks, set into the tunnel roof. The pause was brief and progress resumed, only for their elderly guide, two dozen paces on, to stop once more and let loose a rope from a cleat set in the wall.

The sound was unmistakable: rocks tumbling down, Pearce assumed to shut off the passageway, his supposition soon confirmed as a cloud of dust began to fill the air. A man of few expressions outside concern, in the small circle of light from the oil lamp their host now looked positively smug, which had Pearce reckon the stratagem had been his idea. Those in pursuit would find the tunnel blocked in such a way as to make the clearing of it, if it could be done at all, a job of several hours.

In minutes they were at a junction by the base of a second set of steps, the narrow passageway going on into darkness, the servant reaching up to unbolt a second heavy trapdoor. Fully opened it fell back with a crash, the tunnel filling with light and again Pearce examined Eugenie's expression. She still appeared calm, as though what they were about was an everyday occurrence. Was that indeed the case – for she and her father lived in a febrile world, made doubly dangerous by their obvious opposition to the ruling revolutionary regime?

Climbing brought all five into an open space, once a substantial dwelling of several storeys. Now it was charred walls, collapsed floor and roof timbers, above it an open grey sky, giving it an appearance of having been burnt down some time past. They were admonished to wait while father and servant disappeared, leaving his daughter to usher them into the half-remains of a room. There, for the first time,

both men could seek to make some sense of what had just happened. The conclusion was obvious, if unwelcome.

Their escape from Paris had obviously been engineered for this very purpose, using them to expose a chain of opposition to the rule of the Jacobins. Looking back, everything that had happened previously now appeared part of that ruse. The effortless departure from the Temple, the famous and ancient Paris building, which had served as their prison, followed by the smooth way each part of the journey down the River Seine had been facilitated.

Then came the provision of those horses, now abandoned, the military uniforms into which they could change and finally, a *laissez passer* signed and bearing the seal of Lazare Carnot. A powerful member of the ruling clique in the Convention, he was the de facto Minister of War. No one would dare to question that permission to travel north, towards a zone of recent conflict for a pair of cavalry officers. Thus their passage to the port of Gravelines had been unhindered.

Pearce felt like a chump and said so. ‘Humbled.’

‘By clever people, Pearce,’ was Oliphant’s reply. ‘If you cannot love them, at least admire them.’

Using lumps of debris and a baulk of timber, Oliphant began to construct a seat on which they could rest. Then he looked pointedly at the girl. ‘But it seems we are in the care of folk of equal if not superior wit. That escape route and the blocking of it was near to genius.’

‘What a price they are paying.’

Reverting to French and addressing Eugenie directly, Pearce made the same point he had made on entry to the

tunnel, apologising too, which got from her a knowing smile. Shy and, up till the present, not one for many words, now was an exception.

‘The house was not ours, monsieur. It was the property of an early victim of the Terror, a fine upstanding man, a physician of repute. But he was outspoken in the name of justice for the King, too much so for his own well-being.’

She looked around the shell of the building, her expression sad.

‘As was the owner of this grand manor, the local tax farmer for King Louis.’ At the mention of that name she quickly crossed herself. ‘The mob burnt it the very day he was guillotined, but not from revolutionary passion, more to loot his possessions.’

‘So you and your father took over both?’ Pearce enquired, cutting across Oliphant, who looked set to say something which, by his irritable expression, would be objectionable. His effort was wasted.

‘Is he really your father?’ he demanded, in what, to John Pearce, was an inappropriate tone. About to check him for a lack of gratitude, he was stopped by the old man’s return, with no sign of the servant.

‘The plan we had to get you away will no longer serve. We were to sneak you onto a boat this morning, just prior to it floating out on the tide, which will begin to recede around noon. The port will now be on alert and, being daylight, it is too dangerous to go there. It would put at risk, if you were caught, everything we seek to accomplish.’

He looked pointedly at Pearce’s naval clothing, the garments in which he’d come to France, the blue coat and

distinctive hat, white waistcoat, breeches and stockings as well as the very obvious and gleaming silver buckles on his shoes. To progress through a town garrisoned by Britannia's enemies, they would not serve. There was brief thought to change back into the French cavalry uniforms, packed in those panniers, this soon discarded; the pursuit would be looking for that.

'Now we must take you to a place where you can hide and where, perhaps, a boat can be found to pick you up. We have no idea what is known to the authorities and, until we are sure . . .'

The rest of the point was left hanging as the servant returned, carrying a good-quality boat cloak which Pearce could put over his uniform, as well as an ordinary tricorne hat. The two Frenchmen then moved away and fell into a quiet conversation from which the escapees were excluded.

'How much easier to be a servant, Pearce,' Oliphant said with a smirk, pulling at his own, poor-quality garments. 'No need for a disguise.'

'You may be clad like one, but I have seen no evidence you're willing to act so.'

'I am obliged to do so only in circumstances that merit it.'

Oliphant fixed Pearce with a defiant look, intended to remind him of a pertinent fact: whatever differing roles they had played in this venture, they were equals and Pearce would have struggled to disagree. If he had been handed the primary role in the mission, it had too often depended for success on the wiles of his companion. And he was a man he had known – what was he saying, thought he had known – for no more than a couple of weeks.

Pearce was not even sure of his name. He'd been Oliphant when they met in London, but Régis de Cambacérès, the man who had arranged their 'escape' from Paris, knew him as Bertrand and there was no certainty that was true either. When it came to intrigue, he was the expert and Lieutenant John Pearce of King George's Navy was the novice. Their relationship had fluctuated mightily from the outset, swinging between common purpose through to open quarrel and, on one occasion, near descending into violence. Where it lay now was moot; they had only one common aim, to get away from Flanders and back home.

'For which we are wholly in the hands of our hosts,' Oliphant said with a grim expression when Pearce made the point.

'You don't sound pleased.'

'It's never a comfort to be entirely dependent on others. I should have thought you'd have learnt that by now. Added to which, when the old man said he must find a boat to get us away, how was it conveyed? I do not recall any assurance it would be either quick or easy.'

Pearce looked at the girl, the only one close enough to hear the exchange, to see if she had picked up on Oliphant's downbeat assessment, having shown no sign of understanding English prior to this. But the events of the morning, added to how it had come about, rendered him cautious in regard to everything. The glance and expression were noted by Oliphant.

'I reckon us safe from being understood, but it is as well you show concern.'

A decision had been made in the quiet conversation. The

servant would take Oliphant to the required destination, a couple of ordinary folk passing through the streets, who should attract no attention. At a decent interval Pearce, in the company of Eugenie, would follow. He was to be armed with the cavalry pistols, now extracted from those horse panniers.

‘The rest of the contents we will leave here,’ the old man said, with a finality that brooked no argument. ‘They can be safely stored elsewhere.’

‘And you?’ Pearce asked.

‘I will go about my affairs, monsieur, as I do every day.’

There was a temptation to ask what that might be. But with a man who’d never even gifted them his name, there was likely no point. Impatient, the old man hustled his servant out of a postern door, with Oliphant in tow. That closed, he set himself to loading the pistols, talking all the while, making the point to Pearce that he and Eugenie would not walk together, but would do so twenty paces apart. If the enemy was looking for anyone, it was not an attractive young girl.

‘Monsieur, you must act as my daughter does in all respects, for to do otherwise is to endanger her as well as yourself. Should it be necessary to use these’ – the pistols were held up – ‘then she will seek to save herself and will not stay to aid you. You will then be on your own and, if you’re captured, I ask only that you say nothing about us or how you came to this house.’

A small leather purse containing some coins was pressed into Pearce’s hand, though no explanation followed, just a command. ‘Now you should go.’

Eugenie stood, this as Pearce took the pistols to secrete them in the deep pockets of his coat; thus they were hidden under his cloak. She exited first, he at the required distance, to emerge into the grey morning light, though there was evidence of a low watery sun in the eastern sky. Pearce, who had been in Gravelines before, sought, without much success, to establish his whereabouts. A haven for English contrabandists in peacetime, it had remained so even in war: the gold and silver brought in by smuggling was of great value to a nation suffering a naval blockade. France was so short on specie the government had been obliged to print a form of paper money called *assignats*. It was one widely mistrusted by the citizenry.

The town, set inland from the sea, was dominated by a star-shaped fortress, designed and built for Louis XIV by the Marquis de Vauban, a type of defensive structure replicated all over Europe. It had a deep moat surround with the town an exterior sprawl, and he was relieved to discover they were outside that water barrier. With its very necessary bridges, it provided many natural choke points at which papers and purpose could be demanded by the ubiquitous National Guard.

The position of the sun told him Eugenie was heading west, proven when they came within sight of a long, straight canal, the outflow of the River Aa, which ran from far inland to the North Sea. At this point the quayside was a wooden construct, bordered by the kind of enterprises that supplied the needs of a seaport and fishing fleet, with numerous boats tied alongside and many more downstream.

Prior knowledge told Pearce these upstream vessels were local; the part of the canal used by English smugglers was,

for the purposes of discretion and safety, closer to the sea. Eugenie turned sharply and descended a set of steps, which had Pearce hurry to follow; by the time he got to the edge he could see her taking a place in a small boat. This was manned by a solitary, weary-looking and raggedly dressed individual, to whom she was proffering a coin.

That small, gifted purse from her father now made sense; money was needed to pay the boatman. Once he was seated in the thwarts, Pearce nervously offered a couple of sous, pre-revolutionary coins, which he feared might engender curiosity. They were taken with a nod, to be pocketed in a leather waistcoat, before the oars flicked to cross what was not a very great distance to the southern side of the canal.

Eugenie was out and away first, heading at a brisk pace, he on her heels, past the houses bordering that side of the canal. She then darted into a narrow alley, which led to a twisting and turning route through many more. They made their way through backstreets lined with increasingly unkempt dwellings, their walls high enough to make it difficult to be sure of the heading.

Finally, they thinned out to reveal open land, first sparse coastal woodland. This turned, after a short distance, into undulating sand dunes, mixed with low scrub bushes and strands of tough grass. Sea and the flat expanse of beach were occasionally visible on the rise, with the odd hut dotted around above the high-tide mark. These were not places to live but shacks to be occasionally visited when the owner wanted to fish, one of which proved to be their destination.

As he came abreast of the door – if a tarpaulin sheet could be called that – it was pulled back to reveal Oliphant. A flick

of the man's head drew him into the gloomy interior. The first thing to strike him, other than the lack of daylight, was the strong smell of fish and not fresh at that.

'The servant?'

'Gone,' Oliphant hissed. 'As I assume is the girl by now.'

'Did the servant say anything more about a boat?'

'He repeated that efforts are being made to find one, but when I asked him how long that might take all I got was a shrug.'

'We just have to trust them,' Pearce insisted. Even in the gloom he could pick up Oliphant's misgivings. 'They've stood by us till now, have they not? They could have easily used that tunnel and left us to our fate.'

Eyes now adjusted to the gloom, he was examining his surroundings – not that it took long, for they did not amount to much. There was barely enough room for both men and only one cot, with a grubby blanket. In one corner sat a tiny, much-scarred table, which looked as if it had been used for gutting fish. Under it sat a small barrel, which probably would serve as the only place to sit. To the side of the entrance there was a charcoal brazier on which the owner could, if he wished, cook his catch.

'Food?' he asked, as that pointed to a need.

'Will be brought, and water.' Oliphant paused before adding. 'And there are rods outside with which we can fish.' There was a lengthy pause before he added, 'We're not in a safe place Pearce.'

'Which hardly needs to be said.'

'I don't mean this hut.'

'Even if I agree with you, I cannot think how we are to go about improving it.'

‘So you’re content to rely entirely on the old man?’

‘Content no, but certain we must.’

‘I disagree.’

‘Something you’re prone to,’ was the acerbic response.

‘I hope, as do you, they will find the means to meet our needs, but what if they struggle? I grant you they’ve been clever and, I’m as sure as I can be, their identity is unknown to whoever was clattering on that door. But who are they and how many do they constitute? Is it one old man and a girl, or a large and active conspiracy? What if we are in the hands of the only people in the whole of this part of the world who can aid us?’

The silence that greeted the point encouraged Oliphant to continue. ‘I’ve told you I’m never happy to be dependent on others. I would go as far as to say I’m only alive now because I have had a care to avoid being so.’

The response was larded with irony. ‘Do I sense a proposition?’

‘On the way to this hovel, the servant and I moved with little difficulty, down and across the canal, this at a time when the local forces were supposedly on the lookout.’

‘People whom we last heard hammering and demanding entry and they will still be occupied. It will require the door to be broken down and they’ll find nothing. In time they’ll surely discover the tunnel entrance, but that has been blocked so will lead them nowhere.’

Oliphant acknowledged the point; preoccupied, those doing the chasing might still be looking for them in the wrong place. He then moved onto another point, namely that such a situation would not last.

‘I have no idea which route you took, but it revealed to me a large number of boats lining the canal. If what you told me on the way here is true, some must be crewed by our fellow countrymen and the intention was to get us away just after the turn of the high tide?’

The plan, obviously, had been to put them aboard a smuggler: who else would be sailing out of Gravelines on course for England? An immediate set of questions then arose: which one had agreed to the plan, how could they locate them and was there time to find out?

‘It was said plain such a course was no longer safe.’ That engendered another possibility. Were they now seeking a replacement, and if not, could they find one without help? ‘If we can, we could perhaps offer them money.’

Pearce pulled out the small purse and threw it to Oliphant. ‘Unless you have means of which I’m unaware, that’s all we possess.’

‘A tempting sum could be offered . . .’

‘From where?’

Oliphant barked at him in reply, given Pearce was being obtuse. ‘Henry Dundas, the man who sent us on this damned errand.’

‘You repose more faith in him than I do.’

‘Would you accept it is worth the attempt?’

‘Only if we have no other recourse. But we are not yet so desperate. Let’s wait and see what our friends can arrange.’