

April 1570, The Silver Eel tavern in Bristol.

Doctor Kerr Avon had sat alone in the Silver Eel reading quietly and making notes for a week, a man of thin ascetic lines and a face cruel and aquiline he was a doctor of medicine whose reputation made him often the second to last resort of those in sickness feeling the shadow of the grave loom over them when all other gentler, kindlier doctors had failed. His purgatives were said to be amongst the most viciously effective in England and his bold incisive surgeries were spoken of with awe amongst those who had witnessed them and the few hardy souls who had survived them. With gratifying frequency the sickest patient had revived and filled with sudden energy had risen from his bed upon his entering the room. Indeed those with keener hearing had been known to make miraculous recovery upon hearing him announced at their dwelling place. His very name was synonymous with healing as the grateful friends and families of those who had made a startling recovery simply upon hearing the dark tidings that Dr Avon had been sent for frequently attested.

Resuming his perusal of the copy of "Von den Krankeiten" that had cost him the accumulated fees of his last dozen patients he considered the radical notions that Chorea Lasciva, the dancing mania of the 13th and 14th centuries, that mental plague commonly known as "St Vitus' Dance" was not the superstitious demonic possession preached by the church but a scientific rational symptom of uterine hysteria initiated by unmarried women imagining the sexual act which fantasy set their blood in motion, disturbing the balance of their vital spirits thus causing involuntary joy and spasmodic dancing. In married women the symptoms of uncontrolled screaming, swooning and convulsive movements were illustrated by enlarged abdomens indicating bellies filled with sour uterine vapours.

"Thus, the cause of the disease chorea lasciva is a mere opinion and idea, assumed by imagination, affecting those who believe in such a thing. This opinion and idea are the origin of the disease both in children and adults. In children the case is also imagination, based not on thinking but on perceiving, because they have heard or seen something. The reason is this: their sight and hearing are so strong that unconsciously they have fantasies about what they have seen or heard."

No great admirer of the female sex himself Avon nodded in agreement with the worthy Paracelsus that their natural weakness predisposed chaste and promiscuous women alike to this passion since they had more imagination and restlessness than men so were more easily conquered by the very strength of their nature. Such contradictions! Both weakness and strength conspired against the female, both could be used to advantage. Avon made several notes on the topic, a half-smile playing about his lips.

He waited with the patience natural of a philosophical man for the return of the Kestrel, a small warship owned by his friend the privateer Richard Blake. His role of ship's doctor and personal confidante gave him opportunities denied other naturalists to visit remote islands and distant lands. From time to time there were pecuniary advantages when Blake took a prize or plundered some hapless Spaniards that supplemented his researches.

On his table there sat a goblet of wine watered down so far that it was little more than flavoured water, his preferred drink when engrossed in study. Next to it lay pinioned and no longer struggling but quietly crooning from time to time a chicken he had encountered in the yard. One wing spread out before him he had studied its bones, feathers, sinews and their movements in minuscule detail littering the table with notes, sketches and candles. Its contribution to natural

philosophy and the study of flight was over and Avon had forgotten its existence. Two young serving wenches peered nervously from the back of the inn too afraid to retrieve the main ingredient of the evening meal from the terrible man of learning.

The door to the Silver Eel swung open admitting a large open faced swaggering bluff Englishman followed by an ornately dressed man of obviously delicate sensibility and good breeding holding a pomade to his face. The latter was clearly no seaman as his bearing was a mite unsteady betraying an imbalance of the watery principle that advantageous when tossed in the briny deeps was in conflict with the principle of steady earth. Learned men like Dr Kerr Avon were aware that the ignorant used the common term "sea legs" for such symptoms.

"My dear Blake" Avon rose from his chair to greet his friend with a warmth that was shockingly genuine and would have amazed his patients to witness. He held back from embracing him as was their custom, wrinkling his nose in distaste. "Why in Heaven's name my friend, do you smell like a sewer?"

Blake laughed with good nature and hanging his coat upon his usual hook hallooed for the inn-keeper. "A tale best told over a glass of the finest Spanish wine and I shall regale you with it presently."

"And you brought back m'lord Du Plessis", Avon bowed to the Frenchman he had recommended to Blake in his absence. "You are less certain upon your feet than usual Jules. Well we can't have that, I shall be delighted to prepare a restorative tonic."

Clearly the voyage had gone well which pleased Avon, he knew the qualities of both men overlapped with his and having consulted their birth charts he had been confident their qualities were complementary not contradictory. De Plessy was a gentleman philosopher-warrior in the mould of a latter-day Sir Galahad, a duellist of considerable skill and of good reading. He and Avon had fenced as friends, with sword in hand Jules de Plessy was the clear master and worthy of the elite Cardinals Guard, with words there were little to choose, in matters philosophical Jules was forced to concede but gave more than adequate account of himself.

"Bring forth the finest wine!" Blake instructed the inn keeper who scuttled down to the cellar obediently while the two serving wenches took advantage of Avon's distraction to recover the capon destined for the pot. The fowl secured with somewhat more ostentatious bending low before the handsome seafarer drawing his eye to their immodest necklines than was really necessary and one lingering pout over the shoulder on departing that quite defied justification the serving wenches reluctantly left the men to their tales of war and other manly activities.

"Captain Richard Blake?". A newcomer had entered the tavern and looked questioningly around. "Master of the Kestrel newly docked in Bristol?"

"That is I sir, and what is your business with me?"

"You are summoned to London, upon the authority of her Majesty's Secretary of State by command of William Cecil Lord Burleigh to present yourself at his chambers without let, hindrance or delay."

"Gentlemen I fear my report must be made directly" Blake looked more excited than regretful and swept eagerly out to claim his reward for services to the Crown.

Unnoticed in the dark recess at the top of the cellar stairs the inn-keeper turned slowly away and with the dusty bottle balanced upon his finest polished tray next to his best three pewter goblets sadly descended again returning the wine to its keeping place trying not to think of the silver denied his purse for the time being. But all things come to those who wait he reflected, particularly those who wait upon sailors.

London, Hampton Court Palace

"Ignore that snivelling wretch Walsingham, make your report to me!" ordered Lord Burleigh as Blake, about to make his report anticipated reward but hoping more for further chances to serve his Queen considered his words. The Chancellor of Cambridge University, the Master of the Courts of Wards and Liveries now Secretary of State was a brusque and outspoken man. Known to have been the confidante, supporter and guide of Elizabeth since her days in Hatfield during the reign of her sister Mary. It was widely believed he was one of only two men who had ever dared tell her to her face that she was wrong yet kept his head upon his shoulders. Blake had stood steadfast before cannonade, pistol fire and a forest of swords yet would have gladly thrown himself back into such a fray than make report to one such as Burleigh. Yet Blake was not easily cowed, he recalled the charm taught to him by Avon and recited the words silently in his head.

I must not fear.

Fear is the mind-killer.

Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration.

I will face my fear.

Better thought Blake. Throat still dry. Now, how did the second part go?

I will permit it to pass over me and through me.
And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path
Where the fear has gone there will be nothing.
Only I will remain.

And Blake spoke, freely without stumbling or hesitance well balanced between appropriate bluff modesty and not downplaying the blow he had dealt the Spanish plans for invasion.

"Splendid!" Lord Burleigh was evidently pleased. "Your good work has been .. noted." He glanced at Walsingham meaningfully and Blake was gratified to see Walsingham nod and record the remark in his papers.

"Now, how would you like to seize some Spanish gold?"

Blake smiled hugely.

Silver Eel Tavern, Bristol

"And Avon, how is the chicken?" enquired Blake.

"I regret to say it died in vain, quite inedible my dear Blake yet this '24 is a fine vintage that quite makes up for that. I see we are down to the last three bottles or so, just one more of the outstanding '12 remains yet of the fine '60 there is good supply."

"You can see the contents of the cellar from here Avon?"

"Of course not, but such can be deduced from the obvious signs. Consider the landlord's reverential demeanour and care once reserved solely for the '12 now applied to the '24. This bespeaks the near end of the '24 and the small supply of the '12. Add to that the low price for the '60 indicative of a glut." Avon did not see the need to mention the crude handwritten marks and numbers scratched by the landlord on the bottle.

"Of course, you make it sound so simple Avon. And I see Jules that the good Doctor's infallible blood sausage cure has worked its miracle upon your land-legs."

"Oui, but it is vile beyond all measure of words, I cannot finish it. Such an horror has never before been laid upon a plate before me"

"Perhaps my patent emetic cure then?"

"Alors! I now find it is surprisingly palatable"

"We will need all your steadiness Jules. We sail on the first tide for Spain to meet a brave English agent Rodriguez Delgado who spies the comings and goings of the treasure fleet. With his intelligence these plump prizes wallowing with gold will be easy prey for us and the Queen's coffers will swim with riches. Ours too I hope."

Blake raised his goblet in a toast "To Spanish gold!"

Unobserved a disreputable figure slipped from the tavern and went out into the night his face hidden from view.

"What unspeakable hour is this?" enquired Jules de Plessy. "I have had barely ninety minutes to make my toilet. Thank goodness it is yet dark and I shall not be seen in such a condition!"

"See, the moon is low in the sky and lit from above as she ebbs to the horizon, thus the sympathies of moon and water mean that as she ebbs so does the tide my dear Jules. You know this well of course, did we not together study Aristotle while Blake was in London, the first cause of the tides is the love of the brine for the moon. Indeed I believe I have the passage here, so eloquent in the original Greek. How does it ..."

"This is no time for your philosophy Avon, we'll barely make the tide as it is!" snapped Blake impatiently. Already his lieutenant Thomas Speke had returned in despair at the land-lubbers to the Kestrel while Blake paced impatiently below waiting for Avon to pack his books and for Du Plessis to select the hat most appropriate for the walk down to the docks.

At last all was ready and the three bickering friends took their leave of the Silver Eel causing feeling of regret in the landlord at the silver yet not his, soft yearnings in the heaving bosoms of serving girls who had warmed the bed of Richard Blake and female eyes went damp at the thought of his handsome features being exposed to the hazardous of Spanish muskets once more. And of course the general relief that was felt at most establishments when Dr Avon vacated the premises; most generally so that they could prepare the funeral wake but sometimes more happily entice the frightened patient from his locked chamber as circumstances dictated.

The sharp-eyed Avon however had spotted something that smelled of trouble. "My friends, note that suspicious fellow, was he not in the Silver Eel last night? He is of sallow cast and favours his left foot, clear signs of an untrustworthy character."

"I see nothing Avon. Is it not some sailor returning to ship like we who must catch the tide?"

"He has ducked into that alley which leads away from the docks."

"Then let us follow."

The three had made but a dozen paces when the figure they followed stopped and was joined by two more. Three more stepped in from behind thus sealing the trap into which they had walked.

"Hand over your fine clothes and money then we'll think about letting you live" sneered the ringleader they had followed in a strong local accent.

Blake seized up the situation instantly, clearly these were English ruffians not some Spanish agents. He drew his two flintlocks. "Avon, take the three at the back. Jules and I will see to the three to the fore."

Avon drew his sword and turned to interpose himself with the three to the rear. Military tactics were not much written about in Paracelsus. Nor in Galen. He assumed there was sound reasoning to pairing the finest swordsman in France, a nation of fine swordsmen, with the deadly Blake against half their foes while the Doctor of Medicine and Natural Philosophy with his pale scholar's hands stood with a sword he could wield little better than an untutored boy to face the other three. In such a circumstance a man of Reason would fight defensively he deduced.

Behind him Blake's twin pistols barked and Jules Du Plessis went en-garde.

Three Bells. The Kestrel. At sea.

"So my dear Doctor Avon, you are quite recovered?"

Avon set down his glass, clearly something was on Blake's mind and there would be no more astronomical observations that night. The azimuth of Venus was gratifyingly close to his own predictions, not those of Herr Ensor the so-called Oracle.

"It was little more than a tear to my doublet, I confess, and we still managed to catch the tide so all's well. You appear unsettled, you move from foot to foot and re-arrange your hosiery more frequently than before."

Captain Blake coloured. "Yes, this does involve your medical role. There is now a certain discomfort. Below." and looked meaningfully downwards.

Avon was sympathetic. "Ah yes, the reward of returning heroes may often be the wounds of Venus. When we have the comfort of many undisturbed hours ahead of us then I shall begin the process."

He glanced towards the horizon where Venus was visible above the waves.

"But not for an hour or two I fear. First I must see to your crew with their mysteriously scratched faces. Is there presently a ship's cat?"

"None I fear, the last hopped ship some weeks past for a comfortable berth on a cargo vessel with plump slow indolent rats rather than these wiry naval types."

"Well that explains it. We will need three hours undisturbed. I shall bring my cello."

The Kestrel. Third Night at Sea. Two Bells.

"Ah yes, well I tolerate bit of of fun. Its an ancient tradition below decks but I'll get Speke to put a stop to it now before it can get out of hand. Tell me again how it went Jules"

Blake leaned comfortably back in the master cabin pouring wine for Du Plessis while Dr Avon paced the decks above restlessly doing those mysterious philosophical things that he enjoyed. The crew had not yet complained about the eviscerated fish on the deck or the day that Avon had spent immersed naked in a barrel of sea-water discovering whether man could absorb moisture osmotically from brine.

"Certainment. It was a cage into which I place my face. When I am ready they remove the door and the wild rat is there, whisker to whisker with my nose. Sacre but it is hungry and fast. To pull back is to lose, there is only one tactic - to attack. Yes and swiftly. It is after all a duel."

"And you won?"

"Of course, but too easily. The crafty sailors proposed a rematch tonight. Double or quits as they say. And look here, my treasure!"

Du Plessy proudly produced two battered pennies, as proud of them as any prize. A duel is, after all, a duel.

In the light of the full moon Avon was at that moment recording observations astronomical in nature, potentially astrological, who can say? He stopped and turning frowned as he detected a scent that had no right to be at sea, the smell of wild roses.

As he stands suspicious and curious there is at that moment a cry of pain and fear, not far from him a young midshipman stumbles and falls as if he has been stabbed. Two figures, hooded and indistinct in the night, are on deck and advancing upon Avon who draws his sword and calls the alarm.

Close-pressed for a while Dr Avon holds his ground in a defensive posture wondering at these assailants. Help is soon at hand with the redoubtable Blake at his side turning the battle and Du Plessis's bright blade flashing in the moonlight. The mysterious figures vanish when pressed with steel and no body is left behind. As the last falls a distant echoing cry rises from the direction of Blake's cabin and the scent of wild roses grows stronger. Once inside it leads Avon to a crack in the

flooring which glints when light is shone upon it. He digs with the blade of his knife and levers out a soft pure gold coin of a strange design and unfamiliar writing. Upon it is a curious stick figure. It is as if a large bag of gold has been spilled and one coin missed.

"That confounded Spaniard!" Blake is angry. Clearly a cursed coin has been foisted upon him. His own strength proving a weakness against him. "He paid me a bad of gold to let him sail away the cur."

"Leave this to me Blake." Avon put on his thickest cow-hide gloves. "Have the crew bring me salt and lead, I shall seal this for now. When we return to England I will study it further and make it safe."

"And send me the crew who were injured in the fight. I'll dress their wounds myself."

As Avon suspects, the wounds are feeble, insubstantial ghostly things. Yet he dresses them with care and sprinkles on a little silver dust then applies salt despite the protests of the men. Ghost wounds Avon thinks to himself.

Spanish Cost - St Castellan, midnight

Blake having brought the Kestrel ahead of the rendezvous with Delgado he refreshes with water while Dr Avon treats a young seaman with a rash on his arm. The standard treatment is phlebotomy so Avon lets a little of his blood praying its not a Ghost Wound, for if so then heaven help him should it fester, he must be watched closely, particularly when the moon is next full. There are texts he must consult before then. Perhaps though its just a rash and Avon is starting at shadows.

In the longboat rowing to shore Avon is given time to contemplate the imponderables of military tactics. To a philosopher it is terra incognita, a book whose pages make no rhyme nor reason, the writing is a false friend for it seems orderly and rational on the surface but is grammar and punctuation defy logic. Why does a Captain leave his vessel and row ashore attended only by his ship's doctor and a mysterious foreign swordsman he barely knows? By mere logic this expedition should be lead by a responsible, but expendable officer junior to Blake. The excellent Thomas Speke for example, a steady man, should take a dozen sailors. Or less. Or more. Still, it is a chance to visit a strange shore. The flora and fauna of Spain are old and well documented since the time of the ancients yet there are Roman villas still standing in parts, Moorish spires and mosaics wherein are encoded the mysteries of Allah and the sacred Numerology. Doubtless there will be time aplenty to stop and consider these marvels. Avon brings his glass to the eye, it is as he suspects, Mars is aspecting. What does that portend for this night?

"A light on the shore!" Blake claps Avon upon the shoulder. "You're pointing your glass the wrong way my dear Avon, only stars and waves out there. All the action is in the other direction. That'll be Delgado I'll be bound."

Avon swings his glass around to the mundane shoreline.

"Nothing of interest there Blake. Cliffs, sandstone most likely from the projection and accumulation at the base. Giving way to Holm Oak I think, yes, see where the other lights moving down the cliffs are. Above and to the left of them. Most fascinating, some hundred species of

autochthonous trees grow in Spain. Nobody agrees on the exact figure. I myself count one hundred and five, yet others dispute ..."

"Did you say lights?"

"Indeed. To the right of the Holm Oaks, now descending to beach level to join the other light. Ah, I wonder if those are Quercus suber such as cork those fine bottles of wine we enjoyed in the Silver Eel."

Blake seemed strangely incurious about Iberian flora. "Blast! Our contact has been compromised, seized in the act of signalling to us."

Jules du Plessis however was clearly pleased. "Perhaps I shall need my sword tonight after all and my toilet has not been wasted. Maybe there will be one ashore worthy to cross my blade. I can but hope."

La Villa Strangiata, Santa de Castellan.

"Jules! Jules!! Are you there?" Blake shouts into the night air.

"Alors Captain, not so loud! We lose the advantage of surprise if you shout in English."

"Can't seem a damn thing, where's Avon anyway?"

"Look he is 'ere, making a sound like an 'erd of elephants. Who can miss him? I have followed the lanterns up the cliff while you sent the longboat back to the ship and our friend looked wistfully up at the stars. They have taken him to La Villa Strangiata, a place well defended. We of course follow and against incredible odds rescue him from three or four times our number of Spaniards. That is the proposal?"

"Well, yes, That's about the size of it. We'll sneak up on them of course. That's the plan."

"Please do not call it a 'plan' in the hearing of our friend Avon, you know how it distresses him. E' will say something sarcastic. You know e' will."

"You have a point. He'll raise an eyebrow if we're not careful. How's this for an idea; you and I hide in these trees while Avon distracts the guard and leads them towards us. He can bumble around pretending to be an idiot"

"Pretending you say?"

"Quite. Should be easy for him then, be himself basically. When he lures them out then we'll strike."

"And the rest"

"Play it by ear."

Blake explained to Avon what he wanted to do. Avon considered the strong walls of the Villa, the firmly barred stout oaken doors, the half-dozen guardsmen in breastplate standing alertly outside and unknown numbers inside. Avon considered the cannon.

"So, what do you think of the plan Avon?"

"My dear Blake, I don't know how it is at sea but I assure you that on land it is considered impolite to attempt to kill all your friends while committing suicide"

"Voila. I told you not to call it a 'plan'"

Outside La Villa Strangiata

"Miguel, Sanchez, Adriano. Go see what that racket in the trees is about" the one in charge orders. Two head directly to where Dr Kerr Avon is blundering about in the trees, the other proceeds along the main path that cuts straight through and leads to the beach.

"It was round here somewhere" Avon is speaking halting Spanish and ignoring the guards.

"Who are you?"

"Come here!"

Avon circles distractedly his back to them "I had it the other minute. Somewhere. There I think."

The guards are suspicious but they are more curious and puzzled than alarmed by the antics of the strange foreigner. He seems touched in the head and they cross themselves as they follow.

"That's enough of this. You stop where you are!"

"There it is!" cries Avon delightedly and pointing at the ground steps boldly forward. The guards start to run after him but it is right into Blake's trap and they are looking only at the figure of Avon on hands and knees by a bush not at the sea captain launching from a tree nor at the Frenchman stepping out politely into the moonlight and offering to duel.

Avon got to his feet, in his hand a small figure in the shape of a Roman gladiator with shield and sword. He takes a look at the armed guard with sword drawn, the numerous other guards and convinced that this is not really the territory of a learned scholar but that of a warrior, a martial spirit not a clerical one, snaps it boldly in twain.

The first Spanish guard reaches the figure he has seen in the moonlit woods, he can see his comrades in a desperate battle yet there is something unnerving about the man who stands before him. A moment before he was sure it was a pale dark gentleman, a scholar perhaps from the low countries, Germany or even England. Now there is a savage laughing in a guttural tongue his skin seemingly darker and his eyes narrowed in slits. He stabs with his sword but the man just laughs louder. It is too much, he thinks of his wife and his children, who will feed them when this madman from the East has killed him? He turns and runs into the night.

Avon advances like one possessed, his enemies flee before him. The three men guarding the canon at the main door take one look at the ululating figure advancing with shirt open to the navel and follow their comrade running for their lives. Avon stops and stares at the fortified villa with

disdain then sniffs the air. Confounded once again by fortifications he smells horse in the night air and he has a yearning once again to have good horse under him. The cultured Dr Kerr Avon has become a figure out of civilised men's nightmares, a terror from the east. He has become Genghis Khan.

Blake having dealt with his guard ends Jules's duel before he has finished making the introductions.

"Next time just jump on them will you Jules?"

"This is not 'ow we do it in the Cardinal's Guard my dear Blake"

"I can tell. Where did Avon get to?"

"I do not know, he is acting very strangely. He said something about an 'orse"

"Never mind, I expect it will all become clear later. They seem to have left that cannon unattended which gives me an idea." Help me lift this.

In the stables the horses advance eagerly to the end of their stalls, something in the night air tells them that their true master approaches, the one who was born to ride is coming. They whinny and paw the ground expectantly as Avon stalks down the line stopping at the huge midnight black stallion. The door open it comes obediently to him, its head lowered and its ears submissive. Avon vaults onto its bare back, kicks his heels and together they ride back to the villa. Genghis is back where he belongs upon a horse.

"Pass me the long fuse Jules"

"What is that?"

"Slow-burning cotton so we have time to get clear of the recoil"

"Why do we not just stand to one side and use the brand they have placed handily on a pole right 'ere?"

"Hmm, that's not how we do it at sea. Should still work though I suppose"

"Ah, 'ere comes the Doctor. He is riding an 'orse"

"Stand clear. Fire!"

Inside La Villa Strangiata

The alarm is sounded and Spanish guards reach for their weapons pulling on armour and kissing crucifixes around their necks. Clearly a great force is outside, already half a dozen of their fellows have fled or lie dying. But the walls of La Villa Strangiata are high, the walls are strong. Whatever the fate of the others there are enough inside to hold out until the morning when surely the reinforcements will come.

They place their faith in oaken doors, cower in candlelight but the panic seeps through bloodstained floors as Avon stalks the night. Wooden figures, crucified god, stare blindly out to sea. The cannon roars and the doors are blown in, wicked shards of wood fly blinding, wounding, killing. Yet they hold firm, they are brave men. They are soldiers and they will fight, or so they believe until they hear the hooves and a terror rides in out of the night through the smoke.

The devil has come for them, his terrible laughter is in their ears as they scatter and run. Iron hooves lash and trample, the screams of the dying fill the hallway as death rides up the stairs after them. One has the presence of mind to fire his pistol, at point blank range he cannot miss, but Avon's life is charmed and the ball merely plucks at his shirt. Men soil themselves and leap screaming to the cold hard floor below. What great and terrible sins have they committed that God sends a punishment like this upon them?

Genghis is happy. His enemies are vanquished and he chases them before him to rob them of their wealth, to see those dear to them bathed in tears. He can almost hear the lamentations of their women-folk.

Richard Blake and Jules de Plessy enter the scene of carnage from a side door having taken advantage of the mayhem to enter unopposed through an unguarded window. As they enter then so do the reserve force, well organised and compact who have not faced Genghis and are not routed like their comrades.

Blake in his characteristic style raises twin pistols and fires them at the charging guards while Jules clears some space so he has room for his footwork. Above them Kerr Avon has returned to his senses and wondering why he is sitting on an horse, indoors, upstairs and without a saddle slips quietly off and staggers down a passageway to collect his wits. The horse looks around for its true rider in confusion.

Dr Kerr Avon vaguely recalled that he was here for a purpose, to rescue a prisoner. Perhaps Delgado was incarcerated in the rooms on this wing. Instead he found two men in what must have been an office or a library who rose reaching for their swords.

"Surrender now" Avon was tired and wanted this over.

"I command here. Death before dishonour!" replied the better dressed man.

"I was afraid you might say that. Oh well, have it your way" Avon discharged his pistol but the Commandante had moved and the ball lodged in the bookcase.

The fight was one-sided, Avon defended as best he could being driven ever back but all his wiles were nowhere near enough. His shoulder burned where the Commandate's sword had cut it, his leg ached from another slash and yet he smiled.

"You are better than me, I admit it." Avon confessed as he took another wound from the Commandate's dancing sword-tip.

"Then why are you smiling, you cannot fight long wounded as you are."

"Because of this" replied Avon holding up a small intricately engraved medallion which crumbled in his fingers, "I lead a charmed life you might say."

Now it was the Commandante's turn to step back as Avon's sword moved with shocking speed and parry as he might Dr Avon crashed bluntly through his blocks sweeping them aside. Behind him his lieutenant crossed himself and sent a prayer to Mary and all the saints as his Avon cut fiercely through a weakened guard and ran the Commandate through the heart.

Dr Kerr Avon managed a thin tired smile. "Next!"

In the hallway Spanish corpses were piling up before Jules du Plessis and Captain Richard Blake who had drawn his sword standing shoulder to shoulder began to press the guards back. He had attempted to give them quarter but the fools had not accepted his generous terms that they lay down their swords. All too soon the last Spaniard was down and Jules was wiping his blade as Blake retrieved his pistols then set off to see what had become of his Doctor.

"Good god, Avon!" Blake was shocked at the condition of his friend whose bloodied clothes were ripped and tattered and was bleeding from wounds all over his body.

"Ah Blake, you should see the other man" replied Avon. "No sign of Delgado in this wing. We must search the other side."

The far wing contained three doors which on a count of three they kicked open together. Avon burst into a kitchen where it occurred to him to tie some rags around his cuts before he fainted from blood loss. Blake an empty dining room but De Plessy had located the stairs down to the cellar and his way was barred.

A man rose from his seat unhurriedly as Jules de Plessy strode down the stairs and moved with that familiar ease. Jules straightened and stepped forward boldly, at last an opponent worthy of his sword. Jules attempted to observe the polite preliminaries but he spoke only French and English while his partner spoke only Spanish.

"I am Jules de Plessy, Vicomte du Plessis", Jules bowed and saluted with his sword.

The other seemed to understand and reeled of his name and titles. Jules stood waiting politely as the stream of names flowed past. Finally it ended and he raised his sword. "En garde Monsieur!"

So they began. The first passes were respectful. Both were masters it was clear so they began in earnest to probe.

"Touche!" Jules was delighted, how many years had it been since an opponent had slipped past his guard? The mark was but a scratch, still it was an achievement.

Behind him a Spanish guard less concerned with the niceties of honourable duelling had made his way up the stairs and was circling around the cellar clearly intent on taking advantage of the situation. Fortunately Richard Blake was not napping and interposed his considerable presence between the duel and the guard.

"Let's not spoil their sport, eh?"

The guardsman's heart was not in the fight, expecting an easy stab in the back he put up little resistance to Blake who was able to appreciate the end of the duel below as Jules de Plessy more in

sadness than in anger located the defect in his opponent's defence and neatly ran him through as confirmation. "Bravo! Bravo!" Jules saluted the dying man.

The last three guardsmen hurriedly surrendered. It was a simple matter to order them at pistol point into the stock room that had confined Delgado who had been stretched and tortured for an hour or more but was able to walk.

"So, where have you been Avon?" asked Blake as they helped Delgado back down the path to the beach where the Kestrel's longboat awaited them.

Avon patted the leather satchel at his side. "The library of course Blake, some reading for the voyage home"