

The Sea



The Sea

drama in five acts after Captain Marryat

by Christian Lanciai (2001)

The characters :

Edward Peters
Ellen Peters, his wife
Willy Peters, their son
the commander
an officer
seamen
Adams, old sailor
Admiral de Courcy
the vicar
a servant
another officer
a doctor
Rainscourt
Emily, his daughter
M'Elvina, captain of smugglers

On board the Aspasia:

the captain
first mate Hardy
Price
Pearce
Hardsett
the carpenter
other sailors

shipwrecked Frenchmen
wreckers
a stablemaster and his stable boy
Rainscourt's nanny Nora

The action is at sea, on ships and on Ireland during the Napoleonic wars.

Copyright © Christian Lanciai 2001

The Sea

Act I scene 1.

Attending a hanging on board a ship.

All sailors and officers present.

Commander Edward Peters, former secretary of the commander, is hereby sentenced to death for incitement and leading a mutiny against his majesty's royal navy. He will be executed immediately by hanging from the yardarm.

sailor 1 It's unfair!

2 He was just!

3 As a man on deck he was unfairly lashed for a theft he didn't commit! 4

4 Although they knew he was innocent he was forced to suffer the penalty anyway. That's why he turned a mutineer.

5 He is innocent!

an officer Keep steady, my men! The mutiny is over! The law must have its course!

1 The mutiny failed only because his own wee son walked before a cannon when we already had lighted the fuse!

2 It is judicial murder!

3 It's a disgrace to the whole navy!

an officer (to the commander) I don't like this. The crew is getting uneasy

commander Yes, I am noticing it. But we have to carry through the execution. It cannot be postponed.

Peters Sir, may I speak a few words to the crew?

commander Absolutely not!

officer Maybe it wouldn't do any harm. It might calm down the crew.

commander What does the priest say?

priest I can vouch for that Peters by his speech only will aim at establish subordination with the crew for the future. I can assure you of his constructive intentions.

commander Very well, Peters, but keep it short!

Peters My friends, when you tell your children about this abominable mutiny in the future, don't forget to tell them about the dishonour and death of the leaders at the same time. Tell them, that one of them in your presence at quarter deck admitted the justice of his judgement and conveyed his thanks to the king for his clemency in forgiving the others and only let the chief responsible hang from the yardarm. Exhort them to faithfully do their duty to bravely fight for their king and country, and warn them by our example...

(Willy, the small son of Peters enters on deck at the centre of everyone's attention and walks up to his father grabbing hold of his trousers while he searchingly looks up to his father's face....)....our regrettable example of neglecting our duties... how we were deceived

into taking the law into our own hands... how we lost control... (*loses control and bursts into tears.*)

commander Who is the boy?

officer It's his son, whom he bequeathed to the navy as 'the King's own'.

commander I see.

Willy (the boy) Where are you going, father? (*Everyone is deeply moved.*)

Peters I am leaving where no one can follow me, my boy. I am leaving for the eternal sleep. But you live on and in the navy in my place. You belong to the navy, my boy. Never let it down! (*lifts him up and kisses him.*)

There, commander captain, I am finished. I forgive you, like I hope myself to be forgiven. Sir, (*to the officer*) take this child by his hand and don't allow him to go fore. Remember, he is 'the King's own'. (*bows to the priest, who is quite overwhelmed, walks across to the gangway, drums begin to roll, the noose is set around his neck, and he is ready.*)

Ellen (out of reach) No, Edward, it must not happen! They know you are innocent!

officer (to the captain) His wife.

commander That's all we needed. (*gives a sign. The cannon is fired. Peters is hanged and is lost over the rail.*)

Ellen (cries) No! (*some sailors hurry up*)

officer She is dead, Sir.

commander A double execution was never intended. Take care of the bodies. Let them be buried together in the sea, since she was his sailor's wife.

officer Ay ay, Sir!

commander At ease! Return to your duties!

officer Yes, Sir.

commander This was some bloody awkward business.

officer He is dead, Sir.

commander Who was he really?

officer Edward Peters. An assumed name., No one knows who he really was.

commander Another of those poor rebellious adventurers from fine families making their own father their enemy, probably. And the wife, the poor woman?

officer Ellen, Sir, without means and support.

commander No family of her own?

officer The only daughter of a clergyman. She was left without any support when he died.

commander One of those stories. Unhappy love, probably.

officer We have to take care of the boy, Sir.

commander Of course. We took his life without right, he would never have turned mutineer if he hadn't been treated unfairly, now we can't even give the widow any compensation, and all we can do is to take care of the boy.

officer Perhaps, Sir, it will appear one day that he comes from a famous family and is the heir of a fortune.

commander That wouldn't surprise me. So Peters gave him to us as 'the King's own'. That is a generous gift to the navy that took his life.

officer Adams will be an ideal tutor for him, Sir.

commander No doubt. The best one he could have. (*sighs*) Pity about a good sailor. Damned awkward business this is.

officer Sir.

commander You may leave. (*The officer leaves..*)

That's that. Yet another unnecessary mutiny, yet another number of excellent sailors executed for no good at all, and then an anonymous nobleman hanged in the yardarm on top of that. With a lonesome orphaned child. What will become of such a boy, born a bonds slave in such a navy? (*sighs and leaves*)

Scene 2.

Vicar But you can't just shut yourself up here in your greed, admiral de Courcy! It's bad for your health.

admiral I'll do whatever I like, damn it, dear brother. You have no power over me, for I am just an old incorrigible heathen. My oldest son went to blazes, and I cursed him after his death. Now I am just waiting for my second son to go to blazes as well, but he is cursed already.

Vicar Have you then no humanity left at all, admiral? No human feelings of warmth and tenderness?

admiral All that died with my wife, and you know it.

(*enter a butler with a letter*) From whom?

butler A sailor.

vicar It's from your son.

admiral Yes, it is. (*throws it in the fire*)

vicar Will you not even read a letter from your only living son?

admiral I have already cursed him once and for all. Why would I then read his letter?

vicar Because he is your only son! Who has given you your only grandchild!

admiral By a worthless slut.

vicar Allow me then to rescue his letter and take care of it before it is too late.

admiral By all means. You can have it. I am happy as long as I don't have to see it.

vicar (saves the smoking letter from the fire) Your son Edward at least deserves a mass.

amiralen I doubt it. He is as worthless as all the others. My eldest son at least went to war in India, but Edward only debased himself.

vicar (reads with great astonishment) My good admiral, you have to read this!

admiral Never in my life.

vicar You will come to regret it.

admiral I regret nothing. I just don't care about anything.

vicar (to the butler) Is the sailor still here who brought the letter?

butler Yes, he is waiting outside in case there would be an answer.

vicar I must see him!

admiral I refuse to see my son!

vicar It's not your son. It's just an old sailor.

admiral Very well, but I don't want to see him. You can speak with him here. I am leaving. (*leaves*)

vicar (to the butler) Show the good sailor in.

(*alone*) Edward dead and hanged! And his father refuses to read his last words and prayers! How can a man turn into such a monster?

Adams (enters, an old sailor with his hat in his hands) You wished to see me, Sir.

vicar You have come a long way just to deliver a letter.

Adams I was granted leave, Sir.

vicar I understand the writer is dead.

Adams Yes, he was hanged, Sir.

vicar But his son is alive.

Adams Yes, the boy is in good hands, Sir.

vicar How did it happen? Why was Edward hanged?

Adams A long story, Sir. He was highly appreciated and respected as the commander's own secretary, until he was accused of theft. He was innocent, but the circumstances were against him, and he was sentenced to death. A minute before his execution the stolen things were found with another, but the course of the law could not be stopped. All they could do was to reduce his punishment to 300 lashes "in face of the whole navy", so that he could remain alive. It was a matter of form, Sir. The navy is like that. There can be no argument. They marked him for life, and he never became the same again. He turned into the natural channel for the discontent of various crews, and when the great mutiny broke out, he was the natural leader. We had the lives of the highest officers in our hands, when Edwards' son happened to walk in the way of the cannon, which saved the lives of the commanders. Then the mutiny was quenched, and Edwards was hanged as a warning example to all those whose lives were spared.

vicar So he was innocent all the way and was brought by his destiny to the yardarm .

Adams You could describe it that way, Sir.

vicar And his destiny keeps following its blind and ruthless course after his death. His father refuses to read his farewell letter and doesn't care about little Willy.

Adams That's hard, Sir. Is it the admiral himself?

vicar Yes, it's the admiral himself.

Adams It is hard, Sir.

vicar The hardest thing of all is perhaps that there is nothing we can do. I have tried, you know. The admiral is hopelessly impossible. Edward's destiny gives you the responsibility for the boy, for his life and his future. Only you know who his grandfather is, and he has no other relatives. Do you know anything about his mother?

Adams She died, Sir, in the very moment when Edward was hanged. She tried to reach him but could only see his hanging. It is hard, Sir. No woman's heart can bear such a thing.

vicar (sighs) I can't understand all this meaningless evil and misfortune. What's the name of the boy?

Adams Willy, Sir. He is called Willy 'the King's own'.

vicar So he belongs to the navy?

Adams The naval mark of property is tattooed into his arm.

vicar Mr Adams, we have to keep in touch. Write to me and tell me about 'the King's own' wherever you are. I feel some responsibility for this, and I will continue working on the admiral until he dies, although I have little hope for the recovery of his afflicted soul. *(The admiral shows up like a thundercloud.)*

Adams Yes, Sir. *(rising)* I guess I had better leave now, Sir. I have done what I could.

vicar Take care of the boy, my friend, and good luck.

Adams Trust me, Sir. *(bows and leaves)*

admiral That was the last time anyone who knows my son was admitted in my house.

vicar So at least you admit him as your son.

admiral That's the last thing I will do. *(sits down to read his paper)*

vicar (sighs) Yes, yes, like the old sailor said: it is hard.

Scene 3. A naval battle.

Bombardments and gunsmoke. The ship is in shreds with dead bodies everywhere.

Adams Aim carefully, for goodness' sake! We only win if we never give up! It's forbidden to get tired! Keep firing, boys! *(The cannon is fired.)*

(Suddenly Adams is hit on his side and all splashed with gunpowder, falling down all bleeding. Willy has had his hat blown away by the shot and hurries to help Adams.)

I am done for, my boy. That shot knew its target.

(to the sailors, who want to help him) No, don't take me down! Let me die here on deck! The pains are hard enough anyway. Willy, the King's own, come here. Get me some water.

sailor 1 You are shot in the belly. You must not drink water.

Adams Bullshit! I am to die anyway! For I suppose you don't have any rum here?

sailor 2 I have an extra flask here. *(gives him to drink.)*

Adams You save all but my life. *(drinks)*

Willy, come here. Listen carefully. Your father's name was not Peters. I am in touch with someone who knows all about your family. He is the vicar of...

(bomb explosions. You don't hear the name. A bomb comes rolling on board.)

The bomb, my boy, the bomb!

(Willy quickly sees the danger and succeeds in rolling the bomb over board. It explodes with a vengeance outside the rail but causes no damage.)

Adams (exhausted by the excitement and dying) You start off excellently, my boy. You are just like your good father. No one else on board could have acted so instantly so fast. You will make the perfect sailor. Give me a kiss, my boy. *(Willy kisses his cheek. Adams dies.)*

Willy Is he dead?

sailor 1 Yes, Willy. He is dead. *(All remove their caps.)*

a voice The battle is over! The enemy surrenders!

Old sailor Yet another costly victory for England.

an officer (enters) Who managed to get that bomb over board?

sailor 2 That one over there. *(points at the boy)*

officer So small, so quick and so efficient! Make him an officer on quarter deck instantly! What is your name, boy?

Willy Willy, Sir.

officer And your surname?

Willy The King's own.

sailor 1 He is an orphan, Sir, and belongs to the navy.

officer I see. But he is no ordinary Jones or Smith. Bring him here. *(takes his shoulder)* What would you like to be called, boy?

Willy Just Willy, Sir.

officer That will not do. *(to another)* Is he not in the books?

sailor 1 No, Sir.

officer Sign him up then. What shall we call him? Fortescue? Forsyth? No, something better. Ramsay? Reynolds? No, it doesn't fit. Now I know! William Seymour! List him as William Seymour.

2 An elegant name, Sir.

officer Suitable for a paragon sailor. Well, William Seymour, do you like your name?

Willy Yes, Sir.

officer Very well. Then it's settled. Clear up all this mess now. The battle is over, and we must reach a harbour. Make sure all the bodies get decently sewed up! Funeral ceremony at sunset. All men back to their posts!

(Adams and other bodies are sewn up in sailors' bags, that is white hammocks.)

William Seymour, you are the hero of today! Always carry on as you started!

Willy Thank you, Sir. *(bows politely)*

officer At ease!

Scene 4. The admiral's bedroom.

admiral (in bed) Well, you damned quack, do I get my sentence or not?

doctor Sir, there is always hope.

admiral What kind of a bloody answer is that? A judge must never hesitate to give his sentence. You know all the facts, doctor. I know nothing. Let me know what you know.

doctor I fear, Sir, that...

admiral (breaks off) That's enough. So I am dying.

doctor Begging your pardon, Sir....

admiral Get to the point, you bloody hypocrite! No diplomacy can fool me! Tell me I am dying! Or else I refuse to recover!

doctor As you wish, lord admiral, begging your pardon, you are probably dying, and your illness will probably be mortal.

admiral No wonder, the way I lived. How much time do you give me?

doctor It could be a matter of months, but it could also end tomorrow.

admiral Thanks for that. I love a clear statement. Now get lost and don't come back until I am dead. Send in my butler as you go out.

doctor Yes, Sir. (*leaves*)

admiral Nothing is more false than diplomacy. All those damned hypocrites, who think all will be well as long as they wrap it up in wool, are worse than qualified quacks. They should be done away with, the whole lot of them. (*yells*) To hell with all doctors and diplomats! (*calms down*) Well, now it feels better. I am already well.

(*butler enters*) Well, there you are. I want to speak with that blackguard of a vicar.

butler He is waiting outside.

admiral I thought so. He smelled my disease like a vulture. (*The vicar is showed in.*)

I am dying, you lubber. That should satisfy you. Then you can soon give me the last rites.

vicar I feared the worst.

admiral No bullshit, if you please. Don't be a damned hypocrite like all diplomats and doctors. Take my confession instead, for I have much to pay for by my cursed progress as a rake. I am the worst and greatest motherfucker in the world. Are you aware of that, you expectant vulture?

vicar Alas, I know you all too well, brother.

admiral Listen then. I murdered my own wife and her children. But you surely knew all that already.

vicar Pardon me, brother, but you did not murder them intentionally.

admiral But I murdered them! And that's that!

vicar Not according to law.

admiral The law be hanged! It knows nothing. It is blind, you know. It is completely worthless, since it always turns a blind eye to the truth. By the law you can get anything wrong, and that's how the law works. Listen now. I tortured my wife to death, for I only made her unhappy by my brutal way of life. My oldest son

died in India, because he escaped there from me. Now, only you know anything about my youngest son. Is he alive?

vicar No, he is dead.

admiral I thought so. Both my sons died because I cursed them. Do you still have that damned letter?

vicar I have it here in my breast pocket. (*produces it and gives it to the admiral*)

admiral (*with increasing anger, while he reads the letter*) God be damned, this compromises the entire navy! My son hanged as a mutineer although he was innocent! This is not acceptable!

vicar I am glad you at last realize that.

admiral Why the hell haven't you showed me this letter before?

vicar Brother, you yourself threw it on the fire. I saved it in the last moment before it burned. You didn't even want to see the bringer of the letter.

admiral My son left a son. Do you know anything about him?

vicar (*sighs*) The bringer of the letter was an old sailor called Adams. He was already then your son's willing tutor. He promised to keep in touch with me and keep me informed. He didn't. When I made a research on him he had been lost in a naval battle.

admiral And my grandson?

vicar I tried to search for him and his destiny, but he is lost.

admiral Lost?

vicar I have not found any trace of him.

admiral This is getting worse and worse, my dear croaker. It is hereby your duty to find him alive. I make you his guardian, and I testate all my property to him. That's regrettably the only thing I can do as any atonement for the downfall of my entire family.

vicar At last you speak like a human being.

admiral How come, vicar, that you never gave up hope for my soul?

vicar I knew you would turn human sooner or later. They all do. Human nature can never deny itself.

admiral Still I did all I could to deny it.

vicar That was your life's only defeat which now has turned to triumph.

admiral So maliciously happy, my croaker?

vicar So glad for your soul's sake.

admiral I thought I had killed it, but I killed others instead.

vicar None of them died by your direct action.

admiral I call that a euphemism. The indirect action is worse.

vicar If you realize that you have already atoned for it.

admiral I atone for nothing. I die accursed. But remember my will to my grandson. It must be made unexceptionable.

vicar Of course.

admiral You will be chief responsible.

vicar I accept that responsibility.

admiral Get me pen and paper immediately.

vicar At last I feel I can be of some use to you.

(The butler is called on. They get down to work.)

butler Pardon me, Sir, but I hope this matter can be completed rather quickly, for Mr Rainscourt is outside the door.

admiral What does that reptile want?

butler He wants to enquire about your health.

admiral Rainscourt, vicar, is a poisonous reptile. He only comes here because he knows I am about to die. The worst thing is that he is a relative. Well, let the worst hyena of England in, let the most abominable scumbag on the British Isles demonstrate his plague contamination here at my deathbed, let that scavenger strike his claws in my liver while I am still alive if he can. I am not afraid of his putrid stench of corpses.

butler (lets Rainscourt in) Mr Rainscourt, Sir.

Rainscourt (enters and immediately understands that he has come too early, rushes to the admiral's bed and falls on his knees)

O my admiral, what a godsent bliss that you are still alive! Then I arrived in time after all to find you in good health and vigour one last time!

admiral You bastard dog, you can neither fool me nor the vicar, for I have alerted him on your cloven feet and your long pointed tail. Unfortunately I have to disappoint you, you treacherous pimp. You come too soon, for I am still alive.

Rainscourt Don't misunderstand me, dear uncle!

admiral That's exactly what I refuse to do, you miserable creep! But you didn't come in vain, for I have the great joy to inform you, that my grandson is alive, and he will inherit everything when I die! The vicar here will see to it that my legal will shall be properly executed. You will have nothing, you plague bug. In spite of all your exorbitant hypocrisy you are absolutely worthless.

Rainscourt (to the vicar) I fully understand that the lord admiral in his dying condition is not quite in his right senses, and I share my vicar's forbearance with his mortally bad humour...

admiral Get away, you stinking toad! You are not even welcome to my funeral!

Rainscourt His lordship the admiral could at least afford to be somewhat polite on his deathbed. I am after all your relative.

admiral Yes, and you have inherited all the most rotten blood of all the worst bastards of our tribe! You are a concentration of all the rot of the family! Get out! You will never make a career except as a worse murderer of your wife and children than myself!

vicar Mr Rainscourt, I think you had better leave for the sake of the admiral's health.

Rainscourt Vicar, your word is my law. *(leaves)*

admiral What is this sudden daylight I see? Suddenly I only feel the freshest air all around me. The only death and grave for me in life was that villain Rainscourt. After his removal, death will be a trifle. Remember, vicar, my death watchman: not

one penny to that maggot Rainscourt! My life's last wish is to starve him to death, for he deserves nothing better!

vicar I fear he will marry some fortune.

admiral Yes, that would fit his character. He will marry someone rich and murder his wife and take her money since he can't have mine. I tell you, my dear death watchman, that he who can't make his own money and earn his own livelihood will only be good for wickedness.

vicar Does that apply also to starving artists and humanists?

admiral Yes, if they get fat, for then they are deceivers. Only if they really starve just to be able to do their work they are honest. But to the point! We have a last will to draw! Everything to my grandson and nothing to Rainscourt. Is that clear?

vicar Perfectly clear, brother. Rainscourt will do anything to have it annulled, but I will find your grandson myself. Bring that promise with you from me to the other side.

admiral With pleasure, vicar. Thanks to you I will die satisfied, although you haven't even succeeded in saving my lost and doomed soul.

Many years later.

Act II scene 1. On board "*La belle Susanne*".

M'Elvina What luck that we happened to pass by so we could pick you up, Willy.

Willy I say the same thing. It was great luck indeed. Or else I would never have been able to surface any more.

M'Elvina Your ship must by now be reported as missing with its entire crew?

Willy Without doubt.

M'Elvina Then you can make the best career in the world as a smuggler, since everyone considers you dead.

Willy I never had any identity earlier either. I was known as 'the King's own' with the property mark of the navy burnt into my arm, and I was given the name of Seymour just to have any name at all.

M'Elvina So you never had any parents?

Willy My father was hanged as a mutineer, and my mother died at the same time. That's all I ever learned about them.

M'Elvina Then you are like made for a buccaneer's career, but at the same time you are too honest for that. – What kind of a ship is that, mate?

mate She is heading for us, Sir. It could be a war cutter.

M'Elvina A shark no doubt.

mate Shall we fly the French flag, Sir?

M'Elvina No, we are Englishmen, even if we are smugglers! Let them know it! We will manage them.

mate She sails handsomely. Her boys know how to keep her straight.
M'Elvina Get the ammunition handy and open the gunpowder keg! The crown shall know what we think about coast guards! As soon as she is within reach we will let her have it!
a sailor Banks of fog are coming up, Sir.
M'Elvina We'll have time to sink her before then.
mate She is firing, Sir! (*Cannon rumble. Masts and sails falling down over them.*)
M'Elvina But she can't aim. Our hit will be the water line. Keep steady! Now! Fire! (*Cannons are fired. Cheers among the crew.*)
sailor Smash hit on the boom!
seaman That was not the intention.
M'Elvina But she can't sail any more. She is outdone. That's enough!
mate Captain, a fregate in sight.
seaman She is coming down on us with the wind! We have no chance!
M'Elvina She must have heard the guns. That's what I call a challenge. Bear off two points! Clap on all sail!
sailor She is catching up with us!
seaman It's only a matter of time before we are within range.
M'Elvina It all depends on if she is a beginner or an old channel shark, but we will not surrender without a fight. (*Cannonades.*)
seaman She is firing!
M'Elvina Don't you think I notice? But it's only the beginning. The first shot is only empty menace.
sailor She is catching up with us. We have no chance.
M'Elvina Strike all sails. Show her we surrender.
mate Sir?
M'Elvina Strike all sails! Show her we surrender!
styrman Ay yj, Sir! Strike all sails!
Willy Without a fight, captain?
M'Elvina Just you wait.
sailor She is coming up.
voices (from the fregate, at a distance) Marines, cease fire! All men reduce sails! Make ready to launch starboard boat!
seaman They strike sail. They make ready to come across.
M'Elvina Now, Willy, you will see. We were lucky. She is a beginner. Hoist the foresail! Haul in the leeward sheet! That's right! Hoist everywhere!
Willy You are escaping, Sir?
M'Elvina In that way we will get a lead which she never will catch up with, since she is so much clumsier. She has lost all speed by luffing, and it will take her half an hour to catch up again. By our smarter rig we will then already be on the other side of the horizon.

(*cannonades*)

mate They are firing, Sir.

M'Elvina Let them. It's just to save their face. We have made it. They will never catch up with us before dusk.

Willy Pardon a consideration, Sir.

M'Elvina Yes, Willy?

Willy Two ships have been firing at us for nothing, for being smugglers. Isn't that rather stupid, considering that we really only carry cargo? Wouldn't it be better then to go for free trade?

M'Elvina Out of the question, my boy. Then the whole business and traffic of smuggling would become unprofitable and put out of business. We would only put ourselves out of work-

Willy You mean that dishonest work is better than honest unemployment?

M'Elvina Of course! What else keeps the world going around?

(resumes his binoculars)

Willy Still I hope we will go for honesty one day.

M'Elvina As soon as we are out of the territorial waters of our own country, boy.

Scene 2. Galway, Ireland.

vicar Dear girl, the greatest loss a human being can suffer in life is the loss of her mother, and I know the loss is twice worse for a girl.

Emily Thank you, reverend. But the hardest thing is not the loss. The worst thing is that I can't understand how it happened.

vicar I know how it happened, but I can only reveal it to your grandfather.

Emily He should be here any moment.

vicar There is an old saying, I don't know from where, that says about a mother: "Your son is your son until he takes a wife, but your daughter is your daughter all your life." The bond between a mother and a daughter is much stronger than between a father and his son. As an unmarried priest I can feel as much for a man as for a woman. So count on me, my friend, as much as a father as on a mother.

Emily Thank you, father. You are a true priest. But here is now my grandfather.

M'Elvina (enters) Father, I am grateful for your being here, and since you appear to know more than most about what has happened I must ask you to tell me everything.

vicar I regard it my duty to do so. But it concerns only you, since it was your daughter. And I need some extra information from you.

M'Elvina If what I know is as sensitive as what you know, it would be best for my granddaughter not to be present.

Emily Yes, grandfather, I will leave.

M'Elvina You will learn everything later, my girl. *(She leaves.)*

vicar Is there anyone to comfort her?

M'Elvina Alas, only a sailor, who should be on his way here from around the Cape of Good Hope.

vicar But he is a good man?

M'Elvina The best possible. But tell me now. What happened to my daughter? What do you know?

vicar Was she happily married?

M'Elvina Far from it. It was the most miserable marriage imaginable. She let herself be charmed by him to be lured into marriage, when it showed that he was only interested in her assets with me, but when he later himself obtained his great inheritance he totally lost interest in her and embarked on a life of only escapades. After having given birth to Emily she demanded decree nisi, and they had lived separately all the time up to the accident.

vicar Still he loved her.

M'Elvina Yes, since she was beautiful and increasing in beauty with the years. He applied any means to get her back, but she knew him and always turned him down.

vicar That confirms my misgivings.

M'Elvina Now it's your turn.

vicar When the accident occurred he alone kept the reins. Both the horses were new, and the grooms had advised against harnessing them together. They also shied to the dog that followed with them. So it was set for a disaster. The last anyone saw of your daughter was a face in terror. She obviously didn't want to follow, but her husband insisted. We don't know how the dog managed to frighten the horses, but only the dog could have made them bolt. We know the rest: your daughter was found in the wreckage of the wagon with her skull smashed in, and Rainscourt survived with a few bruises.

M'Elvina Could he have had a motive for arranging it?

vicar Revenge for her detesting him.

M'Elvina I was suspicious against him from the beginning. How did he really come into possession of his great inheritance?

vicar A sad story. Admiral de Courcy had two sons. One fell in battle in India, the other one was executed as a mutineer but was judged unfairly, everyone afterwards said. He left a small boy to whom the admiral testated his entire fortune, but that boy was lost at sea. We know that his ship went down, but we never had his death confirmed. Still Rainscourt inherited the entire fortune by his manipulations of court procedures.

M'Elvina What was the ship?

vicar It was a trophy that went down in the bay of Biscay some years ago.

M'Elvina Could you describe the boy? What was his name?

vicar William Peters, but that was his father's assumed name. But it would have been easy to have him identified, since he carried the property mark of the navy tattooed on his arm, for his father entrusted him to the navy as 'the King's own'.

M'Elvina I know this man. His name is William Seymour.

vicar Could it be true?

M'Elvina I picked him up myself in the bay of Biscay. He knew nothing about his parents, except that his father had been hanged as a mutineer and that his mother died at the same moment. It must be the same fellow.

vicar This is indeed a godsent coincidence! Then he is alive! Where is he now?

M'Elvina There is more to it. He is the suitor of my daughter. He should be on his way here from the Cape of Good Hope.

vicar This is almost too wonderful to be true!

M'Elvina We don't have to examine my son-in-law Rainscourt. As soon as William Seymour de Courcy comes home he will lose all his rights without my having to proceed with court measures against my son-in-law. He is still my granddaughter's father, though, vicar.

vicar This is indeed a most extraneous story.

M'Elvina But it demands extreme discretion, vicar, until the rule of law in the Rainscourt case is safely settled.

vicar Of course, captain. I never reveal secrets of confession.

Act III scene 1. On board the "Aspasia".

Captain What do you think about the weather, number one?

mate It looks worrying.

Captain That's what I mean. What will become of it?

Mate The weather forces are incalculable, but thunder is indicated.

Captain Thunder in the northeast Atlantic at this time of the year is not to be trifled with, number one.

Mate That's what I mean.

Captain At best we could have a storm of three days to look forward to.

Mate And at worst?

Captain Don't ask silly questions, mate. That alternative is excluded until you have to face it.

Mate Is there any risk, Sir?

Captain It should be obvious.

Mate I am sure we'll make it, Sir.

Captain That's not the problem. Either we make it or we don't. The problem is that we have to go through it.

Mate That's what all problems are made for, isn't it, Sir?

Captain Problems have nothing to do here in life, number one, except to mess with us mortals for no reason at all.

Mate I think we are getting rather theoretical, Sir, in view of the weather.

Captain At last you said something uplifting, mate!

Price We must never forget to stick to the earth.

Captain You mean standing on deck, you clown.

Price When the devil walks on land, we Jack Tars get the hell of it.

Captain (to the mate) Don't mind him. He has read too much of Shakespeare.

Mate Mr Price is the only learned man on board, and he hasn't just read Shakespeare.

Captain You mean his case is even more hopeless than just Shakespeare.

Mate Everyone who reads books gets wiser than the whole world, since they realize how insane the world is. That's why the world brands them insane.

Captain Now you are the one who is turning theoretical.

Mate It is not easy to stick to earth when you are at sea.

Captain No, it's thoroughly impossible. Look out! Here it comes!
(thunder and crashing noise) Damned misery of hell! Here is the storm breaking loose for serious! This is no fireworks to play with! Furl the fore and mizen-topsail as fast as lightning, and close-reef the main—that, with the foresail, fore-staysail, and trysail, will be enough for her.

Pearce Wouldn't it be better to reef the foresail, Sir? Or else we could have double trouble ahead.

Captain You are right, Pearce! Reef the foresail! Is the main-trysail bent?

Pearce All bent, sir, and the sheet aft.

Captain Then beat a retreat, and turn the hands up to shorten sail.
(The pipe is blown and all hands come up on deck ready to meet the storm.)

Hardy If this lasts much longer we must take the foresail off of her, and give her the main-staysail.

Captain Not yet. Ease her, quarter-master.

mate Ease her it is, sir.

A watch (from the mast top) A sail on the lee-beam, sir!

Captain (calling up) What kind of a ship?

Watch She's a large ship, Sir—main and mizen masts both gone.

Captain (with his glass) A line-of-battle ship, by heavens! And if I am any judge of a hull, or the painting of a ship, she is no Englishman. Keep fast the foresail, Mr Hardy. We'll edge down to her. Quarter-master, see the signal halyards all clear. Hoist Number 3 at the fore, and Number 8 at the main. We'll see if she can answer the private signal.

Pearce We are closing with her, Sir!

Captain Of course we are. Now then, bring her to the wind, Mr Pearce. Any answer to the signal?

watch No answer, Sir.

Captain Call the gunner—clear away the long gun forward—try with the rammer whether the shot has started from the cartridge, and then fire across the bows of that vessel.

Constable Ready, Sir!

Captain Fire!

(Cannon shot. Hurrahs from the crew.)

Hardy We pitched the shot close to the forefoot, Sir.

Watch French colours, sir!
Captain That's what I thought. Then we'll have to finish the job on her. Let's try her with the carronades.
Price Is that wise, Sir?
Captain What do you mean?
Price She is already badly roughed up, the storm and the thunders are increasing, and we are pursuing her dead ahead towards the shore.
Captain Where are we, Mr Pearce? How many leagues from land?
Pearce I would say about seven.
Captain Then we have time. But she is leaving us. keep more away, and run abreast of her. If we can just prevent her from getting up her jury-masts, she is done for.
Price She is lost anyway.
Captain A Frenchman never surrenders without a fight, and an Englishman never let's a Frenchman go. It has always been like that, and so it will always be.
(Thunder and lightning.)
Pearce The thunderstorm is drawing nigh, Sir.
Captain So I notice.
Price We should leave the Frenchman to her fate, Sir.
Captain An Englishman never leaves a Frenchman alone.
Price I'll be back later.
Captain That idiot Price should be keelhauled for all his Shakespeare sagacity.
Pearce He knows more than we do.
Captain Exactly why!
(A terrible boom and lightning explosion turning everyone over.)
Hardy The lightning hit the ship!
Pearce (rising in a daze) Are we alive?
Seymour That's the question.
Captain Where did the lightning strike?
Hardy Right in the main mast and then the powder keg! Several cannons exploded!
Captain Yes, I heard that. Can we navigate?
Hardy If we survived we can sail.
Captain Pearce, inspect the damages and report as soon as you can. Fie, that smell of ammonia and sulphur!
Hardy It's the stench of death and disaster.
Captain Get down all the wounded and dead! Investigate if the lightning went all through the ship and if we are leaking! At once!
Pearce Captain, the lightning fired two cannons, and all men around are dead, charred. That's the stench of ammonia.
Captain Are we on fire?
Pearce It is being put out.
Captain Another pull of the fore-staysail, Mr Hardsett!

Hardsett Ay ay, Sir!

Captain (to Pearce) The crew is not quick to respond any more.

Pearce We all had a shock.

Captain Good luck for us that the ship still can be controlled. Is the Frenchman still in sight?

Hardy We are still chasing her, Sir, towards land.

captain Keep her under constant watch. The moment she founders we break off the chase, if she founders. If not we take her. Bloody hell that stench! Can no one get that corpse smell out of the ship?

Pearce Captain, the lightning appears to have electrified the entire ship, pierced all iron works and killed everyone in touch with them.

Captain How many?

Pearce We are trying to count them, but it is not easy.

Captain Are they so dispersed?

Pearce Most look alive although they are dead. We have a number of petrified bodies that look alive. Even their looks and expressions have frozen.

Captain Yes, yes, we have no time for them now. Sort them out when you can. We have a French line-of-battle ship to settle with!

Hardy The storm is increasing, captain!

Captain That's no excuse.

Price Captain, Sir, may I be allowed a reflection?

Captain What is it now, then?

Price I have been long in your service, and you have never found any lack in my zeal of duty.

Captain No, I actually haven't, Price.

Price Therefore I dare to convey the general opinion of both myself and the crew, which is, that under the circumstances of this stormy sky of fire it is not wise to pursue an already disabled enemy on his drift towards the shore and certain death and destruction. Is it really opportune for us to stubbornly enforce the war against a falling enemy when the entire heaven and sea are warring against us?

Captain We can't interrupt the operation before it has been completed, Price.

Watch Land ohoy!

Captain Already? Then we are closer than I thought.

Hardy Captain, we have already sailed towards land for hours and with a strong current.

Pearce Shall we haul our wind, sir? We are on a dead lee-shore.

Captain Not yet, Pearce, not until the fate of that vessel is decided.

Sailor Land on the weather-bow!

Captain Really? Then the affair will soon be decided. Chase her on towards land! Chase her up on the rocks! It is our duty! A real hunter never lets go of his prey!

Price Captain, pardon my saying so, but by every inch we continue to pursue the Frenchman, the risk increases for our fregate to be lost as well.

Captain Don't you trust your captain's experienced sense?

Price I am just following the odds, Sir, and they are sinking.

Captain Never talk about sinking on board! We will never sink!

Price I never discussed such a matter, Sir.

Captain Then don't!

Price I don't!

Captain Then why are you doing it?

Price You are doing it, not I.

Caoptain Doing what?

Price Talking about sinking.

Captain I told you not to talk about sinking on board my ship! Why are you doing it then? Are you impertinent? Are you in for insubordination? Shall I put you in irons?

Price Misunderstand me correctly, Sir. I only calculate the risks. Is it worth sacrificing a fregate for an already doomed French line-of-battle ship?

Captain The main thing is that our country wins in the long run, and that Frenchman is not worth more than our fregate.

Price So all our men on board including yourself are woth sacrificing as long as we succeed in wrecking the Frenchman?

Captain I don't follow your calculations, Price. They are too theoretical for me. Go down to bed, and you will make yourself more useful.

Price With your permission, Sir, I will continue doing my duty.

Captain Yes, do that, and don't importune again.

Price Ay, ay, Sir.

Captain War is like a game of chess, Price. It's worth sacrificing a bishop for a tower. If that French tower is lost, Price, this fregate will keep it company if necessary. We all do as well as we can, and it is our duty. We are all in the navy by our own will and have placed our lives at its disposal. Our lives are not our own but belong to the crown. If our lives have to be forsaken by some battle or other circumstances they are not indispensable, but our country will find other equivalent lives for the disposal of the navy on an equivalent ship. We are just a wave on the sea, my friend. There is nothing to discuss. The wave has to be massacred against the shore, and we are all fully aware of that. It's just a relative question of time. But when the moment of truth arrives when we have to founder, it is our supreme duty to make that moment honourable and glorious. It must not for example become like a moment of hanging like of a sentenced mutineer.

Price Sir, you said that we all joined the navy by our own free will. What about this young man then, the best and most industrious on board, William Seymour, previously known as 'the King's own', who had the naval mark of property engraved in a tattoo on his arm?

Captain He never regretted it.

Price No, and he will never regret it. I just wish to point out, Sir, that although he is one of the best men of the navy, he never chose the navy by his own will.

Captain We'll talk about that later, Price. – How are things going over there?

Hardy We are just two cable lengths away from her, Sir! We have a peninsula two points to leeward and a low sandy tongue of land far out on her weather quarter. We are both completely embayed.

Captain We can make it!

Hardy But not the Frenchman. They are desperately trying to set up some after-sail.

Captain Of course it will not work. We are constantly gunning down more and more of her remaining rig.

Hardy They have lost all control of their ship.

Pearce She is visible only on top of the mountain waves.

Price There goes her remaining mast over board.

Hardy Nothing can save her now, captain.

captain She is done for. We have done our work, and we must now try to save ourselves. Secure the guns! You work now for your lives! We must put the mainsail on her, Mr Pearce, and draw off if we can.

Hardy Hands by the clue-garnets and bunt-lines, man the mainsheet, let go those leech-lines, haul aboard!

captain It's a pity, by God, there they go drifting straight up for the cliffs! Eight or nine hundred poor devils will be called to their last account in the course of a few minutes. I wish we could save them.

Price So do we all.

Pearce You should have thought of that before, Sir. Nothing can save them, and I am afraid that nothing but a slant of wind or a miracle can help ourselves.

Hardy She has struck, Sir, and is over on her broadside.

captain Mind your conn, Sir, keep your eyes on the weather-leech of the sail, and not upon that ship!

Pearce The promontory is now broad on the weather bow, and there is a reef of rocks leeward of the fregate!

captain Hold her up, mate! She is pitching but can make it! Let her quake and shake in every spike and plank! Her stem is like a razor through the water! We can make her go through it! Press on! Give her more sail! Give her all she can take! She must make it! Let her shake and quake under my lashing whip, but let her make it!

Hardy The breakers are heaving her back, captain! The waves are too tremendously high. We are forced closer to the reef at every moment.

captain Wear ship, Mr Hardy! We have but just room!

Hardy (to the crew) Put the helm up!

(A terrible crash, a loud and piercing cry from the ship's crew, the masts go down but rise again.)

Pearce That was a hard sunken rock, Sir, but she is off again!

captain Bring her to the wind as soon as you can!
(the carpenter comes running up the hatchway with a pallid and desperate face)
 What is it, carpenter?

Carpenter A big leak, Sir! We have no chance!

Several voices (spreading) Going down! Going down!

Carpenter We are filling fast! We can't keep afloat more than a few minutes!

captain Stop that panic nonsense! Every man to his station! Come out of those boats directly! No one goes near them! Keep away from them! No one abandons ship! Put the helm up, mate! Yes, we are going down, but we still have work to do! We must put her on the reef! Do you understand? The boats are good for nothing! They will just break up in splinters immediately! Hang on to the ship, that's your only chance! If she only hangs together, most of us will be able to make it. Look out for a soft place for her, Mr Pearce, if you can.

Pearce I can only see one possible patch. A little starboard – right so!

Hardy We are flying into our perdition.

Price Yes, isn't it a lovely feeling?

kapten Hold on, boys! Hold on to the ship! Two minutes more!

Pearce One at most.

Hardy She has never sailed so fast.

Pearce May she just get a high and good wave to carry her!

captain Now, boys! We'll all meet again, if we survive!
(A deafening crash as the ship hits the shore in a total blackout while you hear the entire ship being smashed in a blend of desperate cries of terror drowning in the booming breakers burying everything alive in darkness and chaos...)

Scene 2. After the shipwreck and the storm.

You see half the ship (the stem) wedged in by the rocks.

The survivors, many tied to the ship, are all washed up and apathetic.

Price I am afraid we have survived.

Hardsett The captain didn't get as he wanted. The ship was cleft in twain, and half the ship vanished with two thirds of the crew.

Price All that's left is wreckage, skeleton parts and lost parts of the crew.

Hardsett But we have survived, even if we are a minority.

Seymour Two hundred followed the captain down with the aft into the deep. At least thirty more have drowned.

Hardsett But we are seventy left who have been granted a new life.

Price But what are we sailors without a ship? All we have is loose planks.

Seymour And we must stick it out here on the wreck until we can make it for the shore. It could be days and weeks before the storm and waves allow us across the reef.

Price Every moment of life is too invaluable not to be taken care of, you don't realize until you are dying.

Hardsett We did as well as we could, Price. The captain couldn't have handled the situation any better. He was absolutely consistent in performing his duty.

Price Yes, and the result is 230 dead, three fourths of best crew in the world, for nothing, for wrecking a French line-of-battle ship with nine hundred dead. Yes, the captain may well be satisfied, but he isn't, because he is dead.

Hardsett There is no need for you to remind us.

Price But there is nothing else for us to do here but to consider the situation. Everyone is dead, but we are alive. It's a unique situation that imports certain reflections.

Hardsett Keep them to yourself.

Price That's what the captain also said before he perished.

Hardsett In that case he died because you didn't keep them to yourself.

Price Don't try to blame me. I was the only one who tried to avert the disaster.

Hardsett Why didn't you succeed then? Just trying will not do, Price, not at sea. You have to carry it through. Or else you are worthless as a sailor. You tried to avert the shipwreck. So you could have averted it if you had tried a little harder.

Price How do you avert a shipwreck if the captain doesn't want to?

Hardsett He wanted to for sure but he had his duties first.

Price Yes, it was his duty to play Russian roulette with the entire crew, and he and the crew lost. He had four hits out of four.

Hardsett Don't remind us any more. It's all over now.

Price No, it isn't over, for we are still alive and have to go on fighting and suffer for life. Only the dead don't have to worry any more.

Hardsett If you envy them, it's just for you to jump over board.

Price If you jump first I promise to follow.

Seymour If you jump over board I promise to rescue you.

Price At least there is one sailor left among us.

Seymour We are all sailors, and our first duty is to save our lives, since we have lost the ship.

Hardsett Naturally.

Price What do you suggest, sailor?

Seymour To jump into the sea and swim ashore.

Price We suggested that already.

Seymour If you swim ashore it isn't suicide.

Price No, but if we jump into the sea it is suicide.

Hardsett We could make a raft out of some wreckage and save both lives and things on it.

Price You are a genius, Hardsett.

Hardsett Yes, I know. That's why I suggested it.

Seymour But then we must all work together. We have to focus on helping and saving each other.

Hardsett Of course. Or else it will not work.

Price That's survival: helping each other. Without cooperation all humanity will perish.

Hardsett It will do so anyway.

Seymour Not if I may command.

Price Will Seymour, you are the only officer we have left. All the others followed the captain in his shipwreck. You may command.

Seymour Thanks for the honour.

Hardsett Make up your mind. What shall we do?

Seymour Build the raft. Let those who wish try to swim ashore. Let those who don't want to try wait for the raft. With patience and collaboration you can reach at any length.

Price But all will not be able to make it. Most of us are already dying.

Seymour Get down to work now, Price, and give us a hand! We have a raft to construct!

(Those with any strength start working. The others remain passive and apathetic.)

Act IV scene 1.

Hardsett It looks like a shepherd's hut. It's the only human trace we have been able to find all along the coast, but a path seems to be leading up from there.

Seymour The hut will do. It gives protection, and that's all we need. Let's first carry up the wounded. When we have them safely set and sheltered we could start reconnoitering.

Hardsett Come on, lads! The coast is clear!

(The sailors come up, some in a very bad state and staggering, and they enter the hut, which opens up.)

A voice (from inside) Qui va lá?

Hardsett Oh, the village seems to be inhabited.

Price Since when are there Frenchmen in Irish shepherd's cottages?

Seymour (sees the 7-8 unfortunate surviving Frenchmen from the war liner.)

It must be Frenchmen from the war liner.

Frenchman 1 Parbleu, and who are you?

Seymour Englishmen.

2 Do you have liquor?

Seymour We are in the same situation as you, for we are also shipwrecked.

4 Merde, they are from that cursed fregate!

1 Parbleu, so it was you who chased us into the rocks? Damned good shots you were! You shot down the entire rig for us!

Price It was the captain's order. He is dead.

4 Well, there must be some justice! Look how many of us that survived! Eight out of nine hundred! And several of us are half beaten to death if not already dying!

Seymour But now we are in the same boat and have to help each other.

1 No, Monsieur, we are without boats and not even at sea.

Seymour Have you seen where the path above us is leading?

2 Are you sure you don't have any liquor? You must have some liquor.

3 We have just landed here more dead and alive because of you! Several of us will die here and won't come any further. And you talk about making excursions into the land!

4 How many of you made it?

Hardsett We are so far forty-six left of three hundred, but several are near the end.

3 Then you will get to know how it feels! There's for all your trouble! You ran us aground and struck the rocks yourselves! What was the meaning of all that?

Price I tried in vain to persuade my captain to change his political course.

4 He is lucky enough to be dead! Or else we would have made mincemeat out of him!

Hardsett He is massacred into mincemeat already and spread out on all the sharpest rocks of Ireland.

Seymour But we have to help each other. We have masts and canvas and even some food left. Did you manage to save anything?

1 Look for yourself. We just lie here groaning until we turn into corpses.

4 We were all washed up even before we came here.

2 Do you really have no liquor? No one will help anyone here before we have liquor, for here nothing helps except liquor!

Hardsett (to Seymour) Some barrels of rum actually came ashore unharmed.

(The Frenchmen immediately wake up to some life.)

5 *(a groaning dying fellow who suddenly jumps up)* Did he mention rum?

1 Yes, he said rum.

2 We are saved!

Hardsett Hold it for a moment! The rum is ours and has to be rationed! Or else it will be finished at once when everyone drinks himself to death!

5 That's the only thing left for us to do.

Hardsett Did we bring any of the rum barrels?

Seymour I am afraid so.

Price (when the barrel of rum is carried in) Dear enemies, you are hereby all invited to a party of rum! I hope you will forbear with your foundering, as we already paid for it by foundering ourselves.

2 We forgive you anything if only we get liquor! The only decent thing Englishmen are good for is to offer liquor.

3 But when they do so they are good enough. Or else they are just good for nothing.

Seymour Well, Price, be steward! A ration of rum to one and all!
(The rum is poured and measured to each one in a suddenly festive mood, when torches appear at a distance.)

Hardsett I think by my soul that we are saved. Torches are on their way here.

Seymour At last!

5 We don't need to be saved. We have rum, don't we ?

Wrecker 1 They have occupied the hut.

2 Then we kill them first so we can look for wreckage afterwards.

3 Wait a moment. They seem to be many.

4 Yes, there were two ships. They could have populated the entire coast, and at least some hundred must have survived.

5 We'll have to steal on them and take them by surprise.

Price (wants to receive them) Welcome, our rescuers! We have many wounded here who need immediate care if they are to survive.

Wrecker 1 Shut up, you trespassing bandit and hand it all over what you have including the clothes!

Hardsett They are wreckers!

Wrecker 1 Yes, and you are importuning strangers whom we have the right to kill! Everything that has come ashore of the two ships belongs to us!

Frenchman 1 Parbleu! A good Frenchman does not sell his flesh without payment!
(pulls his sword)

Wrecker 2 They are armed!

3 Not all of them.

4 Shoot them!

5 Shoot them all down!

Frenchman 1 Frenchmen, your honour is at stake! This could be our last fight! Don't hesitate but attack at once!

2 They must not take our rum away from us!

Wrecker 3 They have rum!

1 Then we have something to fight for! Get them, boys! Drive the strangers into the sea from which they came!

Seymour Hold it! What kind of inhuman animals are you who attack wounded and dying men? Some fifty of us have gone through all the horrors of a shipwreck and seen most of our fellows perish in the waves, and then a morsel of survivors manage to get ashore and save the dying to get shelter under a roof and then seeing the rescue enter with torches, who then only prove themselves greedy inhuman murderers!

wrecker 1 Get that chatterbox down!

2 He has to learn some manners.

3 He will stop complaining of us when he is dead.

Frenchman 1 Frenchmen, attack!
(Chaotic fight, in which almost everyone fights everyone, many fall and die, when suddenly a blunderbuss is heard.)

frenchman 1 We have reinforcement!
Seymour Too late! (*falls bleeding*)
Hardsett Our only officer has fallen!
A woman's voice Put down all your guns at once!
Wrecker 1 It is our lady!

(*All wreckers immediately throw their guns, escaping in all directions and vanishing.*)

Lady (comes forth showing herself) What is going on here?

Hardsett It should be obvious, Madame. Your wild Irishmen have attacked a handful of shipwrecked and dying men seeking protection and had just put our only officer down when you arrived like a rescuing angel dispersing all the demons like bats by a surprising sunlight.

The lady's groom It was the wreckers again, madam.

Lady What ship has foundered here?

Hardsett The "Aspasia" from the far east, madam.

lady No! Not the "Aspasia"! And who is the officer?

Price You see him here, madam, badly wounded.

Groom Make way for our lady here!

(*She is let through and reaches Seymour.*)

lady Emily William Seymour! (*falls on her knees beside him*)

Seymour (badly wounded) Emily! My beloved Emily! I have come home in spite of all!

Emily Alas, you have come home, but your homecoming has been the most horrible imaginable!

Frenchman 1 He fought like a man, Madame. We can all testify to that, parbleu!

2 Don't swear in the presence of a fine lady.

1 And don't stink of rum so outrageously!

Hardsett We lost our captain and all our officers except him. He led us ashore and the entire rescuing operation until you came.

Frenchman 3 He would have saved more lives if the wreckers hadn't arrived and disturbed us in our fraternal bowls.

Seymour Emily, if I die, I am content. (*goes unconscious*)

Emily He is dead!

Price No, he only had a sword pierced through his body, but under your care he could most certainly recover wholly again.

Emily (determined) Get more people down from the castle immediately who can take care of all these wounded! We have to work around the clock! Nothing else is important!

Groom And the wreckers?

Emily Let those bastard stray dogs run a round until they devour each other by their greed. No one will ever wish to help *them*.

Hardsett Give me some more hands! There are some more wounded here!

(*All are activated, the unharmed give a hand in helping the wounded and carrying them out. Emily follows the litter of Seymour.*)

Price He will surely make it, madam. He is still young.

Emily I would rather give my own life than let him die.

M'Elvina (enters) Emily, my daughter, this is no place for you.

Emily Where would it be if not by my beloved?

M'Elvina Then hopefully you haven't seen all the corpses and dying wounded all around.

Emily What does it matter if the whole world dies if only my beloved may live?

Seymour (wakes a little) Mr Melvina! My former captain! Am I dreaming or waking up? But didn't I see Emily just now?

M'Elvina Yes, here she is. But it's important for your recovery not to get upset. Nothing is as harmful for anyone's health as to get upset.

Seymour I will get upset if I may not see her! Just tell me, how many men did we lose in the final fight?

M'Elvina We have found seven Frenchmen, fifteen Englishmen and eight mad Irishmen dead.

Seymour Mr Price and Mr Hardsett?

M'Elvina They are all right.

Seymour Did then none of these brave Frenchmen survive?

M'Elvina Yes, he is coming here.

frenchman 1 Monsieur M'Elvina, my former captain of smugglers, if I am not mistaken?

M'Elvina My friend Debriseau! What the devil are you doing here?

frenchman 1 Foundering, like everyone else, it seems.

M'Elvina I know what a good sailor and fighter you are. I will give you the command of a good ship if you only keep quiet about our common past as smugglers.

Frenchman 1 It was so long ago that I have completely forgotten all about it long ago.

M'Elvina (takes his hand) Then we are agreed as usual, colleague!

Seymour Give me some wine, so that I can bear with the pains and the joy of seeing Emily again.

M'Elvina You will have any amount of wine and joy, my dear friend, if you only get well first. That's the only important thing for all of us in life at the moment.

Emily Bring him up to the castle. I shall never leave his side.

M'Elvina Neither shall I, for there is more to this fortunate occasion than you both know.

Emily Do you know anything about us that we don't, grandfather?

M'Elvina I know a vicar here who knows everything about Seymour's origin.

Emily That sounds exciting!

M'Elvina But we shall not anticipate anything. First of all Willy must get well. Then we can start arranging all kinds of settlements.

(*Exeunt.*)

Scene 2. In the castle.

Rainscourt That was indeed a most horrendous catastrophe! Two ships and more than a thousand men lost! What luck that most of them were Frenchmen.

doctor I don't share your opinion. Eleven hundred men lost in two shipwrecks are eleven hundred men and two shipwrecks too much! And obviously we Englishmen were to blame for this mass murder, since it was our English captain who chased the Frenchman and his own ship to death against the rocks.

Rainscourt Yes, it was a terrible disaster. Good luck that at least one of the officers survived. How is he?

doctor He will probably manage, but he must not get upset. The crisis isn't over yet, and it must not be made worse. But it is a very remarkable case.

Rainscourt In what way?

doctor He has the property mark of the navy tattooed in his shoulder.

Rainscourt (all upset) What are you saying?

doctor Why do you get so upset? Certainly it is strange, and the navy seems to have branded him already as a child with this property mark, and it's a remarkable procedure of the navy, but why do *you* have to get so upset about it?

Rainscourt Pardon me. That a child could be treated so cruelly made me beside myself.

doctor It was not cruelty on the part of the navy. It was his father who arranged it. The father was so warmly devoted to the navy that he testified his son to the navy when he died.

Rainscourt I see. And you can be assured that he and all the others of the rescued ones that lie here in the castle are in perfectly safe hands.

doctor I am assured of that. Your daughter is even assisting.

Rainscourt Yes. And my own old nanny will make sure that the officer gets everything that he needs.

doctor All he needs is his regular medicine. Nothing else.

Rainscourt Yes, precisely.

doctor I had better leave for a check up of the situation. See you later, Mr Rainscourt. (*leaves*)

Rainscourt It's him! And he is alive! And he has been alive all these years! He has never gone down! And a storm and a shipwreck has brought him home to his grandfather the admiral's, to my own house! When his identity becomes known both I and my daughter will be disinherited and expelled! It must not happen! Anything but not that! So I have to commit a crime. But there is an old law that says, that everything thrown up by the sea rightly belongs to the proprietor of the shore. Wreckers have always been made right even when when they killed surviving shipwrecked to take their things. The storm cast the admiral's grandson up on my beach. So I have the right to decide over his life. I will leave it to my old nanny to do it.

Scene 3. Seymour's sickroom in the castle.

doctor (enters) How is our patient today?

Nanny He is slowly improving, but he worries too much.

doctor About what?

nanny He imagines that his beloved will reject him only because his father was executed as a mutineer.

doctor What kind of nonsense is that? It's all right, sister. I'll take over. You may go. *(She leaves.)* How are you, Willy?

Seymour Alas, I found my Emily again, but what will she say when she learns that my father was a mutineer and was hanged for it? Here she lives in the loveliest castle in the world with no end to her fortunes, while I am just the son of a mutineer, in bondage of the navy forever.

doctor Mr M'Elvina, I think it is your turn now.

M'Elvina (comes forth) I just wanted to wait for your admission. But shouldn't we wait for the vicar?

doctor He is already here. He should come with Emily. *(the door opens, and the vicar enters with Emily. She is radiant with happiness.)*

Seymour Emily! Why do you look so happy?

Emily I just learned everything.

Seymour What is everything?

Emily Grandfather, tell him.

M'Elvina Leave it to the vicar.

doctor I think that is appropriate. But take it easy with him, vicar.

vicar It will be my pleasure. *(sits down with Seymour)* You are not the one you think, my boy. You and Emily are related.

Seymour Related? In what way?

Vicar Not like you think. You are not closely related. She is the daughter of your grandfather's nephew.

Seymour Are we cousins then?

Vicar Yes, second cousins.

Seymour That's why we are so like each other. That's why we understand each other so well. But tell me more.

Vicar I knew your grandfather. He was a difficult misanthrope. He had both his sons turning against him. The older one fell in India. Just to detach himself from his father, the other one joined the navy as a sailor under a false name. That was your father.

Seymour What was his name?

Vicar Your name is neither Seymour nor Peters, which was your father's assumed name, but de Courcy.

Seymour Was my grandfather the admiral de Courcy?

Vicar Yes. He owned this castle and died here in my presence after having received the news of his last son's, your father's death. But your father wrote a letter

to him and told about you. Therefore your grandfather had time to testate all his property to you before he died.

Seymour Go on.

Vicar We searched for you but found that your ship had gone down. You were then assumed dead, and your grandfather's nephew Mr Rainscourt, who is Emily's father, then inherited the property. But one day I met captain M'Elvina here, who told me you had assisted him on his contraband ship.

Seymour Yes, he was the one who fished me out of the sea. But I thought captain M'Elvina was Emily's guardian.

Vicar So he is, for his daughter, Emily's mother, was married to Mr Rainscourt, your father's cousin.

Seymour But my father was a mutineer and was hanged as a criminal. Weren't then all his rights of inheritance forfeited?

M'Elvina He died innocent, my boy. Everyone who knew him have testified to that from the day he died and up to this day. He was a hero who took upon himself the burden of the crimes of others.

Seymour (turning to Emily) Emily, can you forgive me my father?

Emily His honour has been saved by you. But do you still want me now when you know that I and my father are as poor as church rats?

Seymour But if we marry all that is mine will become yours. It will be the same thing but the other way around. The result will be the same.

Emily And that's what you want?

Seymour If I want it!

Emily Then my happiness is consummate. *(throws herself in his arms)*

doctor The patient must not be exposed to strong emotions. Spare him, Emily, until you marry. Then you will have time enough to enjoy all your happiness.

Emily What joy this will bring my father!

M'Elvina Your grandfather enjoys it already.

Vicar We had better now leave the patient alone, so that he may sleep on it to recover thoroughly. *(enter nanny)*

doctor You come very conveniently, sister. Give him now his medicine so that he may sleep soundly.

nanny With pleasure, doctor.

Seymour Alas, I never knew such happiness could be possible!

doctor Let it sink calmly down to stay on in your breast. When you wake up tomorrow you will already be a new and wholesome man. Give him his potion, sister.

Nanny Here, my lad, drink and be gay, and you will be merrier every day.

Seymour Thank you, sister. *(drinks)*

It burns in my throat. Can I have some water.

doctor It should not burn in his throat. It's probably his fever. Give him some water, sister.

nanny (gives him water to drink) Drink, my boy, live and enjoy.

Seymour (drinks) Thank you. But leave the water jug here, in case I would wake up and be thirsty.

doctor Do as he says, sister. Let him sleep now. He needs rest. We all need rest after this most turbulent day.

(gets them all with him out)

Seymour Alas, can you die of sudden felicity? That's how it feels, and now would be the right moment to die, to leave everything behind, to leave all sufferings and ordeals like a cocoon behind and just fly away on the golden wings of infinity beyond all space and time and amount to the life of eternity and everything that is no more of yourself! But I just want to live. I want to explode of the power of life and just come out and break all fetters of mortality to never again have to consider the petty inconveniences of mundanity! But may I live through it, if only my poor body will hold against all these astronomical crampings of the soul!

(lies back in bed.)

Ackt V scene 1. Rainscourt's room.
He is sitting in dark thoughts brooding.

Rainscourt (sighs) No, there is no other way out. He has to die. I can't give up everything I have been living for. *(a knock)* Come in!

nanny (enters) You wished to see me, Sir?

Rainscourt Dear nanny, only you can help me. And you have got to help me.

Nanny How?

Rainscourt Nora, do you know that the castle no longer is mine?

Nora But why not? How come?

Rainscourt Because I am a beggar who is going to prison!

Nora Heavens above! You must be joking?

Rainscourt It is no joke. We are all lost. Even you will be discharged after fifty years of service.

Nora No, that cannot be done!

Rainscourt Yes, Nora. All this will be done within a few days.

Nora But who could do such a thing? You are scaring me out of my wits, Sir!

Rainscourt It's that young officer up there who is at the end of his tether. It will be our reward for having saving his life.

Nora No! It is impossible! Being so young and handsome!

Rainscourt He will take over the entire property and drive us out of here.

Nora Heaven forbid!

Rainscourt Unless he dies, Nora.

Nora Yes, he is beset by a hard fever. He could certainly die.

Rainscourt But he could also survive. And then we would all be homeless and destitute.

Nora Yes, being so young he could well manage the hardest crisis and survive.

Rainscourt You have the decision in your hand, Nora. Do you understand me?

Nora (terrified) But what do you mean, Sir?

Rainscourt Do you love your mistress?

Nora Of course! There is no better girl in the world!

Rainscourt And would you see her reduced to beggary with me?

Nora No, I certainly would not, Sir!

Rainscourt Would you then not like to stop it?

Nora But how could I, a poor old maid, be able to decide such a matter?

Rainscourt It is very simple. How do you kill rats?

Nora With arsenic.

Rainscourt Yes, that's a splendid poison that leaves no trace. You do give the young officer his medicine?

Nora Yes, every four hours.

Rainscourt Bring that medicine to me next time you will administer it, and bring some arsenic with it.

Nora But what will you do, Sir?

Rainscourt He has to die, Nora! We have no choice! You don't have to know anything! You don't have to see anything! Just bring the medicine to me and administer it! As usual!

Nora But I couldn't do such a thing!

Rainscourt You have to, Nora! I beseech you! I order you!

Nora But wouldn't it be better to just marry the young gentleman to your daughter? He wouldn't throw out his own father-in-law, and there is plenty of room here!

Rainscourt Do you think he will want my daughter when he learns that he owns everything and she is worthless? No, Nora, he would discard her directly.

Nora But then try at least!

Rainscourt Impossible. I don't believe in it.

Nora But I can't help you.

Rainscourt You have to! It's our only possibility!

Nora The priest would never forgive me.

Rainscourt But you are Catholics. It's his duty to forgive. Come on, Nora.

Nora But I would never be able to go through with such a thing.

Rainscourt (takes a pistol and sets it against his head) Nora, if you don't do it, you force me to take my life!

Nora Take it easy, Sir! Let's consider the matter! This all comes so suddenly! And you must not shoot yourself either! Just think of how the blood would splirt on all the walls!

Rainscourt You've got to help me!

Nora Yes, I guess I'll have to help you then, but I will not be accountable for the consequences.

Rainscourt I take full responsibility for the consequences. (*calmer and lower*) But there will be no consequences, for no one will ever notice it. He hovers between life and death. The cause of death will be obvious. Fever!

Nora Yes, yes, Sir, I will do it then, but don't blame me afterwards!
(*retires in haste*)

Rainscourt She will do it. I know it. She can't deny me this. Everyone thinks first of himself. Anyone may die as long as you survive yourself. That's the highest law of egoism, which is above all other laws. The case is settled. I save both my daughter and myself, while only a stupid naval officer passes on, who made the mistake of allowing himself to be rescued ashore from the sea! A heroic death at sea would have been better for all of us, you damned survivor!

Scene 2. The patient's room.

(*The curtains are drawn. Seymour lies rattling in bed, and Nora is on her knees on the floor with her hands clasped in desperate prayer, as the doctor enters.*)

doctor What is the matter? What has happened? (*examines the patient quickly*) The patient is worse. (*to Nora*) But pull yourself together, woman! He is after all not dead! (*pulls the curtains*)

Emily (*enters*) What's the matter with Nora? What has happened, doctor? He is not dead, is he?

doctor No, he is not dead, but he is worse, and the fever is higher.

Nora It is my fault!

doctor (*suspects something*) What have you done, sister?

Nora He drank it all!

doctor Yes, he always did, and that's what he should do. So what?

Nora He is dying, and it is my fault!

Emily It must not be true. We must not lose him now, when we are about to marry.

Nora What are you saying, Miss? Would you have been married?

Emily Yes. It was all settled. Why?

Nora Woe is me! I am the one who has murdered him! (*gets into further hysterics*)

doctor She is deranged.

Emily Why do you say you have murdered him, Nora?

Nora Because I did it! I thought it would benefit you and the lord! I learned that you would be homeless if not! And then you tell me you would have married! My God, what have I done!!

doctor What have you done, Nora?

Nora I gave him rat poison! The whole glass! And he drank it! Every drop! Nothing is left! He is dead! And I am the murderess!

doctor This isn't right. You can't have done such a thing. (*enter Rainscourt.*)

Rainscourt How is the patient? (*Nora screams out loud as she sees him.*)

Nora My lord! How could you ask me to do such a thing! I did ask you to let them marry first!

doctor Nora says she has given the patient poison. Do you know anything about this, Mr Rainscourt?

Rainscourt Nora has gone mad. How is the patient?

doctor He is worse, considerably worse.

Nora You asked me to do it, Sir! And now our young lady says they would have got married!

Rainscourt Emily! What is this? (*sees Emily's tears*) Is it true?

Emily I had intended to tell you about it today, when Willy would have been better. But now everything has been totally twisted awry...

Rainscourt Emily, in heaven's name, do you mean that you and that officer had a relationship with each other and have discussed marrying?

Emily It was settled, father. We decided about it yesterday.

Rainscourt And did you, Nora, serve him the glass?

Nora Yes, he drank it all, and now it's empty! We have killed him, Sir! We have killed your own daughter's becoming husband! And you persuaded me to do it because you did not know they were engaged! You thought you would be turned out as a beggar! You said it yourself!

doctor Mr Rainscourt, if this is true...

Rainscourt ...there is no hope for me. Yes, my daughter, I asked Nora to poison him to save your future. I never thought he would fancy a girl without means. I was mistaken. I have committed my life's first and most fatal mistake. There is no excuse for it. It cannot be forgiven. It's the shipwreck of my own making. (*takes forth his pistol and aims it at his front*)

doctor No!
(Rainscourt shoots himself. The blood splatters on the walls.)

Nora What did I tell you! He did it anyway! Now I will have to wash the floor and the walls for the rest of my life! Alas, Sir, you could never listen! You only thought of yourself all the time!

Emily O father! (*sinks down by her father's dead body*)

M'Elvina (*enters with the vicar*) We heard a shot.

doctor It's only Mr Rainscourt who has shot himself.

vicar Shot himself? But why?

M'Elvina Was happiness too much for him, when he heard his daughter would become the bride of the heir?

doctor Emily, don't waste your tears on the dead one. Think of the living instead. – Gentlemen, Mr Rainscourt has in deluded self-interest tried to murder this patient.

M'Elvina Did he then go completely out of his mind?

doctor No, he just deceived himself. But his self-deception is over now. Not even you, vicar, can save his soul any more.

Vicar We could always pray for his soul.

doctor Rather pray for the living one, for he needs it more.

M'Elvina Can he make it?

Emily But look, he is coming to! He is awakening!

Seymour (*wakes up*) I had a terrible nightmare. But how strange you all look! What is the matter with you? And what is Nora doing on the floor?

Nora (*gets up*) He is alive!

doctor How does it feel, Seymour?

Seymour My throat is dry.

doctor Have some water.

Emily Willy, say that you are alive!

Seymour I am alive.

Emily And that you are going to live!

Seymour I am going to live, if I can.

doctor Didn't you take your nurse's medicine?

Seymour No, I spilled it out on the floor.

doctor That explains it. He grew worse when he didn't take his medicine! Congratulations, my dear patient! You will manage!

Seymour What do you mean?

M'Elvina Everything is well, my boy. Only Mr Rainscourt is shot.

Seymour Shot?

M'Elvina Yes, he shot himself in his head and died instantly.

doctor Nora, get this corpse out of here and start scrubbing ast once. You haven't killed anyone.

Nora Thanks to the patient, who didn't take his medicine! (*gets started*)

Emily (*sits down by him*) Willy, I am so happy.

Seymour Don't thank me. Thank the sea who gave me back and straight into your arms.

Emily I guess the sea knew what it was doing.

Seymour The sea always knows what it is doing. (*indicates Rainscourt*) It's only we human beings who never know what we are doing.

vicar My children, your union will be the happiest I will be able to form during my entire life. A funeral tries to cast a shadow over your wedding, but that funeral is to your wedding like a glass of water to the sea.

M'Elvina I hope we will be able to sail together again some day, Willy.

Willy Yes, if my wife may follow.

M'Elvina Of course, my boy.

Vicar Thus ends this tragedy in a most remarkable comedy.

Emily As it ought to, if only a woman is allowed in it.

Seymour That's why women always should be allowed. And therefore all figureheads are female, and most ships carry ladies' names.

Emily I thank you for the honour.

doctor My good people, we have to think of the patient and not anticipate his recovery. I therefore suggest that we break it off here to then stage the wedding aside from all scenes.

Vicar That is reasonable.

Emily (sits with Willy) I stay with you.

Seymour Yes, please do.

doctor We had better leave. This patient will recover best on his own.

*(Doctor, M'Elvina and the vicar leave,
while Emily and Willy for the first time meet in a kiss.)*

Curtain.

Palermo 29.9.2001,
translated in September 2021.