

THE QUEEN'S EXILES

by Barbara Kyle

Chapter 1

The Prisoner

Fenella Doorn watched the unfamiliar wreck of a ship ghosting into her bay. Crippled by cannon fire, she thought. What else could do such damage? The foremast was blown away, as well as half the mainmast where a jury rig clung to the jagged stump, and shot holes tattered the sails on the mizzen. And yet, to Fenella's experienced eye the vessel had an air of defiance. Demi-cannons hulked in the shadowed gun ports. This ship was a fighter, battered but not beaten. With fight still in her, was she friend or foe?

Or *faux* friend. Fenella kept her anxious gaze fixed on the vessel as she started down the footpath from the cliff overlooking La Coupée Bay. Old Johan followed her, scuffling to keep up. The English Isle of Sark was the smallest of the four Channel Islands, just a mile long and scarcely a mile and a half wide, so from the cliff top Fenella could see much of the surrounding sea. The few hundred farmers and fishermen who called the island home were never far from the sound of waves smacking the forty miles of rocky coast. Fenella, born a Scot and bred from generations of fishermen, was as familiar with the pulse of the sea as with her own heartbeat.

"She flies no colors," Johan said, suspicion in his voice. Sheep grazing on the cliff top behind them bleated as though voicing the old Dutchman's unease.

"She likely struck her colors in the skirmish," Fenella said.

"Surrendered? Then why wasn't she taken as a prize?"

“Maybe she was, and the prize crew boarded her.” Whoever was in command had done a fine piece of seamanship, Fenella thought. The skirmish must have happened far out in the Channel, since no report of it had reached Sark, yet this captain had brought in his ship with one mast shot away and a single latten sail on the jury-rigged mainmast. Crew now labored at lowering the sails on main and mizzen, the figures too small at this distance to make out features.

“Or maybe she’s Spanish,” Johan warned. “Spaniards are cunning. Have a care, Nella.”

“That’s no Spaniard. Her beak’s too long. English, maybe.” She had decided the ship was not a danger, at least not to the people of Sark. On the contrary, the crew might need victualing, and Sark’s crofters would be glad to sell them mutton and the first spring lambs. Fenella saw silver for herself, too. The monotonous clanging aboard, faint at this distance, told her that crew were working the pumps non-stop, which meant there was at least one hole below the waterline. That promised employment for Fenella’s shore crew to careen the hull on the beach to make repairs.

Still, something about the crippled vessel unnerved her, as though it had come hunting her personally. She gave a thought to the flintlock pistol that lay in her petticoat pocket beneath her skirt. A foolish fear, she told herself, especially on such a peaceful, sunny day. Her skirt brushed the flowering gorse, releasing its faint perfume into the warm air. The cliff paths all around were brocaded with primroses, dog violets, and yellow celandines. Springtime always lifted Fenella’s heart. Yet she had seen death strike often enough amid sunshine and flowers.

She and Johan were almost at the beach, and the cliff path through the gorse was now wide enough for them to walk abreast. Knowing they could be seen from the ship, Fenella took comfort in having the old man at her side. Absurd, she knew, since he was sixty, twice her age, and had just one arm. The other had been hacked off above the elbow when they’d fled the

Spanish troops' onslaught of the Netherlands, troops who had butchered their village and made Fenella a widow at twenty-five. Johan, her father-in-law, was as stubborn as her late husband, and she knew he would fight for her to the death. She loved the old man for that, but his devotion was also troubling, disabled and frail as he was. She worried about him, for he was getting frailer every day, the cough that had infected his lungs at Christmas persisting despite the spring warmth. Still, she did not slacken her brisk pace on the path as it wound down to the beach. Johan would not want her to.

“More likely she’s Dutch,” she said to reassure herself and him, “crawling in from a scrape with a Spanish galleon or two.” The Dutch hated the brutal Spanish occupation of their country and many had taken to the sea to attack Spanish shipping in the Channel. They had organized themselves into a ragged fleet of a few dozen vessels, and with rebel pride called themselves the Sea Beggars. Fenella had refitted several of their vessels shot up by Spanish guns. “The fools never learn,” she muttered. She belittled the rebels to mask her admiration for them. But realism outweighed her admiration. Imperial Spain, the most powerful nation on earth, was invincible. The Sea Beggars were minnows attacking sharks.

“That’s not Dutch rigging,” Johan said. They were crossing the beach, heading for their rowboat, and he raised a hand to shade his rheumy eyes as he studied the ship. “Now that I see her abeam, I think your first guess was right, Nella. She’s English.”

Nothing unusual about English shipping around Sark. The island lay eighty miles off England’s south coast, closer to France, and English trade with France, the Netherlands, Spain and Portugal was constant. But this ship had been maimed in a battle and England wasn’t at war. “An English privateer?” Fenella wondered aloud.

She heard a clank at the bow and saw a dull metallic gleam as the vessel's anchor plunged with a splash. Cable roared through the hawsehole. Fenella knew the anchor would hold well on Le Coupée's sandy bottom. This ship was here to stay.

She and Johan reached the rowboat and lifted it to the water's edge, wavelets sloshing at their feet. They climbed aboard and she took the oars. He sat in the stern, squinting at the ship. "God's blood," he said with sudden eagerness, "could it be the baron?"

She scoffed as she rowed. "That fable again, Johan?" He had spoken before about an English privateer, a nobleman who was hitting the Spaniards hard. It was common knowledge that privateers and pirates of many nations prowled the Channel looting their prey – if they weren't sunk first. But a baron? To Fenella it made no sense. Why would an English lord put himself at such risk?

"It's him, I can feel it." Johan's milky eyes shone with excitement. Then, indignation. "And look what the Spanish devils have done to him. Shot him to pieces, damn their hides! I've got to get home, Nella. I've got to go and do my part!"

"You'll do no such thing." He had been harping at her for months to take him back to the Netherlands so he could join the resistance movement. What nonsense. As if a one-armed old man with weak lungs could be of any use. "Might as well spit at a hurricane."

"I beg you, take me back so I can do what I can. Before I breathe my last."

"Enough," she snapped. "I've told you, we'll go nowhere near that madness." Exasperation made her row with such vigor she felt sweat trickle down her back. "You need to look in a mirror, Johan. Fighting's for the young."

"If you won't take me, just give me a boat that I can helm and one brawny crewman. That's all I ask."

“A boat is something I cannot spare. And with one arm you’ll find the swim to Amsterdam a long one.” Over her shoulder she glimpsed a scatter of men at the ship’s rail watching them approach. “Now, keep your nonsense to yourself in front of these visitors and let’s earn some coin. Go on, hail them.”

Johan shot her a look that said, *You and I are not done yet*. But he squared his shoulders to do business. Cupping his hand to his mouth he called up to the men at the rail, “Are you English?”

“English, aye,” a voice called down. “We’re the *Elizabeth*. Come aboard, if you will.”

Rowing closer, Fenella felt the breeze die in the lee of the tall hull, like a wooden wall, and its shadow engulfed her. Again, she sensed the ship’s latent power, like a harpooned whale, weak but still able to crush a boat with a thrash of its tail. But harpooned it was. She saw three jagged shot holes in the hull’s planking, two forward and one aft, all plugged with oakum-stiffened canvas that dripped water. The gun port sills were stained black with gunpowder, and the acrid smell of it clung to the planks. Fenella skulled the rowboat around and came alongside, and Johan made fast the bow line to the ship’s chain plate. The crew tumbled a rope ladder over the side.

Fenella let Johan climb up first, a slow process with his single hand and fluttering empty sleeve. She followed. It was their usual device with strangers. Visitors assumed that the man was in charge and Fenella a mere shore woman. It allowed her a few moments to observe them unwatched before introducing herself as the owner of a salvage enterprise, to their inevitable surprise.

Today, as it turned out, she was mistaken.

“Mistress Doorn?” a man asked, striding toward her. So, they knew of her. He was stocky, bull-necked, and black-bearded, his thick lips chapped by the sun. Gun grease streaked his plain gray breeches and doublet, and a grimy bandage wrapped his head, its bloodstain dried to a nut brown.

“Aye, sir,” she answered.

“I must say, I expected—” He stopped, looking flustered.

“A hag instead of a beauty?” Johan slyly suggested.

The Englishman collected himself. “Someone older.”

Fenella noted the dozen or so crewmen nearby, dirty, barefoot, bleary-eyed. They carried on at their labor, some coiling lines, some snubbing the anchor cable even as they stole glances at her. They had the look of exhausted men relieved to have made safe harbor. No wonder - she had never seen a deck so damaged. The stump of the lost foremast looked like an amputated limb. In the base of the mainmast a thirty-three-pounder cannon ball was embedded in the oak. Shot holes peppered the roughly furled sails on the mizzen mast. The bowsprit was blown away, as was the taffrail, and shot had ploughed splintered channels in the deck planks. Dried blood stained the deck in red-brown splotches. The scene below deck must be as bad or worse, since the clang of the pumps never ceased. The sweating men at the pumps would be sloshing in knee-high bilge water. The deck itself vibrated underfoot with every clang. She could hear men moaning below, too. The wounded, no doubt.

“I’m Curry,” the bearded man said. “James Curry. My gunner’s mate was on a Portsmouth carrack you re-fitted last year, Mistress Doorn, says you’re the best. As you see, we’ve suffered severe hits. Can you effect repairs?”

“I can, sir.” This captain seemed common enough, she thought. *Not Johan's baron privateer*. It brought out the playful devil in her and she asked Curry, with a taunting glance at Johan, “Just one question, sir. Do I address you as *your lordship?*”

Curry looked baffled. Johan winced. Fenella had to smile. But she tempered her mockery as she considered the fine seamanship that had brought the *Elizabeth* into her bay. “Forgive my manners, Master Curry, you are most welcome. And never fear, my shore crew will soon have you re-fitted to fight another day.”

“Was it Spaniards?” Johan asked Curry with grim eagerness.

“Aye, a monster three-decker. But they got the worst of it.”

Fenella didn't see how. This ship was a hulk.

Curry grinned. “We sank her.”

“Curry, get below.” The gruff voice behind Fenella made her turn. A man, tall and lean, was coming up the companionway from below deck. His clean-shaven face was smudged with grime like the other men's and his voice was hoarse with fatigue, but his movements were brisk, charged with anger. “Waites is dead. Bring up the damned prisoners. They'll pay for this.”

“Aye aye, sir.” Curry knuckled his forehead in salute and hastened down the companionway.

“You there, boatswain,” the tall man went on, “go with Curry and tell the—” Seeing the visitors, he came to a sudden halt.

Fenella's heart seemed to stop. Those dark eyes staring at her. That face sun-burnished beneath the dirt. Sir Adam Thornleigh! She had never thought she would see him again, not in this life. And not in the next one either, for smiling angels would surely welcome him into heaven while she'd likely be kicking at flames in the devil's place.

“Fenella?” he said in amazement. “I’m right, aren’t I? Fenella” – he struggled to remember her last name – “Craig?” A faint smile broke over his face. “I’m sorry, perhaps you don’t remember me, it’s been so long. Edinburgh?” he prompted to jog her memory. “Your fishing boat?”

As if she would ever forget! Their desperate flight to Amsterdam. His kindness to her on the voyage. She had been struck with love for him like a bolt from the blue, and every day since then she’d secretly held him in her heart. “Of course,” she managed. “Sir Adam.”

“How many years has it been, I wonder?”

“Eleven,” she blurted. Then laughed, too thrilled to feel foolish. “You are well met, sir,” she said with all the warmth she felt.

He grinned. “So, you’re the Siren who lured us poor sailors to your shore. Well met, indeed, Fenella.”

He looked so pleased it brought joy bubbling up in her, making her laugh again. To think that she had fancied his ship might bring evil! But her happy bubble shattered as she thought of her appearance, disheveled as a fishwife. The damp clumps of blond hair that had escaped her mob cap. The sweat darkening the underarms of her coarse linen sleeves. Her cheek . . .

He saw it, of course. His eyes locked on the scar. She turned her face away, pretending a consulting look at Johan. Beauty, ha. Men admiring her body were content to ignore her ravaged cheek, but she always caught them stealing looks at the scar left by a smashed bottle, compliments of the bastard she had lived with, the Edinburgh garrison commander. The scar had hardened into a white ridge that branched across her cheekbone. After eleven years she rarely gave it a thought, her days too busy for mirrors. But Sir Adam’s eyes on it made her cheek burn as if the flesh were gashed anew.

Johan piped up, "One question, sir, if I may. Do we address you as *your lordship*?"

Thornleigh blinked at him. "What?"

"By the fine sound of you you're an English lord, and it seems you've sunk a Spanish man-of-war." With a smug glance at Fenella he went on, "Are you the hell-bent English baron we've heard tell of?"

The brazen interrogation seemed to amuse Thornleigh. "I can't speak to what you've heard, but yes, I'm Baron Thornleigh." He looked at Fenella, jerking his thumb at the old man, "Who's this?"

She could hardly find her voice, appalled at Johan's impertinence, and in awe of Thornleigh's exalted new status. New to her, at least. "He's Johan Doorn . . . my lord," she managed. "My master shipwright."

"Good, I'll need you, Doorn." Thornleigh was suddenly all business. "Would you confer with my carpenter? You'll find him in the fo'castle." A nod of agreement from Fenella sent Johan shuffling toward the forecabin. Thornleigh turned to her. "I have wounded men. Is there a doctor ashore?"

"Tomorrow, from Guernsey." She explained, "He comes the last Wednesday of every month." She was glad to turn to business to quell her somersaulting emotions. "How many?"

"Fourteen."

"There's room in the church of St. Magloire. And crofters' wives to nurse them."

"Good." He turned to his watching crew. "Rayner, tell Bates to ready the wounded and get them up on deck." The scrawny crewman dashed to the companionway and clambered down it.

“By the sound of your pumps,” Fenella said, “you’ll be wanting to careen right soon, my lord. We’ll tow you ’round the headland to the boatyard bay. Good beach, and I can supply all you need there. Stout oak masts, cured planking, plenty of pine pitch. I have carpenters, too, if you lack them, and a sail maker if you’re needing canvas.”

He nodded but was clearly distracted, his eyes fixed on the companionway that led below. The scowl she had seen when he first came on deck darkened his face again. Curry was leading up several men, and a crewman below bellowed at them to keep moving. Five emerged, stumbling one by one out onto the deck, squinting at the sudden bright sunshine. From the look of them – filthy, barefoot, in ragged homespun shirts and patched breeches – they were common seamen. Spanish prisoners. She smelled their sweat and fear. The gashed forehead of one oozed blood, and all were bruised and scraped. She imagined them plunging into the sea as their ship sank, flailing in the water in terror since few seamen could swim, and then, when the *Elizabeth* picked them up, scrambling up the chain plates for dear life, the heaving sea bashing them against the hull, cutting heads, arms, shins.

Another prisoner followed, far better dressed, though his clothes were unkempt: a black satin doublet frothed with gold lace, and black satin breeches embroidered with silver and gold. He wore a jewelled hat of green velvet. A Spanish noble. A Don. He stalked a few paces away from the seamen and arrogantly turned his back, proclaiming his status. Fenella felt a shiver. She hated Spaniards.

“Bring ropes,” Thornleigh told Curry. “We’ll hang them in pairs from the mizzen.”

The crew sprang to life with savage eagerness, swarming the prisoners. Fenella’s breath caught in her throat. Had she heard aright? *Hang them?*

“Sawyer, lower the longboat,” Thornleigh ordered a crewman. “Prepare to ferry the wounded.”

The two crew parties set to their tasks. Curry and his men marched the prisoners to the mizzen mast while Sawyer’s party set to swinging out the longboat from its boom.

“Move to the mizzen,” Curry barked, “or you’ll taste Kate Cudgel again.” The seamen didn’t know the English words but they understood Curry’s raised club. So did Fenella. Their bloody wounds had not come from scrambling aboard in a heaving sea. Thornleigh’s men had beaten them. She watched in horrified amazement as Curry’s gang hurled two ropes aloft along the mizzen spars. A hangman’s noose dangled from the end of each rope.

She spun around to Thornleigh. He was striding across to the port side crew party. She hurried after him. “Sir Adam . . . I mean, my lord—“

“Plain Adam to you, always,” he said with a gentle smile. “You saved my life.”

It sank the words she’d been about to say. Yes, she had saved him all those years ago, springing him from the garrison jail, but he had been so weak from captivity she thought he’d scarcely noticed her on their flight across to Amsterdam. Now, his look at her said he knew he was in her debt, and it thrilled her.

The terrified jabbering of the Spanish seamen brought her back to the here and now. They were huddled together, quaking in fear, surrounded by the leering crew. She could not see the Don past the crowd of crew shouting their blood-lust, but she imagined that even the nobleman now was quaking. “Surely you won’t hang them?” she asked Thornleigh.

“Why not?” he snapped.

Her words stalled at his glare. She found her voice. “Send them to the galleys, that’s punishment enough. And you can ransom the Don.”

“I don’t need silver.”

“But, hang them in cold blood? It’s . . . plain murder.”

“*They’re* the murderers. Attacked my men guarding them. Slit their throats, four good mariners. And a boy, Tim Waites, ten years old. He died in my arms five minutes ago.” He turned to Sawyer’s men and shouted, “Belay those lines!” They hastened to obey and the longboat splashed into the water, ready to take the wounded. They heaved over the rope ladder.

A wail came from one of the Spanish seamen. He was frantically crossing himself, praying, as a crewman tugged the noose close. Laughing, the crew mimicked the prisoner's action like monkeys.

“Don’t, my lord,” Fenella said. “This is raw vengeance.”

“Which is mine, sayeth the Lord.” The look in his eyes was cruel, bitter. This was not the Adam Thornleigh she remembered. What had happened to harden him so?

“My lord, they’re set to swing,” Curry called to him.

“Get on with it then,” Thornleigh growled.

“No!” Fenella said. “Stop right there, Master Curry!”

They all looked at her in surprise. Thornleigh scowled. “What the devil—“

“The devil’s behind what’s afoot here, sure enough. I will not have it. This is my bay. You are my guests. Hang those men, and I promise you there will be no respite for your wounded, no refitting of your ship, no victualing. You will not set foot on Sark.”

He glowered at her. “Who do you think you are, woman?”

His fury unnerved her. She hardly knew how the steel had come into her to cross him. But she had not escaped war in Scotland and slaughter in the Netherlands, all those mangled

bodies that haunted her, to tolerate gross brutality now. Not here. She had come to Sark for peace.

“The Seigneur of Sark gives me authority over this bay,” she said, “and I have twenty-three armed men ashore who’ll do as I order them. Let these poor wretches loose, I say, or mayhap in the night you’ll find your anchor cable cut. You’ll drift out to sea and your men at the pumps will finally drop, and your ship will sink.”

They stared at each other. Fenella didn’t blink, but her mouth was dry as canvas. She said quietly, her heart in her throat, “Stay, my lord. Set them loose. Stay, and make your ship whole.”

A faint light came into his eyes. Shame? Amusement? Tedium? Whatever it was, he turned and gave a brusque new order, “Curry, pull down those ropes. No one hangs today.”

There was a groan of disappointment from the crew. They didn’t immediately obey, anger in their faces. The way they glowered at Fenella sent a spike of fear through her. She thought of the pistol that lay in her petticoat pocket. Idiotic, of course. Her against all of them.

She had to act quickly. She called to the Spanish seamen who were watching, stupefied. “Come on, you poor silly dagos, take the longboat!” She beckoned them over to the waiting boat that nudged the hull. “Come!”

They gaped at her. At Curry. At the English lord who was captain. Thornleigh's eyes stayed fixed on Fenella. Then he bellowed to the prisoners, “You heard her! Move, you damned sea slugs! You’re free!”

One more stunned moment, and then the prisoners rushed across the deck. Thornleigh stood stony-faced, giving no order to halt them as they raced to the boat. Curry and his men watched in amazed silence.

The seamen were clambering over the rail when a man crashed against Fenella's back. She staggered to keep her footing. It was the Don, racing after the seamen for the boat. He grappled a prisoner in his way and threw him aside, sending him sprawling. The action knocked off the Don's velvet hat. Another prisoner was in his way, starting to climb down the rope ladder. The Don spun around, looking for a weapon. Fenella saw his craggy face. Green eyes. Gray-blond hair like bristles. A shock went through her. Five years ago that hair had been bright blond.

The Don snatched a belaying pin and turned to the prisoner climbing down and bashed his skull. Blood drops flew and the victim pitched overboard with a scream.

The coldness of a grave settled over Fenella. She was not aware of the time it took to raise her skirt and draw out the pistol, load the finger-sized powder charge, then the ball. She was swift from practice, and a calm corner of her brain knew it took less than a minute. The Don had tossed his weapon, the belaying pin, clattering on the deck. He had thrown one leg over the rail.

Fenella cocked the trigger. "Don Alfonso!" she called.

He looked up astride the rail.

She aimed straight at the green eyes and fired.