

# Bad Business

Peter had lain in filth in the little nest he had created in his corner of Newgate Prison for days going over scenes from his life during the past year. He had taken water and something like mashed oats and potato offered by a prisoner who spoke kindly to him and whose voice he could hear close by from time to time. This person had carried him up a flight of steps and had settled him on some warm straw. He could hear many voices: talking over the general noise; shouting, laughing and, all too often, crying and wailing. From time to time a woman would whisper to him and sing soft songs. But Peter had no care to open his eyes. He wished he could close off his ears and his nose. Just shut out this noisy, stinking world around him forever.

Peter recalled the day he had been taken to be examined before the Worshipful Charles Pinfold, Doctor of Law. He had been badly shaken by the ordeal and all the details he had had to explain. When he had returned to his cell at Marshalsea Prison he had become ill, really sick. Eventually, he had been taken to a small, light room with smooth plaster walls and a small window which let sunshine in, but only early in the morning. Peter had heard sounds of city clamour outside the prison walls but, in his misery, had been sure he would never be free again. In this room, Peter had been on his own for most of the time. Dobson and Phinnes had spent some hours with him. They had tried to reassure Peter he had done nothing bad. "We'll all be out of here soon, you'll see," they repeated to his thin, inert body. Peter had discovered that the best escape from all his troubles was to imagine Hubbins was there with him. He would decide to think of nothing but the cat's soft fur and the purring sound he used to make when they curled up together in their hammock. He would imagine he was stroking the cat; he would see its green eyes, the patches of brown and white on the cat's sides, the stripes round his neck, his white paws and tummy. In this way Peter had drifted off into long spells of deep sleep. He believed he needed no-one.

Then, one day, he had been taken outside. Peter was escorted, once more, to be examined by Doctor Charles Pinfold. This time he was allowed to sit on a wooden chair. There was that smell again he had thought, the beeswax, to bring back all the horrors that tore at him. However, the examination on this occasion had been short. Pinfold asked Peter to clearly name those men whom he thought to be the murders and add those who had acted as true pirates. It was over for him now, he had reckoned as, instead of returning him to his familiar, cold white room, Peter had been marched, staggering, round to Newgate Prison.



Peter had been *so* sick when he arrived through the gate into a yard. The smell was horrendous. Marshalsea had been a palace in comparison to all this he had judged. Women screeched and laughed round him. He knew no-one at all. What had he done to deserve all of this? As he had entered a building a young, tattered girl had taken Peter to a corner at the far side of an open drain which trickled across the stone floor. She explained she had come to see her mother! The girl had given Peter some bread and left.

Now Peter wondered if he had ever eaten it. He wondered that, if he had given in to screaming or wailing, would anyone have heard him above the raucous din. As if the stench of packed human bodies and filth was not bad enough, there was the tobacco smoke and stale ale to get used to. The sickness subsided, but the food which was taken to him each afternoon was cold, uncooked gruel. What had it been? He recalled hearing Phinnes urging him to eat. Phinnes and Dobson had tried from time to time he was sure. They must be close by Peter thought but had

no energy to sit up. Peter remembered the man who carried him to the place where he now lay. He could here that man's voice now.

The voice talked about Orkney and he heard his ship the *George* mentioned. Peter opened his eyes and he tried to listen through the prison din; all the other shouts and jabbering. The voice was boasting about his part in turning in a bunch of pirates to the law. "I turned 'em all in, I did. Could have cost me me life and what do I get? No gold medal, not even thanks. I'm thrown in here and left while most of 'em get off home. Free men." Peter pushed his back up against the cold stone wall and leaned on one arm to see the man. Who was this person?

The old sailor was now telling his audience about his shipwreck in the northern islands. His ship, *Lovely*, had been smashed to bits in a westerly gale below the cliffs of Hoy among the islands of Orkney. Having made it ashore, he had lived on the island by fishing and helping the farmers until someone, probably wanting rid of him Peter thought, told him about the *George* in Stromness.

"The crew had near but all deserted her. The *George* needed a crew and I needed off the islands. Cold and bleak they are. How anyone can live there I'll never understand. Where was I? Ah yes, the pirates."

Peter interrupted the man before he launched into another great spiel.

"I escaped from that ship, the *George*..." he began

"Oh, it lives!" the voice called and Peter could see a lean, very pale and filthy man point at him. The man came and stood over Peter.

"Come on Boy. You must try out these legs to see if they still work. I've been keeping you fed, but I was beginning to think ye were a lost cause."

The thin man pulled Peter up onto his legs but he sank back into the damp nest he'd been sitting in.

"Oh no, you don't get off that easily Boy. Ethel will be along here today. She's my old lady and she's been taking food in for the two of us. We must get you cleaned up and show her you were worth her bother.

He pulled Peter up again and leaned him up against the wall. Peter's head swam. Everything around him whirled around, but Peter became determined to find out more from this man. He maybe knew what had become of his friends. What about William Harvey? Had he ever seen Hubbins?

"Where is the *George*?" Peter groaned as he felt himself sway. The man steadied Peter as he rubbed the boy's bare legs with straw.

"It's a good job Ethel has your breeches Boy. We'll have you respectable in no time She took 'em to keep 'em clean for you, and your tunic." The man wrapped Peter in the blanket he wore round his shoulders. It felt warm.

"You'll soon be fit and fine again Boy. My old lady likes to look after young uns. We have none of our own."

The man sat Peter down on some dry straw he took from a sack. "She thinks of everything does ol' Ethel."

"Pleased to meet you, Boy, whoever you are, though those lads you were with tell me you're called Peter. I am William Punton and come from the town of Harrington in England. My wife, Ethel, has come to London to be near me through these long days, bless her. So, you escaped off the old *George*?"

Peter told Punton how he, along with nine others from the ship, had escaped because they thought things were turning for the worse on board. They were sure they would all be captured and hung for other men's crimes if they remained on the ship.

"Well Boy, you were right there. I thought I'd made a good choice in joining the ship; my chance to get back to sea and home again, but as soon as we weighed anchor it turned bad. There was one young lad, William Clouston, nephew to the master. His dad came rowing out to the ship as we was gettin' ready to leave, but Gow would not let the man board the ship to see his lad. The boy was locked in that cell below deck. His dad rowed hard after the *George*, but we were going some in a good wind, so the poor man had to give up. William Clouston's father had been assured by Gow that he would take great care of the boy and train him to be a captain. At that time the Cloustons, just like I had, believed that the *George* was a respectable merchant ship. But on leaving, with the boy's desperate father following, I knew there was something far wrong, and that was just the start of it all."

"Where are all the crew? Are they here?" Peter longed to see some of his old mates.

"They are hereabouts, but not in such good quarters as we are. There's Orkney men down there who know not a soul in this city. They have no one to pay for their food. They're below on prison rations; in prison *care*. It was bad till I got word to Ethel and she came up to London. My Ethel, see, she works at the inn she been staying at and earns a bit too to help me out in here. That's why we're up here and they're down below. It's bad down there."

Peter looked around at the squalor and wondered what it was like *below*.

"Can I see them?"

"If you like. We can visit any of the folks in here, but wait till you get your breeches Boy."

"Who is still locked up here?"

"Let me try to recall all their names. There's that shower of rough fellas from across the North Sea who keep mainly to themselves. There's some Scots men among that crowd; Winter, Rollson, Peterson, Macaulay, Melvin and Moor."

"What about John Gow?"

"He keeps himself to himself. He got a beating. A wild Welshman called James Williams rushed at him and gave him a fair pounding. Williams arrived from a hearing at the Doctors' Commons. He said he'd been banished from Gow's ship as a prisoner and turned in to the authorities in Lisbon. He said Gow was a fool. They could all have been free and wealthy if it was not for the idiot, Gow. When he was finished with him,

Williams had spat on Gow and said he should have finished him when he had the chance off Africa. He blamed Gow for all sorts of crimes and gave him one final kick before cursing him and telling Gow he'd spare him for them at the Old Bailey to finish off. Gow never spoke to any of us ever again. I believe he has a sorry heart and truly blames himself for all our troubles today. And, give him his due; he was always proper to me. I think that man got into bad company. He could be a fine captain on the right ship."

"I know James Williams. Is he still in Newgate?"

Aye Boy. He's a bit of a loaner too, but maybe not by choice. He's a bad un.

Some of the men who were on the ship were lucky. After the first hearing in April they were sent off home" Peter was tired. Maybe that was what happened to his friend William Oliver. He's been freed and gone away home. He would look for John Gow, soon as he could.

"Among the others I know here," Punton continued, "are the Orkney men: William Pottinger and Magnus Hewison, two young fellas from one of Orkney's north isles, Westray. They were kept below deck, until we sailed to the north islands, along with young William Clouston and two other unfortunates, Magnus Rendall and James Cromarty. They are here in Newgate too.

Magnus Rendall, a tailor's apprentice from Stromness came to have a look at the ship one day with his friend. Once the crew heard his trade they paid him to come on board to mend their clothes. He spent the night on board. Gow asked him to join the ship and the boy was pleased to do that. Ah, but when he asked to go ashore next morning to take leave of his friends, Belbin refused this wish. When he persisted, Belbin threatened to shoot him. Young Rendall called to his friend, Peter Craigie, who came rowing out with the day's supplies of eggs and milk next morning, but Belbin and his men took Rendall off below deck and locked him up with the others."

Peter jumped. He was wide awake now. "What became of Craigie? Is he here too?"

"No Lad. Gow tried every day to get him aboard, but the lad never ever stepped on the deck of the *George*. He'd pass up his goods, wait for payment and row off to shore. Every morning Gow told the boy he'd make him rich if he'd come and join us. We really needed crew to get away anywhere. When Craigie shouted for his friend, Rendall, that last morning to come to the rowing boat, he even called to his friend that he was in danger. "They're pirates!" he had called and, at that point, Rollson pulled out his cutlass and rushed to the side of the ship to get the boy. Craigie was off and rowing faster than anyone ever did. He was safe, but his friend was already below deck.

Another lad who joined us on the *George* was a poor fellow called Edward Gunn. He can tell you his tale when you see him. He's an unfortunate soul. Then there's Alexander Robb, Timothy Murphy, William Booth and two French men.

There are two men who were worried about your health. You seemed to be with them when you arrived here at Newgate, but you weren't talking to anyone during those days. I think you would be a goner by now if it was not for my Ethel insisting you came along with me when I moved to these *finer* surroundings"

"Please tell me who they are. I must find them."

"Their names, I think, are Phinnes and Dobson."

Peter remembered that, of the ten who had escaped on the longboat, just three were detained here at Newgate. Phinnes and Dobson's friends, Wheatly and Newport, who had gone to find work together in Aberdeen, were still there held, in prison, on other charges. Two had never been rounded up. Peter's fighting comrades off the *Bachelor*, who had been caught with him at the river crossing on the Forth had been freed after the preliminary hearing. That left Peter here in Newgate with Phinnes and Dobson.

"Is there a William Oliver here, and do you know of my friends, Harry Jamieson or William Harvey?"

Peter was desperate now to find his friends.

"Jamieson and Oliver, I'm told, was set free after that hearing and never came to this hell hole. I know William Harvey though. He talked of Jamieson and his tricks. We will look for Harvey when you are fixed up and ready. It seems that we are a divided bunch off the *George*. Some of the men are to be tried at the Old Bailey. I'm told some will be charged with murder and piracy and others with piracy. The rest have been kept in this mess to be witnesses against the others. It's a bad job. Do not be talking too much about what you know and have been asked. They're all looking at each other down there and wondering. Rollson and his gang blame me for turning them in at the end."

Liz Punton arrived and gave her husband a peck on the cheek. As she did this she noticed Peter sitting up and gushed towards him, smothering the boy in cuddles.

"I knew it. See how he's come through all his woes Bill. I knew it. Children are strong. Here you go." And she handed Peter some warm bread bundled up in a cloth.

"Steady on Liz. Don't forget about me, an' he'll just get sick if he tucks in to that lot."

Peter broke off a bit for himself and handed the bread to William Punton

"I'll be back soon," Liz announced and rushed off again. Punton shrugged and ate.

After a while Liz bounced back and handed Peter his breeches, tunic and a fine red apple. Liz was bright red also, and out of breath. Peter caught a faint rose perfume which reminded him, for a moment, of his aunt in Sweden and all her kindness.

Liz was a short woman, but well built Peter noted. He wondered if she always smiled. Peter knew she must hate visiting this stinking hole but must love her Bill, as she called him, very much.

"My but it's hot out today. I can't stay long. Work to do."

She fussed over Peter: wanted to wash him with the rosewater she brought! But he promised to do this himself as soon as she was gone, which he did. Finally semi decent and dressed Peter thought that he would go off in search of his friends, but he was so weak he didn't make it further than a few yards. Punton helped him back to their little space. Peter slept.

"Is he alright?"

Peter recognised that voice and opened his eyes to find William Harvey peering down at him.

"Course I'm fine. You're looking a bit thin William." Peter was excited to have his friend by him again.

The boys laughed. Colour came to Peter's cheeks for the first time in weeks. Peter was glad to hear that his friend, Oly, had been freed, but sad he had never come to say goodbye. He wondered where he was now.

"Sit here young Harvey. Now we've found you and we have plenty of time I want to know what went on with you all on the *George* before I joined." Punton gave Harvey the sack of straw to sit on and a crust of bread to eat.

William Harvey began and between them they told Punton how Harvey had come to be part of the pirate crew. John Gow had kept him locked in the hold after being captured off the *Bachelor*. He was young and strong and Gow would need him. He had only been allowed on deck after the *George* arrived in Orkney.

"After you and the others left in the longboat, Peter, there was not enough crew to man the ship. Robert Reid ran off and so did William Oliver and Harry Jamieson. The farmer, Archie Sutor gave Reid his horse to ride to Kirkwall to alert the authorities about our pirate ship. Before he set off Reid told Sutor about Belbin and Peterson's plans to rob Mr Henry Graham's fine house in Stromness, among others. He had told Sutor that they expected to get around £1,000 or that man Graham's life. What I dislike Reid for, more than anything, is that he told the authorities that John Gow was behind all the plans. I do not think this was ever the case. I believe that Gow just wanted to spend the winter in Stromness, relax and enjoy the time there. I think this would have worked had it not been for those like Belbin who seemed, by all accounts, to be turning as bloodthirsty and greedy as Williams had been. There was bad business going on. When Gow got back from his honeymoon there were not many of us left. Rollson had an armed guard on us. One Orkney man, Pottinger, simply came out to the ship looking for Harry Jamieson. Jamieson had some medical skills, at least he made out he did. Pottinger had some ailment regarding his left arm and wished to see Jamieson, but Harry Jamieson and William Oliver had escaped a couple of nights before he arrived. Belbin locked Pottinger up on the ship along with his friend, Magnus Hewison.

These Orkney men should not be kept in this place. They had no choice but to do as they were bid by Belbin, Rollson and that gang.

James Cromarty is a poor thing and lies in the muck downstairs. He was employed by an old school friend of John Gow's, Andrew Baikie, from the island of Hoy to row him out to the ship. Baikie and Gow sat drinking in the cabin all day. After a while Cromarty was asked up onto the quarterdeck to take a dram. There Gow asked him if he would join the ship. Cromarty said he'd never been to sea. He then noticed that Baikie had set off for the shore without him and became alarmed, whereupon Peterson, with cutlass in hand, seized him and forced the boy into the cabin. A little later, however, Cromarty contrived to slip over the side of the ship. He swam to a boat moored nearby, but he was soon missed by Belbin and Macaulay who rowed over and carried him back. He was told that if he tried that again he would be shot.

Belbin has thick skin. The ship was in bad need of crew, but Belbin is unbelievable. On February 7<sup>th</sup> he had rowed over, with two others, to the ship, *True Love*, anchored close by the *George*. There, armed with pistols, the three men forced a middle aged man named John Emmerson to go with them. Fearful, Emmerson had said he would gladly go with them but that he felt loyal to his master and owner of the *True Love*. Belbin told him they had come for men, and men they would have. He was taken.

Next day Macaulay and some others visited a Stromness inn. There they pressed a young boy named William Hughes into service. Hughes was cabin boy to Captain Oyson off the *True Love*. Oyson had had enough by this time and bravely came on board the *George* to get young Hughes and Emmerson back. Gow calmly pointed out to the visitor that, although he could sympathise with the fact that Oyson was now short of crew

for the *True Love*, he was, indeed, surrounded by pistols and cutlasses. He should therefore visit Hughes and Emerson to bid them farewell and leave the ship promptly. This the man did.

Stromness was no longer a safe place for Gow and his ship. None of us could go ashore. The town was arming itself against us. We weighed anchor in a big rush late in the afternoon of February 10<sup>th</sup> and slipped into Scapa Flow. Just one side of the *George* was careened and everything was in a poor state of repair. That evening we dropped the anchor, under darkness, just east of Stromness Bay. Gow, Belbin, Winter and Rollson had been arguing in the captain's cabin since we had left Stromness. Rollson gave the order to drop anchor. Peterson had been at the wheel and giving the orders as the ship sailed out of Stromness. Belbin took a group of men ashore in a small rowing dinghy."

"I was among that group," Punton started.

"We crept up to the looming shadow of the two-storey home of Mr Robert Honeyman, the laird, or owner, of one Orkney's largest estates. He was also the High Sheriff of Orkney and we knew he would not be at home, but in the town of Kirkwall where we heard the citizens were preparing to arm themselves against our ship. Maybe Gow had agreed to this raid, I do not know. Belbin told us that Gow had drawn up plans of the house and that from this they could go straight to where the money was hidden. He said this would possibly be around £1,000. Robb claimed that Gow had instructed him to find Honeyman's daughter and take a diamond ring off her finger which would fetch £50. Gow had spotted it whilst out socialising when the ship had first arrived in Stromness.

The house windows were dark. Mrs Honeyman and her daughter, who were expected to be home, were indeed in bed. Belbin banged on the door. A timid maid opened the door and the men swept her aside as they barged in. They raided cabinets and chests. I could hear wood splitting and glass smashing. Then there were women screaming. I was posted outside to apprehend anyone from leaving, and to cover the men's retreat once the robbery was over. But when Mrs Honeyman appeared at the door she looked terrified and I'm not sure who got the biggest fright, me or her. I did nothing to stop her even though I could see she was carrying off belongings in a fold held safe as she clutched the hem of her nightgown. She dashed off and I ran round the side of the house to find her. There was a thump on the ground close by. As I investigated, what seemed to be a bundle of papers tied in a napkin, I was struck and winded by someone who jumped on me from the top window. When I recovered I saw the silhouette in the moonlight of two females struggling along the muddy track leading from the house. I could hear them panting and chattering as they went. They were off and running for help, but I could see no lights, no other houses, in the surrounding area. This scheme was none of my idea and I let them go. I returned to the door where I had not been missed and decided to act as if I had seen nothing. The rummaging went on and the voices from inside declared there was nobody of importance at home and worse, there was no treasure or money. Then there followed the sound of bottles clinking and revelry. This went on for an hour or so before the wailing of bagpipes sent a cat flying out of the door past me.

The whole troupe followed: piper first with Belbin's pistol at his back. I took up the rear, having said goodnight to the frightened maid who had sat sobbing, throughout everything, behind the main door. We filed down the track to the beach where our dinghy waited and we rowed back to the *George*, complete with piper.

Back on board, and in the light of the main cabin, I could see that the total haul for the night's work was around £7 and some silver spoons as well as some of Robert Honeyman's finest wines, two frightened kitchen maids and a servant man, the piper, now pressed into service on the pirate ship. There was no £1,000 and no diamond ring.

The men were pleased with the women, however, and began to drag them off below deck. Gow was furious." "I have never seen a man so angry." William Harvey took up the story once again. "Gow fired a pistol in the cabin ceiling and everyone was stunned into silence. The young girls were shaking and crying. They could only have been ten or eleven years old. Gow ordered me to take them to the forecabin and settle them there. I was to guard them with my life. He sent Ervy Toul to assist me. We were armed. I don't know how Gow got the men to quieten down. I thought there would be a mutiny or murder."

"Gow had a problem on his hands alright," Punton went on. "The only way to stop trouble was to promise the men what they wanted; action and wealth. Gow told them that Orkney was littered with wealthy estates. Each estate had a laird, and each laird had a mansion house. 'I can take you to one of these houses,' he had told the men. 'It is placed right on the shore for our convenience on one of Orkneys' outer islands. No one there will expect us. Easy pickings.' So the men had gone off to their hammocks, not pleased, but with their captain's word."

"The two girls were quiet in there all night," Harvey continued. "Next morning Gow spoke to them. They came on deck and pointed to a small island. We sailed close to its north shore where I was sent to row one of the girls ashore. There were people on the shore watching, but they did not talk to me. I was armed.