

The Bell Cannon Affair: an Excerpt

THE SITUATION:

The Isle of Lewis has been refused entrance to Great Britain, and all the passengers have been taken off except for a handful: Ewan, Tereza, Daisy MacLaren, daughter of the U.S. Consul to Edinburgh, and Derek Reed, a young man who managed to avoid being disembarked in order to stand by Daisy. Now Captain Morrison has made use of bad weather and darkness to escape impoundment by the British Royal Navy, but that sends the ship and its people steaming toward new danger.

DAWN BARELY CAME. The storm had lessened briefly during the middle of the night, but soon returned in full fury. The *Isle of Lewis* steamed steadily north by west into the teeth of it, struggling to make slow headway against the looming waves. Ewan moved the group into cabin one, which was closer to the center of balance of the ship and felt the rocking and pitching less. Lying on a berth was easier than staying in a chair, but no one slept. The effort to stay wedged in was too great.

As the light went from black to charcoal to slate, they risked broken limbs by climbing back up to the wardroom. No sooner had they arrived than the *Lewis* plowed into another oversized wave with a rise and a lurch that sent them sprawling. Water washed along the deck as high as the portholes at the front of the wardroom. Something outside rumbled by, then – as they grabbed again for chair arms and the edge of the table – rumbled back forward. There was a clang as whatever it was hit the port rail. Another wave lifted the bow; the rumble came toward them and struck. The walls of the deckhouse rang like a cracked bell. Tereza put her hands to her ears but then had to grab the edge of the table again.

Ewan struggled out into the passageway and fought to open the hatch. Through the noise of the storm, he heard shouts out on deck, curses as the ship heeled and the rumbling moved back toward the rail. He got the hatch open enough to peer out but was almost blinded by the rain and spray. The wind battered the sou'wester tied to his head and flapped the tails of his oilskins like flags. The signal cannon rumbled past, to clang against the railing again, bending the steel bars. The cannon's sliding carriage had torn free of its lashings. Now it was sledding across the wooden deck like a toboggan on an ever-changing hillside. Several of the deck crew chased after it, trying to slip nooses of heavy line over the muzzle.

Ewan took one step out of the hatchway, only to find his way blocked by the bosun.

"Stop gowping and get your daft arse back inside!" the bosun yelled. "Tend to your own charges. We'll handle this."

"Aye, Sir!" Ewan replied, barely audible above the tumult. He knew better than to argue with a man who could shout louder than a hurricane.

He returned gratefully to the relative warmth and dryness of the wardroom, where the others heard his report with pale faces. The rumbling went on for a few more passes, before stopping. Either the crew had managed to lash the cannon against something solid, or it had taken itself overboard.

Later that morning, the cook managed to produce some hot tea and oat porridge, but only Daisy could eat more than a few bites. It wasn't just the heavy motion; everyone was dead tired and aching. There was only one reasonable human response to the storm: fear. Wedging your resolve against that force took more effort than anything else. After so many hours of it, you found either God or philosophy.

Ewan felt it as much as the others, maybe more. He had been through other storms, but he could tell that this one was much, much worse. He knew how well built the *Lewis* was, and also how fragile.

Now the seas were washing over the deck with every wave. Water was seeping around the portholes and the hatch covers. The cabin door popped free of the latch and crashed back and forth on its hinges until he and Derek managed to wrestle it shut and tie the latch with their shoe strings. The walnut paneling creaked and groaned like a grove of trees being felled by the wind. The ship's steel masts were far stronger than any wooden spars, but the yards and booms were wood, and the rigging was hemp and marlin. The single propeller, he knew too well, was held on by one pin. The engine was assembled from hundreds of parts, all being asked to perform at the limit of their strength, and for who knew how many hours longer. If just one of them went and the engine failed, the *Lewis* would fall broadside to the waves. In minutes, they'd capsize and go down.

"This certainly has gone on for a long time, wouldn't you say?" Derek shoved his spoon into his cooling porridge and pushed the bowl aside. It immediately slid to the far side of the table and slammed against the fender, flipping over it to smash on the deck in a sludge of mush and broken crockery. "I'm sorry," he said, with little energy. "Clumsy of me."

He tried to kneel and mop up the mess with his napkin but popped up quickly and jammed himself back into his seat, white faced. "Don't try that. Head down and it all goes round much worse."

"Stay put," Ewan said. "I'll deal with it." *It's part of my job, after all*, he thought.

He dropped his napkin over the pile and nudged it up against a table leg with the toe of his shoe. It left a smear on the deck, but at least it seemed inclined to cling to the leg and stay out of the way.

"I'll go check with the bridge to see if there's any sign of it lessening," he said.

"Find out where we are, if you can," the professor asked.

"Better yet, find out where he's taking us," Daisy said.

"And how he plans to keep us away from the English," Tereza added.

"I'll ask," Ewan replied, donning his oilskins and tying on his sou'wester, "but I'm guessing he's too busy to answer right now."

He noticed that not one of them offered to come with him. It was a measure of how much the storm had sapped them all.

It was worse in the companionway and hell on deck. The roar of the sea was horrendous, and the wind blasted his ears with an unholy wail as it sang through the rigging and the railings to hammer spume and spray against his face. It was only a few feet from the hatchway to the bridge ladder, but Ewan had to pause till the roll of the ship swung the hatch away from the side of the deckhouse and then back around so he could slip out, slam it shut, and latch it. The wind tore at his sou'wester, cutting the ties into his still bruised neck, trying to drag him sternward along the slippery deck – a terrible reminder of the garrote. Then the bow dipped into the lee of the next wave and he lunged for the railings on the ladder.

He caught hold and started up as the ship dug into the face of the wave, a huge cliff of gray water, seething like the flank of a monster. The *Lewis* came almost to a dead stop as her bow plowed through the heavy water, lifting slowly till it broke free and rose, shedding sheets of seawater on both sides. The water was four feet deep on deck when the sheet reached the deckhouse, washed against the deadlights, and surged around the side, grabbing at Ewan's boots and pants as he clung to the ladder for dear life.

The *Lewis* reached the top of the wave, broke through the crest, hung a moment as the stern lifted out of the water and the propeller pulled free, whining till the whole ship rattled. Then she sledged down into the trough. Ewan ran the rest of the way up the ladder, now almost flat, before the *Lewis* could plow into the next wave. Water sloshed in his boots. His face was soaked, his arms, even under the oilskins, were wet to his shoulders.

Captain Morrison stood at the center of the bridge by the telegraph, gripping the rail as he stared into the wind. James Gilmore was braced between the port corner of the deckhouse and the port rail, scanning the horizon for stray waves that might come from the southwest quarter. Fourth Officer

MacDonald was braced at the starboard corner, watching for waves from the north. Ewan slid along the rail to James and shouted in his ear.

“How much longer?”

James shrugged. His face was gray, and dark circles hung beneath his eyes, but he managed a quick smile. “It should lessen by evening and blow out by morning at the latest,” he shouted back. “Tell your friends the captain says he’s seen worse.”

When? Ewan wondered, watching the huge waves roll relentlessly toward them. They were as high as the bridge, even higher – forty feet high, some of them, though it was hard to be sure. Wavelets the size of beach breakers broke randomly at their crests. Foam blanketed the entire surface of the sea. He looked across the jagged peaks ahead. The rain and flying spume were so thick, he could barely see four or five crests before they were lost in the gray tumult that fogged the horizon, as though the clouds and the sea were one heaving blanket wrapped tight around the *Lewis’s* small patch of gray daylight.

As he stared, something grew out of the fog, something gray and huge, moving toward them with the waves. Ewan peered through the driving rain, trying to believe what he was seeing.

It was a wave like no other. Twice as high as all the other crests. No, higher. Marching toward them in lockstep with the wind.

The captain pulled on the telegraph, sending a signal to the engine room. Ewan couldn’t tear his eyes from the oncoming wave. It loomed higher and higher above the bridge. Above the foremast truck. A vertical wall. The *Lewis* hung at the top of the final crest before the monster, then dipped into the trough. Now the rogue wave, as high as the topsail yard, hung over them like an avalanche waiting to happen.



Cover art by Maurizio Manzieri