

PART ONE: WHERE ZOMBIES ARMIES CLASH BY NIGHT

Chapter One *Trial by Ordeal*

Ned Knob had woken up on many an occasion with a thumping headache occasioned by being hit over the head with a blunt instrument, but he had never learned to like the experience. Indeed, it never seemed to become any more tolerable. He always took care to thank Providence for giving him such a hard head—which had so far proved resistant to everything cruel Fate could throw at him—but, like the good Radical he was, he thought of Providence in terms of heredity and education rather than whimsical deity, so he always tempered his gratitude with regret for the fact that such an evolution had been necessary.

Ned had never known his father, but he had always admired the fortitude and discipline of his mother, who had never allowed him to touch a drop of gin, lest it deplete her own ration, and had sent him to the best school she knew: the academy of thievery operated in Will Sharper's Spirit Shop by the legendary Thomas Paddock, alias John Devil—from which he had eventually passed on, not without difficulty, to the university run by Paddock's mercurial successor, Tom Brown, alias John Devil the Quaker, also known as Comte Henri de Belcamp, late of the Knights of Deliverance and currently active in *Civitas Solis*. That admiration had, however, been similarly tempered with regret for the fact that his dear mother had required such fortitude and discipline in order to maintain her composure.

Having made his list of all the things for which he was required by his continued consciousness to be thankful, and added in the required leavening of regret, Ned tried to remember who had hit him, and under what circumstances. Unfortunately, his memory was reluctant to provide him with that information, at least for the moment.

He knew that he had been traveling on the French merchant ship *Belleville*, bound for Port-au-Prince in the Republic of Haiti, and that he had been so sick for the first week of the journey—his first ever crossing of any stretch of water broader than the English Channel—that he had been unable to keep his food down until the ship's supplies had deteriorated to standard naval fare. He also knew that he had contrived to forge a temporary alliance of sorts with Edward Trelawny, Lord Byron's emissary to the Republic, even though that worthy gentleman liked and trusted him far less than the not-so-late Percy Shelley, whom he had met in Spezia not so long ago. Alas, the trauma of being hit had robbed him of access to any shorter-term memories. He had one other avenue of information open to him, though, and he tried to engage it by opening his eyes.

The sky was a remarkably bright shade of blue and the tropical Sun must have been blazing with its most fervent ardor, but the direct light of the fiery orb could not reach him, by virtue of an expansive green parasol held by the exceedingly pretty young woman at whose feet he lay. She appeared to be in her mid-20s, and her skin was very dark, although the cast of her features was not entirely Negroid. He assumed that she was a mongrel of some kind—although she was evidently no mere cur, as he had been before transforming himself into “Gentleman Ned.” She was, in every possible respect, a lady.

Ned remembered having seen the young woman once or twice on the deck of the *Belleville*, but she too had spent by far the greater part of her time in one of the glorified coffins that the *Belleville*'s captain—a Corsican who had once served Napoleon as a privateer, by the name of Argile—called “first class cabins.” Ned had never been introduced to her, and had not dared to approach her without an introduction, partly because she had been accompanied on the occasions when he had seen her by an enormous bodyguard. He did not know the woman's name, but he had observed, with some interest, that at least some of Captain Argile's multicolored crew had treated her with an exaggerated respect mingled with fear, and that the few God-fearing individuals among them had crossed themselves defensively on catching sight of her.

The young woman was looking at him now, studying him carefully, but not contemptuously. Ned realized that he had not been laid at her feet in order to signify his relatively lowly status, but in order that his battered head might share the protection of the parasol. It was not until he sat up that he realized that the two of them were adrift in a small dinghy, which had a short mast but no sail, and rowlocks but no oars. The sea surrounding them was calm, and its deep blue would have seemed infinitely peaceful had it not been for the fins of two large sharks, which occasionally broke through the quiet waves as the predators circled the boat. Sharks had often followed the *Belleville*, from whose high deck they had seemed quite ineffectual, but at closer range their presence was considerably more disturbing.

Ned scanned the interior of the dinghy for a second time, making perfectly certain that it had nothing at all by the way of equipment or supplies, save for a small leather bottle that the unknown woman was cradling in her bosom, as if it were extremely precious. Ned deduced that the bottle contained water. He understood that, given the circumstances, his companion would be every bit as reluctant to share its contents with him as his mother would once have been to offer him a sip of gin—but when he raised his hand, tentatively, she handed it over without hesitation. She was obviously a very exceptional person. He responded to her generosity by sipping very carefully, taking the minimum that he needed.

He knew, as he did thus, that he was literally prolonging the torture to which they had been condemned. To be set adrift in a small boat in the Atlantic Ocean—for the Caribbean Sea, properly speaking, lay to the south of the line of islands that stretched from the Leewards through Puerto Rico and Hispaniola to Cuba—was, in essence, a form of execution, favored by mutineers, pirates and other agents of injustice who liked to pretend that they were better than mere murderers, or had some other reason for adopting a policy of cruel diplomacy. Notionally, castaways were delivered into the custody of God, who had the prerogative of treating them mercifully, should they be deemed deserving—except that God obviously had a blind spot when it came to victims of that sort, even when they were afforded the mocking grace of a bottle of water and a parasol. Despite the lesson preached by the heroic tale of Robinson Crusoe, Ned knew, even castaways fortunate enough to reach “desert islands” almost always perished, slain by thirst, heat and disease.

On the other hand, Ned reminded himself, determinedly, the real man on whose adventure Defoe had based his legend, Alexander Selkirk, really had survived for years on such an island, sustained by a population of goats and the company of his cats. “Pirates,” he contrived to say, hoarsely, as memory began to filter back. “The *Belleville* was attacked by night—by pirates.”

“It was,” the mysterious woman confirmed.

“But the English and French navies suppressed piracy in these seas 100 years ago, and put an end to it forever,” Ned remarked, nursing a sense of grievance that even the little history he knew should have misled him so treacherously.

“The English and French navies have been busy fighting one another for the greater part of the last thirty years,” she told him. “When cats are away, it’s not merely mice that come out to play—and piracy will endure forever, no matter what navies might claim.” Her English seemed very fluent, although she spoke with a marked French accent. After a pause, she added: “These were privateers, though, rather than mere sea-wolves, for all that they’re based in La Tortue. They were sent after the *Belleville* as mercenaries.”

“By whom?” Ned asked, in bewilderment.

“Don’t you know?” she countered. “You are, after all, a secret agent of His Britannic Majesty, King George.”

Ned’s hand moved reflexively toward the breast of his jacket. His second set of identification papers had not, of course, been carried in the inner pocket of the garment, but sewn into the lining, so subtly as to be hardly tangible—but someone had obviously found them. He only had to twitch the jacket to know that the lining had been slit and the papers removed. He looked into the woman’s lovely dark eyes, suspiciously.

“It wasn’t me,” she said. “The pirates took care to search you. You were probably fortunate—had you not had the secret papers, they’d probably have cut your throat, and saved me from my obligation.”

“What obligation?” he asked, still utterly bewildered.

She did not answer directly, but she did ask: "Why did you defend me, Monsieur Knob? Why did you prevent the *mestizo* assassins from carrying out their mission? Does the English King have some reason for wanting me alive?"

Fortunately, these questions acted as a trigger, releasing a trickle of memory.

Ned had been in his so-called cabin, asleep, when someone on deck had raised a belated alarm, informing him that the ship was under attack. He had slipped on his jacket and picked up the swordstick that he had bought from a shop in Jermyn Street before embarkation, in anticipation of the fact that he might need a disguised weapon in Port-au-Prince. He had gone out into the narrow corridor that connected the cabins, treading softly but ready for action.

There had been a lantern in the corridor—a further testimony to the cabins' supposed "first class" status—but its candle had burned low. Even so, he had been able to see two shadowy figures descending the staircase that led up to the deck, moving as stealthily as he was, clutching cutlasses. By the time he had drawn his blade from its wooden sheath, they had already passed the door of Trelawny's cabin, which was situated between his own and the stairway, and had seemed to be headed straight for him with murderous intent. He had, inevitably, backed away along the corridor while striking a defensive stance, glad that the corridor was so narrow that the attackers could only come at him one at a time.

Ned was no polished fencer, but Thomas Paddock's school had offered courses in dirty fighting that were the equal of any in the world. He remembered seeing the first of the cut-throats smile as the lantern-light had revealed his exceedingly small stature. He had been mistaken for a child or a dwarf before, but even when he really had been a child the appearance had been deceptive. The cutlass-bearer had moved forward recklessly, expecting an easy kill, and Ned had planted his own blade in the imbecile's heart with a riposte of which Henri de Belcamp himself would have been proud.

The second man, alas, had thus been forewarned of what he was facing, and had skipped over his fallen colleague's body with ominous agility. The corridor along which he was backing had a right-angled bend in it, and Ned had been driven into the corner, backed up against the door of one of the other cabins. There he had made his stand, against a slender, long-armed fellow who had a cudgel as well as a cutlass, and knew how to use both weapons. In defending himself against the blade, Ned had been forced to expose himself to the cudgel.

He could not remember exactly how the flurry of blows had come out, but he did remember the door of the cabin opening, allowing him a useful backward step at a critical moment. He *thought* that he might have contrived a lethal thrust of his own, at the very moment when the cudgel had come down on his well-seasoned head. What seemed more important for the moment, however, was what the pretty woman might have thought.

Apparently, finding him with his back to her door, fending off two assassins whom she believed—rightly or wrongly—to have been commissioned to murder her, she had seen him as her defender, risking his own life for hers, rather than merely as a ruffian raised in Sharper's with no other thought in his head but to defend himself. More than that—for some unfathomable reason, she thought that he might actually have been commissioned by the English crown to protect her.

Ned prided himself on his adaptability to any and all circumstances, so what he actually replied was: "It was not for the King of England's sake that I defended you, Mademoiselle, but out of loyalty to a higher duty. I'm not a gentleman by birth, but I am one by vocation, and I could never allow a lady to be attacked without doing everything in my power to protect her."

The woman studied him even more intently for some ten or 12 seconds, with dark eyes that seemed suddenly to become supernaturally intense. Eventually, she said: "Do you really expect me to believe that a white man would feel any ready-made desire or compulsion to defend the honor or life of a *zambo* woman from other half-breeds?"

Ned had not even bothered to take note of whether or not the two men he had fought had been white, black or anything in between, and he had not the slightest idea what a "*zambo*" was. "I've lived most of my life within spitting distance of the London docks," he told her, accurately enough, in a metaphorical sense. "I've long grown used to the company of men and women of every color and creed—there's no color bar, and precious little discrimination, in Sharper's. I might have been temporarily reduced to taking

the King's shilling in order to support myself, but in my heart I'm a Radical, a diehard follower of Tom Paine. So yes, Mademoiselle, I would feel exactly such a desire and exactly such a compulsion—but if it relieves your conscience, you need feel no obligation. As a matter of fact, I thought the blackguards were trying to murder me, and was defending myself. If I rendered you some service in the process, then I'm sincerely glad of it—but I'll admit that it was accidental, and that what I said just now was mere bravado."

The pretty woman nodded, as if satisfied that he was now being honest—as, indeed, he was. "Is that why Monsieur Trelawny told the mercenary captain that you were not to be trusted, and were probably a traitor to your own ostensible cause?" she asked.

"Did he?" Ned queried, genuinely astonished and offended. "I would not have thought him capable of that degree of treachery."

"He had his own life to save, and his intervention might well have done as much to save you from immediate execution as your apparent status as an agent of the crown. It was Trelawny who persuaded Amédée Desart that you and I ought to be set adrift, subjected to trial by ordeal, rather than summarily killed. I have a similarly ambiguous status myself—and a reputation that complicated my situation further."

It was Ned's turn to study her. "If you were captured by the pirates after I was knocked out," he said, "why did they not simply complete the mission in which the first two assassins had failed?"

"Wheels within wheels," she said. "There are mercenaries and mercenaries. The two men who came to kill me did not have the same paymasters as the master of the pirate vessel. Desart was after the precious fraction of the *Belleville*'s cargo; he probably didn't know that I was aboard. He probably has a dozen *mestizos* in his crew, but knows nothing about their feuds and cared even less—until their subsidiary enterprise posed a tacit challenge to his despotic authority."

"I didn't know that *Belleville* had a precious cargo," Ned observed, thoughtfully. "I thought the bulk of what she was carrying comprised agricultural machinery."

"That is the precious fraction to which I referred," the woman told him. "There are Frenchmen willing to supply Boyer with economic necessities, and there are Frenchmen who are desperate to bring his infant republic to its knees by any means humanly possible. Wheels within wheels, as I say."

Jean-Pierre Boyer, Ned knew, was the President of the recently reborn Republic of Haiti, first proclaimed by Toussaint L'Ouverture, then smashed—albeit briefly—by Charles Leclerc, on the orders of Napoleon Bonaparte. It had been reasserted in the wake of the Emperor's defeat at the hands of the English, much to the chagrin of the restored Bourbon monarchy. It was not difficult to understand, in those tangled circumstances, how the presence on the *Belleville* of an English secret agent bound for Port-au-Prince might have seemed significant in all sort of strange ways.

"Might I ask what your own ambiguous status is, Mademoiselle?" Ned asked, politely.

"Do you really not know my name?" she countered. "You're a poor spy, if so—and you must really have been seasick when you hid away in your cabin for the first week of the voyage."

"I'm not so poor a spy as all that," he told her, "but your presence on the ship was of no relevance to my mission, and I really was horribly seasick. My being raised so close to the docks was no guarantee of immunity to the typical agues of seamen, unfortunately. Might you not trust me a little, given that we're in the same tumbrel, headed for the same cruel guillotine? Is there really any point in your keeping secrets, even if I am an agent of the English secret police?"

"We're not going to die, Monsieur Knob," she said—although he could not for the life of him see any such hope as he scanned the circular horizon, where the lighter blue of the sky met the darker blue of the sea with an ominous uniformity. "And you're right—even if I did not owe you an obligation for saving my life, there would be no point in concealing my identity at the stage in the game. My status is ambiguous because I'm an American citizen, born in New Orleans, although my loyalty is to my parents' people. I'm a *zambo*—a *maroon*, if you prefer, although that's a far more general term. The men who came to kill me were *mestizos*—sworn enemies of the *zambos* on hereditary and historical grounds—who would have considered my murder a triumph for their cause. I have no papers linking me to the American government, alas, but I do have a reputation as a practitioner of *vaudou*. My name is Marie Laveau."

Ned's first thought, absurdly, was that the surname should surely have been Leveau, as *veau* was a masculine noun—but this was the Caribbean, where grammatical niceties probably did not apply. He did, however, know what a *maroon* was: the result of interbreeding between runaway slaves and the native islanders whom Europeans persisted in calling “Indians.” He had also heard the term *vaudou* before, in sinister and superstitious contexts.

“Are you saying that you’re some kind of witch?” he asked. “Is that why we aren’t going to die.”

“Put crudely,” she said, “yes. Whites and mulattos consider *vaudou* to be a kind of witchcraft, or black magic, while blacks consider it a kind of hybrid religion. There are many varieties of it, even in Haiti, and in New Orleans the situation is even more confused, because of its confusion with Cuban Santeria. As to what it really is...well, some of its hybrid forms incorporate the traditions of the Tairo, reputedly handed down from Queen Anacaona herself, of whom I’m said to be a descendant, and a reincarnation. There’s no proof of that, by European or American standards—the Tairo’s genealogical records were purely oral, and now that the tribe is extinct, save for its *zambo* and *mestizo* relics...well, a great deal has to be taken on trust, even if one holds the secrets.”

“I’m sorry,” Ned said, “but I don’t understand many of the terms you’re citing. Who are—or were—the Tairo?”

“The original inhabitants of the island that Columbus called Hispaniola—the island he mistook for the Garden of Eden, although that didn’t stop him making war on the island’s Queen, Anacaona. Her forces initially defeated his, despite Spanish steel and firepower, but he had secret weapons of whose power even he was ignorant: measles and smallpox. What military power failed to do, disease achieved. Anacaona’s depleted forces were eventually defeated, and she was executed. The Spaniards were obsessed with gold, stealing all they could find and opening mines of their own; they had no interest in the Tairo’s knowledge and arts apart from that. What they did discover of the Tairo’s beliefs and practices, their priests condemned as devilry, which they considered it their holy duty to obliterate.

“When the Tairo retreated to the hills and forests, the Spaniards followed their usual policy of importing African slaves to labor in their mines and their plantations. As usual, many ran away and found refuge with the Tairo, with whom they interbred to produce the *zambo*—the *maroons* of Hispaniola. In the meantime, the Spaniards interbred too, with both the Tairo, producing *mestizos*, and the blacks, producing mulattos. Although they were second-class citizens, despised by the whites, the *mestizos* and the mulattos remained agents of the colonial force, electing in their turn to despise the *zambo*, and developing a fierce hatred for them, and for the remnants of Tairo wisdom that the *zambo* preserved within their own version of *vaudou*.

“*Vaudou* was, of course, primarily a black institution, but it mutated in various ways among such marginal populations as the *zambo* and the mulattos, accommodating itself to circumstance. My *vaudou* is not the same as black or mulatto *vaudou*, and is opposed by them as fiercely as heresies invisible to external eyes have been opposed within Christendom. As Spanish authority was succeeded by French authority in the western half of the island, which became Saint-Domingue, the situation was complicated further, but the underlying factors remained the same. The American Revolution and the French Revolution were followed by a Haitian Revolution—but neither the American nor the French revolutionaries were sympathetic to the Haitian one...and you must surely know the rest, Monsieur Knob, if you are any sort of agent at all.”

“I’m a spy, not a diplomat,” Ned reminded her, wryly. “But yes, I’m vaguely familiar with recent political developments, and the re-establishment of Boyer’s republic. I know that Saint-Domingue was the richest of all France’s colonies, supplying enormous quantities of sugar, tobacco and other produce, and that the restored monarchy would be very glad indeed to re-establish control of it, formally or informally. England and America, for their own reasons, would prefer that no such control was re-exerted, although neither nation would go so far as to attempt an actual conquest of all or part of the island. All in all, it’s what we in England call a *can of worms*.”

“It’s more like a bucketful of snakes,” she told him. “Mercifully, you killed the *mestizos*’ agents, and Desart was more inclined to put my powers to a trial by ordeal than simply slit my throat. He threw you in, I suppose, merely to add a little spice to the situation.”

“But not Trelawny?”

“No—for some reason, Desart was inclined to befriend Trelawny. I find it strange that Lord Byron’s authority should be taken more seriously by La Tortue’s pirates than that of King George, but the intricacies of British politics are far beyond my comprehension.”

“How did this Desart contrive to intercept the *Belleville*?” Ned wanted to know. “According to Captain Argile, we made an unusually fast crossing. How could news of our arrival possibly have outdistanced us?”

“Ships leave Le Havre for the New World almost every day,” she told him. “The *Belleville*’s cargo and passenger list were matters of common knowledge for a week before she sailed. Ships bound for Florida and New Orleans left within that week, making their first ports of call in the Bahamas. The news flew south from there. That, at least, required no magic.”

Ned looked at her quizzically, trying to assemble all the information she had given to him into a coherent whole.

“You may ask me the question, if you wish,” she said. “I shan’t take offence.”

Ned was wary of a trap, so he said: “What question?”

“Don’t pretend to be more innocent than you are, Monsieur Knob. Short as you are, I know you’re no child. I can believe that terms like *Tairo* and *zambo* are unfamiliar to you, but you must have heard talk of *vaudou*, and I know what associations the word must conjure up in your mind.”

“Even so,” Ned said, still exceedingly wary, “I’m unsure as to what question you expect me to raise.”

“Don’t you want to know,” she said, “whether the secrets of which I claim custody include the secret of making *zombies*—of resurrecting the dead?”