

To Key A Marquis

A Romantic Adventure of a Lady of the Bedchamber to Queen Anne

by Vernanne Bryan

The Lady Soleil was skillfully negotiated out of the inlet into the dark waters of The Solent. The breeze was slight, but with the help of a powerful ebb, Ashley could sense the beginning of the larger body of water. Her ship made a wonderfully silent progress across the five mile stretch of water. A bright orange glow of light on the horizon had guided them easily to the waters just outside the Tournemouth docks. Somewhere about halfway the darkness had disappeared; the moon shone brilliantly and in the north the stars were even brighter. Then, without warning, three ships appeared phantom-like on the distant northeast waters of The Solent.

Ashley glanced over her left shoulder in the direction of Beaulieu, trying to see the extent of the fires burning on shore through the gray smoke that moved across the water tracing the currents of air. It was Captain Reynard that drew her attention to the three ghost-like ships sailing ahead on their right. The one nearest to them had backed her foretopsail to speak the other, still they remained like luminous spectrals on the water. No one on board the Soleil spoke as Ashley put the ship before the wind on a steady breeze in their direction. There was no chance that the vessel could escape them for it was truly a ship and no ghostly mirage. There was also little chance that they had been unseen for the ship was a man-of-war and Ashley could see the pennant streaming in the wind. Still, the nationality remained a mystery and only a hint of white was blowing from her colors. Everyone on deck remained silent as Ashley handed the tiller to Skeet and reached stiffly for her glass. All figures on board gazed intently in the same direction as her telescope in an attempt to determine without aid of spyglass what lay ahead. The Lady Soleil continued to glide on, the wind singing gently in her rigging, the water whispering by her sides. Except for these noises all else was silent. At last Ashley said softly, "The one nearest, not ours, the ship in the middle, Moncrieff's, the one ahead of him, not ours."

By this time they had reached the waters of the Spithead and were heading out into the Channel. The Soleil was abreast of the point; she came easily into the wind, with her guns ready to speak. Ashley and Reynard walked out on the quarter deck. The chase ahead lay about two miles to leeward and all three ships were running at a good ten knots. The Lady Soleil began to gain perceptibly as they all continued to run eastward, each displaying a long white furrow that gleamed in the moonlight on the sparkling sea.

Ashley took note of her vast silent surroundings. It was a big empty sea. At this moment there was nothing windward, nothing to leeward, and the ships ahead seemed to vanish astern like a faint cloud-like band from the masthead. And then the closest vessel that had seemed like a stranger was no longer a chase. She displayed a broad Jolly Roger on the main together with the colors of the French and Ashley knew without a doubt she was part of Barteau's flotilla.

Only seconds later Ashley noted that the vessel's royals came in, followed by her fore and mainsail. Suddenly the ship hauled to the wind, her speed dropping immediately. It was clear at that moment to Ashley she meant to attack.

"The chase is over." She said simply to Reynard. "She means to stand and fight. I think she always meant to fight. But to fight when it suited her. She has drawn us away from land and seems content with that." An intelligent, cool, and cunning opponent, Ashley found herself reflecting as she set her jaw in rigid determination. This time, she thought bitterly, she would make certain Robert Moncrieff was not left without aid!

The Lady Soleil quickly replied to the colors of the bandit ship with her own Union Jack flying high in the leeward rigging as well, so that there could be no mistake. Ashley saw to it that the Soleil too was stripped to her fighting sails. There were no sounds on board but the few brief orders given, the run of seamen's feet, and the creaking of the blocks. Every man came on deck as the main and foresails were hauled up and then as the crew and Reynard looked respectfully on, Ashley took the Soleil down and slanted her across the wind straight for the enemy's quarter. In approximately thirty minutes they would be in full battle!

Eight of those thirty minutes rapidly passed while Ashley scanned the waters all about them seeking the other two ships. Where was Moncreiff? Had he seen her coming? Would he trust her to stand and fight? She needed to know before she attacked the pirate ship. Frantically she swept the glass back and forth in the direction she had last seen him. Then suddenly a cluster of flashing lights followed by the report of canon fire could be seen approximately two miles away in the channel. She swung her glass in that direction and saw what appeared to be a fire flaring on one of the shapes, but she could not distinguish if it was friend or foe. Dropping the glass from her eye, she noted the suspended activity on board the Soleil where scarcely a word had been spoken. Glancing once at Captain Reynard, she nodded to Skeet and the drum volleyed and rolled fore and aft. The various officers and midshipman ran to join their divisions at the canons, while selected members of the crew climbed into the tops, dragging their muskets up with them. The ship's surgeon went below and the eery quiet fell over the vessel once more.

All along the clean deck the powder-boys waited with their cartridges behind the guns. Ashley quickly noted that the shout-racks and garlands were filled. A thin stream of smoke was streaming from the match tubs. Her rapid appraisal told her that the bosun had secured the yards with puddening and chains. Each gunner stood beside his open powder keg and the fearnought screens had been laid over the open hatchways.

Reynard, stripped to the waist, had joined the gun-crew. One of the men handed him a handkerchief and he nodded in gratitude as he tied it about his head. The men could see he was wearing a serious but confident expression and they accepted him with a certain hopeful deference. But all eyes soon turned to Ashley who stood motionless with one hand raised, waiting to give her signal to fire the guns in the first round of anger. Reynard was amazed at the look of serious respect most held on their faces. He had known no men, before this moment, that would ever sail with a woman that was in complete command. He turned his eyes to the quarterdeck to see what held them in such total abeyance and saw the Marquise as he had never seen her before. Gone was any semblance of fragile womanhood. Her long glorious hair had disappeared under a green bandanna, a sword was strapped about her slender waist and a pistol had been shoved through the belt just above it. Her wrists were bound with leather and her hands were gloved. She stood, long limbs braced against the roll and pitch of the ship, gazing straight out to sea in the direction of the enemy bark. Captain Reynard had to concede she was magnificent and as courageous as any warrior he had ever witnessed before a battle.

Unaware, of his assessment, Ashley was busy gauging the true size of her opponent's massive spars. She could see that its ports were well clear of the choppy sea. This was a ship that had been improvised in a way unknown to her and she suddenly knew it was not going to be an easy fight. A great deal depended on the skill of the enemy's crew. Were they well seasoned or had they recently been gathered sporadically from varying ports near and far. Had they ever fought together? She hoped they had not and that her premonitions about greedy roaming bands of pirates were true. As for herself, she had only the master knowledge her father had given to her, untried and untested fully by herself. Yet, she was confident that belief in all that he had taught her would hold her in good stead. Her teacher had been one of the most skilled seamen in all of England.

Twenty-five minutes had passed and in that time a fierce battle had ensued between the two ships out on the near horizon. The roar of their guns had made the crew edgy and filed their taunt nerves to a razor's edge. Lifting her spyglass once more in the direction of that battle, Ashley

could see the ships were bound together in a heated deadlock and that obviously one had been boarded by the other. She prayed it was Moncrieff leading the attack for few ship's companies could withstand the onslaught of hundreds of men swarming over the side with cutlasses and tomahawks.

Just before Ashley dropped her hand, a tremendous triple sound with a crash reverberated along the cable-tiers. The pirate ship had opened fire at less than half a mile and three of her round shot had ricocheted across the side of the *Soleil*.

"It would appear they're just warming up!" Skeet yelled from his strategic positioning on the quarterdeck.

Just then another belch of smoke was heard from the pirates after-guns. The sizzling shot struck the sea, skipped five times, then came aboard with a thump and rolled around the deck. A powder-monkey darted out and came back with the ball. Ashley chose that moment to drop her hand in signal for the first firing of her own canons.

"Fire as they bear!" Skeet called out.

The welcome order was shouted just as the pirate ship came full in the beam. She was point blank range. The *Soleil* reached the top of her roll and was just beginning to lean to leeward when the whole of her starboard broadside roared out. The crew clapped on, ran the guns in, sponged, reloaded, and rammed in the charge. When the smoke finally cleared they were able to see that they had hit the pirate ship hard. The men of the *Soleil* began to cheer as the enemy came in even closer still and fired again. There were a few splinters aft, but not enough to interrupt the men's cheers. Once more the *Soleil*'s guns were run out, but as the crew peered into the dense cloud of smoke in order to take aim, Ashley called for the sail-trimmers. The sea robber's ship, having worn, had put before the wind and the *Soleil* was wearing after her. As the smoke cleared completely away, the predator was displayed well to leeward, but Ashley was coming up fast on her quarter.

Soon the *Soleil* was ranging up on the pirate vessel's starboard side. Ashley ordered the larboard guns trained hard forward. Almost simultaneously the guns turned, took aim, and fired. She saw the shot strike the enemy's main chains and through the ensuing smoke there were orange flashes as the pirate's guns replied. Shortly thereafter both full broadsides were at work with an incredible continuous bellowing roar. Ashley ran forward on the quarterdeck to look down below. Three of her guns were dismantled and there were several men lying dead on the deck. She could still see the blonde head of Reynard moving up and down the lines attempting to secure the guns. The crew seemed battle dazed with little notion of what to do. But somehow amidst the incessant roar and clamber, Ashley was grateful to see that the captain was managing to organize them into making the guns once again fast.

As the smoke began to clear somewhat, she ascertained that the fire was very hot on board the pirate ship. Three of her main deck guns had been knocked out. The small fire on the *Soleil* had been squelched, but a crewman running to deal with the blaze had been shot from the pirate tops. That shot, as far as Ashley could surmise, was the last for this bout. The pillager's ship was wearing again and very fast. Ashley immediately let fly her topsail sheets.

Reynard smiled. He quickly analyzed that this amazing woman was intent on raking the enemy from stern to stem. It was the most damaging fire a ship could receive. But before he could think further one of the crewman was yelling at him through the smoke.

"Sir, sir," cried the gunner from number seven, "the shot is jammed!"

Now the *Soleil* was beginning her turn. In little less than a minute she would be crossing the pirate ship's wake right beneath the stern. It was a wonderfully calculated move, but Ashley

suddenly realized her crew was unaware that the starboard guns would have to be engaged. She turned the wheel over to Skeet and flung herself down the steps to the main deck and raced at her own peril through the fire of small arms.

"The other side, the other side!" She screamed at the top of her lungs and then to her utter horror she discovered they had not reloaded their starboard guns. In agonizing frustration she watched as the Soleil continued making her turn until the tall, unprotected, infinitely vulnerable stern of the plunderer's ship was right before the Soleil's broadside. Following Ashley's instructions, Skeet had beautifully steered the Soleil until her main yardarm crossed the enemy's taffrail. The daring move could not have placed the Soleil in a better position to destroy the attacking vessel. Unfortunately, the same could now be said for the pirate ship.

Reynard had come to stand at her side.

"Lie down!" She yelled, jerking him down as she hit the deck.

The broadside came, striking the Soleil's stern, tearing the whole length of her deck. The towering foremast with all its spreading yards, the fighting-top and its sails with countless ropes and blocks came crashing down. The lower part of it went aft to cover the main deck, while the upper part fell covering the forecastle. A great amount of rigging was over the forward guns. Men were pinned, others were wounded. In the frantic minutes of the melee of clearing it all up so the guns could be fired, Ashley lost all sense of the positioning of the two ships. When at last the ship was somewhat restored, she finally saw the pirate ship wearing across the Soleil's bow. There was not one gun on the Soleil that could be fired in this position. It looked as if they were going to be raked from stem to stern. Preparing to face the worst, Ashley clambered through the labor of clearing and slashing the wreckage with axes to the quarterdeck in order to gain her bearings.

As she reached the higher deck, she wondered why the pirate ship had not taken the advantage. Her puzzled look was received by a delirious Skeet who was waving wildly and pointing in the opposite direction. Turning quickly about and straining to see through the smoke to the other side of the enemy ship, Ashley's soot smudged face took on a total look of wonder.

To Ashley at that moment, what she was witnessing was beyond all miracles. It was the Paladin, bearing down on them in full sail from the north, her forward guns roaring out a warning and her Union Jacks showing bravely in the wind. She had a vague awareness of Skeet swearing something that would have ordinarily made her blush, but instead she just grinned at him and took over the wheel.

"Go forward, Skeet," she ordered, "if we can get the ship before the wind we'll board that blasted bandit yet!"

She watched as he made his way across the bloody deck, then her eyes rapidly scanned the pirate ship, noticing that their crew was busy knotting and splicing. If we can manage to get the Soleil before the wind and can fall aboard the enemy, we might just carry the night yet, she thought desperately. Straining to see behind the pirate vessel further out in the distance, she knew if Moncrieff got there in time they'd definitely prevail. Hopefully this will be one pirate ship that won't plague us again, Ashley swore with a healthy amount of adrenalin bolstering her. With luck we'll see the surrender of her colors yet! But before she could have another victorious notion, the sea robber's vessel murderously raked the Soleil from stem to stern, killing about a dozen men and bringing down her maintopmast. The last thing Ashley heard before she crumpled was the awful sound of dying men and the terrible crack of splintering wood. She had only a vague awareness of Skeet loudly shouting something, then an unwelcome darkness closed her eyes against the awful carnage about her.

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Robert moved forward along the bloody deck of the Lady Soleil. The ship was lurching on the enormous roll and most all of the crew were watching the pirate ship run further out to sea, out of the range of their guns. Robert noticed as he passed that Ashley's gun crew were still in high spirits, roaring after the plunderer, challenging her cowardice and yelling for her to come back and fight. Game bunch of men, he reflected distractedly as his narrowing eyes searched through the wreckage on deck.

On the forecastle Robert could see that Skeet and a party of seamen had managed to raise an almost undamaged topgallant mast and were trying to revamp it into a foremast. But the Soleil's roll and pitch was so violent they were having a hard time of it. At every floundering move of the ship, wreckage from the maintop rained down on them. The mainmast itself, with its backstays gone, was threatening to fall at any moment.

"Get rid of the mainmast," yelled Skeet. "and get the carpenter's crew over here." He looked wildly around. "Where is the Marquise and Captain Reynard?"

One of the crewmen shouted back, "Haven't seen the Marquise."

"And Captain Reynard?" Skeet queried anxiously again.

"I think he's gone sir. Blasted over the side," came the swift reply from somewhere nearby.

Robert's worst fears were confirmed. She had been on board, but where in the hell was she? He made his way through the shambles toward Skeet on the forecastle. When at last he reached the young man, Robert was surprised at how angry he was feeling. He tried to contain his temper. "Skeet!!" Robert yelled caring little about the repair of the ship as he reached out for the man's shoulder and turned him forcibly around. "Where in the hell is your Captain?"

Skeet stared hard at the tall angry man before him. The duke's eyes were like blazing blue shards of lightening that Skeet felt striking the depths of his soul. He knew it would not bode well for him if his answer was not immediately forthcoming. "I'm sorry, sir, I've had my hands full. The last time I saw Lady Tournemouth she was standing on the quarterdeck. As you can see, it's a mess up there."

"Stand easy, man!" Robert said more sharply than he intended. "I'll find her." He started working his way back to the quarterdeck, but Skeet called out to him, "Are we going after those bastards, Your Grace?"

Robert stopped, gazed out to sea at the retreating pirate vessel and then back at Skeet. Just at that moment with a loud cheer the crew raised the jury-mast straight up and made it fast. They rigged out a lower studdingsail-boom and it awkwardly rose, filling, and the Soleil gathered way, answering her helm. The great ship slowly turned, moving toward the distant pirate vessel, her tattered colors flying from the stump of the mizzenmast.

Shaking his head in admiration at their dogged determination he responded, "No! Not without direct orders from your captain and right now you've got no captain." Robert turned and continued to make his way slowly through the debris on the steps to the quarterdeck.

A familiar feminine voice called out from above. "And how do you think we got the colors to fly from the mizzenmast, Your Grace?"

He could not believe his ears. When he looked up, there she stood, soot dirty and ragged, a thin crimson line trickling down from beneath the green bandanna. Her eyes, however, belied not only her condition, but that of her ship's. They were filled with fire and stubborn determination and something else he could not quite make out. Godsblood, was she actually glad to see him? His joy at finding her alive, however, was quickly overturned by the discernment of his temper. He

covered the distance between them easily and stood looking down at her, hands braced on his hips, booted feet planted far apart in order to maintain his balance against the violent pitch of the crippled ship.

Ashley watched in stunned amazement as the knuckles on his fingers grew whiter and whiter. She wondered idly if the pressure from those strong digits felt unbearable on his own skin. He was glaring at her and the look in his eyes told her he was more interested in strangling her than in feeling the delight that she was still among the living. When he finally spoke, it was between tightly clenched teeth. "What in the hell, lady, did you think you could accomplish by disobeying me?"

He was surprised when her expression never changed, nor did she shrink from him as he was used to seeing most men do when his temper flared. No, she stood there, mimicking his stance almost to the last little finger and retorted pleasantly as if they were both in the midst of a London ton tea party. "Like you, Your Grace, I hate to witness an unfair fight. I just wanted to even the odds a bit."

Ashley watched a range of high emotions play across his handsome face, disbelief, frustration, anger, then finally total amusement. She couldn't help but smile when he threw back his head in delightful rich laughter. Unfortunately his amusement quickly passed and he immediately zeroed in on the seriousness of their situation. Ashley had no idea what he'd do next.

"It would appear, madam, I have been very wrong about you. My apologies to you. But, considering the condition of your ship, do you really want to go after those cowards?"

"With all my heart, Your Grace!" she declared with great enthusiasm.