

The winter of 1794-5 was bloody cold. Damme but it was! 'Tis true that I spent it all wrapped up snug in London, largely thanks to their Lordships of the Admiralty expecting to me to wait upon their good graces day after day, but still the snow was thick in the streets, and even old Father Thames froze solid. And the fog - damp as a freshly swabbed deck and cold as ice almost every night! Why, even allowing for the new oil lamps, anyone brave, or foolhardy, enough to venture abroad after sunset was obliged to carry a glim just to see their way clear. It was a long winter too. The cold and frost continued through to spring, with the thermometer rarely above twenty below zero of Fahrenheit, causing extreme distress to all, and especially to the poor and labouring classes who had already been hit by the catastrophic effect of the previous year's devilish bad harvest. Coal, when it could be obtained, fetched more than three guineas a chaldron and water-pipes were all frozen, so that many perished that year through a fearful lack of fuel and water.

For sure, Billy Pitt and his cronies did little to help. The unshakeable belief of a Tory Government wildly out of touch with the common people was that a strong economy was ever the key to victory in the war old England was waging, in concert with the Austrians, Prussians, Sardinians, Dutch, and even the despicable Dons, against the newly emergent French Republic. Consequently, the Treasury had committed to a punitive fiscal policy that was set to ruin all but the rich through the imposition of unconscionable taxes on essential goods and services. Westminster steadfastly ignored the plight of the poor and any form of relief was fobbed off on to the Justices, or else left to common charity. Collections were regularly made by the clergy and others and public kitchens had begun to spring up all around town. I remember *The Times* carried a long parry-garrick extolling the virtues of forgoing any sort of food that was deemed essential to the poor and confining one's diet solely to the consumption of fish. And so, in order to make sure that I could not be accused of failing in my duty, I oft found myself alone in my modest rooms at the Bell Tavern in King Street sitting down to a meagre and depressing meal of boiled trout or water souchy.

Mark you, I was no stranger to such privation, having served the last twelve years of my life on several of His Britannic Majesty's ships, oftentimes sailing some most inhospitable waters. But I will confess that I was glad to see winter turn to spring and with it the return of some, albeit feeble, sunshine in April, when I joined a small and slightly disinterested crowd outside St. James' Palace to try to catch a glimpse of Prince George and his bride to be, prior to their wedding. Like most royal weddings this one was a private affair to be held in the Chapel Royal, and especially so, some said, because the Prince considered his future queen to be a somewhat unsavoury creature. But, all things considered, I thought that it might be worth a shot and sure enough, after some degree of idle loitering, I was rewarded with a brief sighting of the couple in the Palace grounds. Sadly, however, the

spectacle was somewhat less than edifying.

The Prince, dressed in a brown coat covered all over with overblown embroidery and other such fripperies, was clearly as drunk as Davy's sow, and Princess Caroline looked for all the world like a lewd Dutch doll in her gauzy, almost bare bosomed, silver dress and velvet robe. A pretty pair they made indeed - neither of them no better than they should be, and especially so our noble Prince of Wales. It was common knowledge that the Prince had only agreed to the marriage in order that the King might pay off his debts and that, before consenting to marry Caroline, Prinny had been carrying on a liaison with that arch tart Maria Fitzherbert for over ten years past. Why, it was even said that at one time they went through a distasteful, clandestine, and ultimately illegal form of marriage, with the supposedly sacred rites actually taking place in as unhallowed a setting as Mrs Fitzherbert's own drawing room!

I declare though that I was not at all surprised by all this, for it was in no way out of the ordinary. During my time in our fair Capital I had become all too aware of the inherently self-centred, sinful nature of the city and its proliferation of such moral vices as duelling, suicide, gambling, and debauchery. Indeed, the Londoner's wanton desire to engage in three to one permeated all levels of society and could be seen everywhere, from the ubiquitous presence of drabble tail harlots in the streets at night and the regular staging of common balum rancums attended by various rakehells, libertines, whores, and painted Cyprians, to the execrable excesses of *roués* like Old Q, the Duke of Queensbury. Ever present in society, Old Q was the epitome of London licentiousness and had seemingly dedicated his life to seduction and swiving. It was even rumoured that he once re-enacted *The Judgement of Paris* with three of the most beautiful and respected women of the town exhibiting themselves before him, as bare as nature intended; simply in order to compete for the spurious prize of a golden apple!

I will confess that it can be said that my own experience of these matters at the age of twenty-four was by no means great. My mother died when I was but a babe and I could only boast one female childhood friend. Her name was Elizabeth Saunders and she was a pretty little thing, with auburn hair falling in loose ringlets around her face, a radiant and ready smile, and an insatiable propensity for all kinds of mischief. But, although we resided in close proximity, I did not really see very much of her, save at church, and any contact was completely lost after I entered the Navy. Even when at sea I was seldom part of the atmosphere of wine, women, and song that permeated the wardroom, and most certainly never party to any of the higger-mugger Miss Molly antics sometimes practiced by members of the more undisciplined of ship's companies!

I had joined my first ship at the age of twelve as a gentleman volunteer - servant to Captain Gardiner of the old *Demetra*, 74. My

family has always been of the middling sort and when I was a boy my father, God rest his soul, worked as a gunsmith in our home village of Canewdon, an isolated place set deep within the Essex marshes. The old man was an ambitious fellow, both on his own part and on behalf of his family, and, after I had plainly failed to show any aptitude whatsoever for the gun maker's art, he conceived that the Navy should be the place for me. He knew right well that high rank within the Sea Service was not solely the prerogative of the titled and the wealthy and that, given a good measure of talent and wit, and no small amount of luck, success, fame, and fortune was open to a much wider class of 'gentlemen', wherein he was happy to categorise his only son. Obviously, with such humble origins and lack of influence in high places I was unable to enter the Service at the rate of midshipman, but Captain Gardiner, a local man, had apparently been an old friend of my mother's before I was even born, and so was kind enough to take me aboard as part of his following.

So it was that under the assiduous tutelage of the Captain, and by dint of my own hard work and exceptional diligence, I was rated midshipman at the age of sixteen, consequently serving as such on a number of ships for another four years before I entered and passed the examination for lieutenant. It was at this point that my sad lack of connections fully hit home. Notwithstanding that I had passed the exam at my first attempt, it proved singularly difficult for me to secure my promotion and I found myself continually passed over in favour of the milksop sons of the aristocracy or the snotty relatives of high ranking officers. Then, at the outbreak of the current hostilities, I had a stroke of uncommon good fortune. I was at that time serving in the *Dione*, 32, under Captain Thomas Horne when we took the French frigate *Amazonne* off Cape Finisterre, following a long chase and a sharp action which culminated in my having the honour to lead a party on to the very decks of the Frenchie and, by and by, to personally haul down her flag. It was on account of this singular feat that I finally gained my commission, and very proud I was too. Lieutenant Roger Alexander Ellis, Royal Navy - how grand it sounded - and I were sure that this was but my first step on the road to glory.

The following year, however, *Dione* suffered a mort of damage in the great fleet action of the First of June and, subsequently being paid off, was brought into Chatham for an extensive refit. I therefore found myself dumped somewhat unceremoniously on shore with a small amount of prize money from the sale of the *Amazonne* and showing the flag of distress with a modicum of half pay. Thereafter, in common with scores of my fellow officers, I was obliged to petition the Admiralty Board for a new berth.

At first I was ever hopeful. Having good qualifications and a record of gallantry, I was sure of finding a new ship right speedily. But, notwithstanding this, as the months wore on the spectre of my bourgeois upbringing once more raised its ugly head and my lack of access to the high and mighty began to tell against me. In those days

the supply of sea officers was rapidly outstripping demand and it seemed to me that, without interest, I might remain in my sorry situation some thirty or forty years without once having any notice taken of me! At times, I even began to envy the Frenchman, against whom we were currently pitted. Johnny Crapaud appeared to fully espouse the enlightened ideas of egalitarian and meritocratic advancement in his military establishment, and indeed, since the revolution, the country seemed to have totally adopted the true philosophies of enlightenment - particularly the excellent concept of reason as the primary source of authority, the sweet ideals of liberty, freedom, and equality, and the laudable acknowledgement of the importance of religious toleration.

But, just as one had come to expect, the damned Jacobins once more went too far and, having bravely elevated the concept of reason itself to the status of religion, proceeded to tarnish the whole idea by holding a series of obscene Rabelaisian festivals dedicated solely to anarchy and the wanton pursuit of free will and pleasure. It was reported that in Paris, for example, that damn fool Hébert, who famously decried the actions of the bishop of Rome in excommunicating all the French by declaiming ‘fuck the court of Rome, its cardinals and its bishops’, presided over an indecent, so called ‘Festival of Reason’ at Notre Dame. By all accounts, after that venerable church had been thoroughly plundered by the *sans culottes*, it became the stage for a blasphemous and orgiastic public affair in which a seductively dressed young strumpet wearing a Phrygian bonnet and holding a pike so as to signify that she was the ‘Goddess of Reason’, was fairly worshiped at the high altar; and all whilst a gaggle of other half naked doxies danced around her singing ribald songs in celebration of the revolution.