

Mary Ann has asked me to write down, for you and you only, my “best adventure” as a gift. Apparently you are under the impression that I was some kind of buccaneer. I was not a pirate; I was an officer in the finest service in the world, and I have never wished to be known, like so many old seafarers, as a spinner of outrageous yarns. But Mary Ann must be obeyed.

Be warned, my “best adventure” did not take place at sea. In its most hair-raising part it was a land adventure, though it followed, in my opinion, the greatest sea battle ever fought.

Of that battle I will only say that in my little ship Pickle we saw more than anyone, terrible things that I prefer not to speak of. Afterwards a westerly gale blew up and days passed before the commander in chief summonsed me for a special mission. He looked like a corpse as he stood bracing his legs against the lurches of the ship (his dog Bounce, poor thing, was seasick - lolling on his side on the bare boards of the cabin).

I was to take the news of what had happened to London - a great honour.

In fact a treasure trove of rewards was now within my reach. A heap of money, the chance to make the leap from lieutenant to commander. Everything that had held me back - was it lack of connections? My foreign-sounding name? Plain old bad luck? All were suddenly vanished.

But to claim the reward I would have to be first with the news.

Over the years people have asked me, “did you run?” They like the idea of me in my lieutenant’s uniform, boat cloak billowing behind, bolting down the jetty at Falmouth, sprinting from coach to coaching Inn, tearing breathlessly down corridors at Admiralty House.

Let me be clear: an officer of His Britannic Majesty’s Navy does not run. It smacks of panic. The great thing is to achieve excellence without apparent effort. But I admit I did run, just once, faster than I ever ran before or since, and blindly. In truth the journey was hell itself, something that has been my secret these many years. I share it with you now because it was indeed my greatest adventure. Read it, take from it what you will and afterwards please burn this paper.

My foot touched dry land the first time in many months at Falmouth’s Fish Strand Quay. On Pickle the furthest you could walk in a single direction was twenty three paces. It felt wonderful to be striding along, not at the mercy of wind and current but using my limbs.

A small crowd had gathered. More approached. The whole country was waiting to hear if the fleets had met. The people of Falmouth knew that a ship like Pickle carries news, the way we launched our boat immediately on anchoring suggested urgency.

“What news?” was shouted several times.

“I have dispatches of great importance,” I announced, to no-one in particular. A man fell into step beside me, asking, “Do you have anything for the readers of The Flying Post?” I was tempted to tell him to take a flying leap into the harbour. If the Post ever spelled my name right before that day or since, I never saw it. I enquired about the weather and when he replied that it had not rained in nearly a week I tightened my fist in victory. The roads would

be dry.

“Will you not give me anything for the Post?” he pleaded, so I spelled out my name “L - A - P - E - N - O - T - I - E - R - E,” before diving into an alleyway.

I went straight to the office of the naval commissioner, Captain John Bowen, my old friend and neighbour from Ilfracombe. It was an agony to have no time to tell him about the battle or indeed the storm that had forced me to have our heaviest guns heaved overboard like so much jetsam. But John understood my situation immediately. He declared I could not present myself at the Admiralty in rags (my silk stockings were in tatters). A runner was sent to the Royal Hotel to order me a postchaise express while we walked briskly to his house. There he dug out stockings and his old lieutenant’s dress coat (in better shape than my own and - what luxury - dry as a bone!) He ordered his cook to make me up a basket of provisions.

At the Royal a post-chaise was ready with post boy in the saddle. Of course the ‘post boys’ (or postillions) are not boys at all - they are small wiry men, often in their sixth decade. This one was called Geoffrey.

We were off and almost immediately I realised I had left the food basket behind on the ground by the main doors of the hotel. I had momentarily placed it there to take shake John’s hand and take receipt of a purse. He had kindly gathered all his ready cash knowing that while I could order coaches on the Navy account, without cash for tips I was sunk. As we trotted away I heard John shout “Your basket!” but I roared at Geoffrey to keep going.

Ahead of me lay nearly three hundred miles of road, in the western section much of it little more than drovers’ tracks. Twenty staging posts where I would have to engage fresh horses and post boys or coach drivers at all times of day and night. It was a journey that, in those days, could take three weeks.

The place names ahead tolled through my mind like a bell, each would have its own challenges. A lazy or inefficient ostler perhaps, or a lack of horses, there were endless things to worry about but I knew that I would be wiser to catch some sleep. The way those coaches are suspended produces a rhythmic swaying, not unlike being in a bumboat in a fresh gale. But any hope of sleep evaporated when a notion began to gnaw at me like a rat in the hold.

Following the storm off Finisterre we had encountered The Nautilus, a sloop under Captain Sykes. It was an awkward situation. Sykes, a post captain, was my superior but I judged the dispatches I carried to be of such importance that it should be he who was rowed across to me and we hoisted a signal ordering him aboard.

Sykes, as he stood stooped in my little cabin listening to my account of the battle, showed no obvious sign of having been insulted. But he then announced that he would “take things from here”. His sloop, he argued, was a faster and more reliable a means of transport for the momentous news.

Fortunately I was able to point out that my orders stated that I was to take the dispatches personally to the Admiralty. I do not lay any blame upon Sykes; ambition runs fierce in the veins of every officer, but as we piped him overboard I noted, in his last glance, a look of animal cunning, like that of a wolf that has seen a juicy lamb carefully locked away in a stable.

As I rocked back and forth in the post-chaise, watching the hunched figure of Geoffrey through the split glass in front of me, I began to reflect on that look. Captain Sykes' visit to Pickle had been brief and he had not had time to copy Admiral Collingwood's neat handwriting - but the news was clear enough and easily memorised.

What would he do next?

Would he continue to cruise off Finisterre, as his orders required him or, with all the uncertainties of the sea in time of war, would he take a chance that Pickle might meet with delay or disaster? Another storm? An enemy squadron? A dead calm? Would he then calculate that he would be welcome at the Admiralty, even with a second hand account of the battle?

I had last seen his sails off Portugal's Burling Island, heading North, and I had wondered then if he had chosen to make a race of it. I now became convinced that he had.

All rewards would be his if he beat me.

I had disembarked at Falmouth because the wind had dropped away to almost nothing. We had been forced to use the sweeps for five full hours off the Scillies (leading to mutinous grumbling amongst the crew). But Sykes would most likely have sailed straight for Plymouth and might (hideous thought!) be ahead of me already.

I struggled with the catch that held fast the little window in the front of the carriage and ordered Geoffrey to shout, on his approach to the Red Lion at Truro, that a naval officer had urgent dispatches and required fresh horses immediately.

This had an unfortunate effect. There were two post boys standing by the entrance to the stables (their great white coats buttoned to the neck) and they both leaped into action, no doubt sensing that a large tip was in the offing. By the time we came to rest they were scrabbling about in the dust like wrinkled urchins, throwing violent punches and swearing like sailors. The ostler appeared and attempted to separate them but it seems their dispute had unleashed years of pent up resentment and it was not until the cad appeared (a huge youth with a permanent lopsided grin) and threw a bucket of cold water over them that peace was restored. Geoffrey then offered to ride another stage which started the whole thing up again and I found myself roaring like a master's mate in a gale.

In the Navy you learn that the only thing that matters is the job in hand. Laying blame, especially in the heat of action, makes no sense. Geoffrey's shout had created a frenzy of greed, that was my own fault. What is more I had lost my composure. Fists had flown and confusion reigned but I needed to get moving.

I addressed the ostler thus: "I carry dispatches of great importance and must leave now for the Blue Anchor at Fraddon. If fresh horses are in place with a post boy mounted when I return from the bar then I have three shillings for you to distribute as you see fit."

I had hoped to order something to eat but too much time had been lost and I merely attended to my most pressing needs. On my emergence fresh horses were indeed harnessed and one of the two fighting post boys was in place, looking damp but triumphant.

It was then that I felt the first painful pangs of hunger that were to bedevil me. At each inn I would contemplate ordering every kind of delicacy, then I would imagine Sykes showered with promotions, money, untold glories and all because I insisted on waiting for food to be prepared by some slow-moving rustic. I had been married to Mary Ann little over a month and already she was inclined to tease me, in her letters, for what she termed my “gluttony”. Imagine having to tell her that my whole career had been blighted because of it! All that day as I passed through Fraddon then Bodmin, then Launceton around ten in the evening, I had visions of roast chickens, pork pies and whole sides of bacon. But at each stop the practicalities of paying tips, finding the ostler, throwing more money around to get them to understand my plight, swallowing a glass of beer and visiting the toilet prevented me from ordering so much as a pickled egg. Finally at Oakhampton, in the dead of night, I could bear it no longer and asked the landlady if she could throw together some kind of picnic. To my horror she declared herself eaten out of house and home by a large and unexpected party of travellers. She then mentioned a type of ‘preserved herring’ which she kept about the place for just such emergencies. In my famished state, God knows why, it sounded delicious.

Once on route to Crockernwell I exposed the fish from its greased paper and found that a thick slice of stale bread accompanied it. I sunk my teeth into the bread and immediately felt a molar crack in my right cheek. I shifted my attention to the fish and became aware of a faint unpleasant smell. For once my instincts failed me. Hunger had driven me half mad and I savaged that carcass like a ravening beast. With a fish bone still in my gums I began to regret it.

My stomach began to rumble like an active volcano. Visions tormented me. Would the coach arrive at The Golden Lion at Exeter in the dead of night bearing my poisoned carcass? What would become of the dispatch? I imagined a half-witted cad rifling through my leather folder and scratching his head at the elegant handwriting, baffled by words that reordered the world.

Suddenly my stomach expelled a substantial part of the offending material onto the floor of the coach. I just had time to open the door before I vomited the rest. I managed to scrape a good part of it out using an old copy of the Flying Post but the stench, combined with the acute stomach cramps and the wild rocking of the coach as we passed, in total blackness, along rutted tracks, made that night one of the hardest I ever endured.

I arrived at Exeter an hour or so before dawn. Although exhausted beyond reckoning my spirits were lifted by the thought that the worst roads lay behind me. In addition my stomach seemed finally to have settled and I was able to drink a glass of water without incident. The post-chaise could go no further and I was forced to engage another with four horses, the harnessing of which took a little time. The landlord persuaded me to order a plate of cold pork with pease pudding and potatoes to complete my recovery. I was lifting the first forkful into my mouth when the barkeep mentioned, casually, that great events must be afoot as ‘another naval officer passed through here, in a similar hurry, not four hours ago.’

Within a second I was out in the yard roaring at post boys and cads until I was puce. Once again only the promise of money produced any results but within minutes I was once again on my way. All my fears were justified. I was in a race with Sykes and he was winning by miles.

What can I say of that journey? Starving, weakened by illness, half mad with anxiety and self reproach, I knew not a moment of sleep or peace or comfort. At Honiton, Axminster, Bridport I asked to be informed how recently Sykes had passed through only to be told that he was “a fine looking officer, in a great rush” or that he was “clearly bearing momentous news of national importance.” It took all my self control not to scream at these innocents with their infuriating cheerfulness and refusal to answer my actual questions. To add to my torture I was forced to carefully distribute mail that had been placed into my care by West Country officers. Those given to me by Captain Hardy, for his family and his friends the Roberts, required me to go off my route to Burton Bradstock, causing me to lose countless precious minutes. Sykes of course carried no such burdens.

But I had one thing on my side. Yes Sykes was ahead but he could not know that I was immediately behind him. He would be making all haste but there are always ways to speed things along when your plight is desperate. I wasted no time in ordering refreshments and spoke loudly of handsome tips to inspire the post boys to greater feats of horsemanship. The result was that as we passed through Honiton, Axminster and Bridport the gap between us began to close. By the time we passed through Dorchester about noon on the 5th of November only an hour separated us. Sykes no doubt felt that he was doing everything humanly possible to speed himself along but would he think of depriving himself of a toilet break? I had grabbed an old tin chamber pot being used as a dog bowl outside the George in Axminster and am not ashamed to admit I made liberal use of it. Flinging my waste out of a moving carriage may not be refined behaviour but it meant I did not have to disappear inside the various hostelrys for even a moment.

But as the second day progressed a new problem presented itself. At Blandford I shifted back to a post-chaise and the post boy commented that I had picked a ‘funny old day for it,’ a remark which I ignored until he dismounted at Woodyates and pointed out to me that it was bonfire night. “And not any old bonfire night,” he added before striding off. I had no time to press him for an explanation and as we crossed Salisbury plain I saw, in the far distance ahead, a dot of canary yellow disappearing over a hill. Realising that it must be Sykes’ post-chaise all thoughts of Guy Fawkes were dispelled from my mind until we reached The White Hart at Andover where a large crowd of revellers was preparing to put flame to the most enormous bonfire I ever saw. I was even accosted by a gang of impertinent ragamuffins who informed me that it was “200 year to the day since the wicked Gunpowder Plot” and demanded a “penny for the Guy”. I gave them short shrift then thought better of it and engaged them to clear a way through the throng on my departure.

The next part of my journey passed like a vivid nightmare. The sheer scale of the raging fires I passed made me wonder if some new national madness had taken hold. Of course the fires spooked the horses who became skittish. The roads were thronging with people bearing flaming torches, many the worse for drink, but to add to my woes the population seems to have got hold of some infernal new breed of firework which they ignited without thought. The distant ones were bad enough but when some fool fired one up at the roadside the leader horse was driven instantly mad by the colossal “BANG” and the pair of them bolted.

To be on a post-chaise in the pitch dark, when the horses bolt was, and remains, the most terrifying experience of my life, and I have sailed the seven seas and survived every horror the oceans can devise. The postillion, realising that he risked killing someone, yelled like a maniac and people threw themselves into hedges as we passed. At one moment he

turned in his saddle to shout at me, “They just wants their stable sir!”

Sure enough, though the postillion had no more control of the horses than I would Pickle in a typhoon, the terrified animals knew exactly where they were going and we soon roared into the courtyard of The Crown at Basingstoke where they finally slowed to a trot and then brought themselves to a panting standstill. It was only then that it occurred to me that we had probably completed the stage in record time and that I must now be breathing down Sykes’ neck.

We were nearing London and the hour was late. Bonfires still glowed in the dark but the populace was abed. At Hartford Bridge I was informed that Sykes had departed just fifteen minutes before me. But how could I hope to catch him in the dark and even if I did, how could we overtake another coach in these or any conditions? And yet I kept going. Why give up If the game is not lost? At Bagshot the ostler seemed to think that Sykes was a half an hour ahead of me but I just cursed his timekeeping. Then at Hounslow a fog came down and we were plunged into a blackness so deep that I was forced to pay the postillion a whole guinea to keep going. The bells tolled midnight as the horses felt their way forward and then all my hopes were dashed. The postboy pulled up the horses and we ground to a complete halt. This was not just a fog: it was a smog thickened up with the smoke of a thousand London bonfires. He was relying on the horses’ own knowledge of the route but he knew for certain that the street should not be so narrow and it was clear we had taken a wrong turn. We were lost and the street too narrow to turn around.

The silence was terrible. Would it end here? Was I to be a lieutenant into my dotage, with barely enough pay to feed myself let alone a family? This was failure that could not be brushed aside. To have been honoured with such a mission and to have handed it to another man! But I did not give in to despair. I recalled my mother telling me that where there is life there is hope.

I leaped from the carriage and made my way blindly down the narrow street, literally feeling my way along walls. I would find a turning place.

And then I heard horses snorting in the blackness. I approached and found another post-chaise, the mirror of mine, and daring to peak inside I saw a captain’s bicorn hat on the seat in the dim light of the lantern.

It was Sykes carriage and he was not in it. Like me he was stumbling about in the dark.

That was when I ran.

Using my internal compass to guide me I ran back towards my carriage at full pelt. I remember even now the cold fog rushing past my face, the mad exhilaration. I could win after all but I must now risk all. Had I run into a wall I would have knocked my brains out.

I almost crashed into the leader horse. I grabbed its chinstrap and began to drag it in the opposite direction. Those carriages may not turn on a penny but by God with a bit of determination they very nearly can! The postilion, sensing that I was possessed, kept his peace.

I leaped aboard and shouted "Forward", and it was then that I heard, emanating from back down that befogged street, Sykes letting out a great cry of fury, topped off with oaths too blasphemous to repeat. Within moments we found where the horses had lost their way and we were back on track.

We entered Whitehall from the south. I suddenly became painfully aware of my appearance. I was unwashed and unshaven, but at least I wore good stockings, and (thank heavens) I would be observed only by lamplight or less. I heard the bell of Westminster Abbey toll the hour of one in the morning and calculated that I had made the journey in thirty-eight hours.

As we pulled up in front of the Admiralty building I heard another carriage approaching from the North. Sykes must have panicked and taken another route in a last desperate effort to overtake. I had beaten him by minutes.

I descended the carriage and gave the postboy the biggest tip of my life - then walked inside, for all the world like a man returning from an evening stroll. The doormen at the Admiralty are not fools and I was led immediately up the stairs and into the presence of William Marsden, the First Secretary, who was working late in the board room. Hunched over a document, by the light of a single candle, he turned to look at me as I was ushered in. I held out the leather folder containing the dispatch but his eyes remained fixed on mine.

"Sir, we have gained a great victory," I declared, "but we have lost Lord Nelson."