

The Camel Trail

Judy Jackson



A novel inspired by a true story

THE CAMEL TRAIL
by Judy Jackson

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for Michael

chapter 1

THINGS WORTH KNOWING AND REMEMBERING:

*Rubbing the temples with a slice of lemon
can relieve a headache*

*A package or envelope sealed with white of
egg cannot be steamed open*

Tried Favourites Cookery Book with Household hints and other
Useful Information, by Mrs. E.W. Kirk, 1926

LONDON 1944—ANNA

The envelope had no postage stamp. In the left hand corner were the words: *'To be opened after my death'*. Someone had searched the desk and emptied the walnut pigeonholes. Bills and correspondence were scattered in a heap. The letter had been opened. Anna turned it over and read the first few lines:

'My darling children,

*As soon as I have passed away I beg you to ask
the Doctor to sever one of my arteries.'*

The request left Anna shaking. She wiped her eyes and put the letter back on the table. She was alone in the room. Her brother and sister were upstairs at their mother's

bedside. Anna pulled at her knitted cardigan, stretching it to do up the buttons. She climbed the stairs and paused at the landing, catching her breath outside the door to the bedroom.

Dina lay on the bed breathing slowly. Her eyelids fluttered as if disturbed by the cracking sound when she inhaled. The air came out in a low whistle followed by a succession of laboured puffs. In the corner of the room Isaac sat reading. His older sister Boni blew a wisp of greying hair out of her eyes and leaned forward to stroke Dina's arm. There was room by the bed for two chairs but when Anna leaned over and kissed the soft skin of her mother's cheeks, Boni got up and without speaking she and Isaac left the room.

Anna moved her thumb over her mother's fingers, feeling the swollen joints and the buffed nails. She smoothed the bedjacket and leaned forward to whisper in her ear. What she said invited a reply but Dina was unable to talk. Would she have said anything if she could have spoken?

For three months Dina had been getting weaker. The doctor had been reassuring, claiming that his patients didn't die of old age:

"They always die of something. That 'something' can often be treated, even in an eighty-four year old."

He prescribed medication for the heart and a glass of wine with meals. He advised her to continue walking up the stairs, even though the effort of climbing made her clutch the bannister every few steps.

None of them knew how long it took her to dress in the mornings. Dina adjusted the front buttons on the Liberty

bodice and pulled on knickers and stockings. Then she'd have to sit down. Fastening the suspenders was slow and laborious and had to be done standing up. Before she could lift the petticoat over her head she would collapse into the chair again. Finally the black dress could be pulled down over her hips. Each stage took ten minutes with a fifteen minute rest in between. Dina refused to let Boni help. Her daughter would hear sighs and grunts from the next bedroom, but was only allowed to enter the room when the pearls were in place and the white hair smoothed into a bun at the back.

Anna stood up and walked to the window. A heavy fog hung over the back garden, blanketing the striped deck-chairs piled up against the side wall. What had possessed her mother to move so far out to this double-fronted property in Finchley? It was the garden of course. Dina had always dreamed of a lawn, trimmed and rolled in neat lines, with dahlias and foxgloves in the borders. Anna could hardly remember her mother sitting in the garden. The pleasure had lasted only a few months. She had loved the summer sunlight, but when the sun disappeared and the clouds joined up to make a ceiling of grey, she would go indoors, no doubt regretting the move.

The flat in West Hampstead had been quite adequate. Anna had grown up there, in a mansion block called Kings' Gardens. There was nothing regal or green about it, apart from the leaves on the plane trees and a wide double entrance. Anna shared a bedroom with her mother so she was the one to hear the sobbing every night. Boni was eight years older; bossy, confident and forceful. It was Boni who decreed that there should be no onions in the

house as she didn't care for the taste. Her mother gave in. She had other concerns and was preoccupied with Isaac's health: he had poor eyesight, probably caused by a bout of influenza, but to outsiders all he needed was a pair of glasses with thick lenses.

Dina was breathing more steadily so Anna smoothed the eiderdown and left the room. From the top of the stairs she could hear her brother and sister arguing. Isaac was shouting:

"You're not telling me she collapsed because of me."

Anna couldn't hear Boni's response. She knew they were talking about the money and when Isaac yelled the words 'you twisted her mind', she picked up her coat from the hall and pulled the front door closed behind her. The trolleybus drew up at the stop and Anna heaved herself into the nearest seat. By the time she'd changed buses and got off at Cricklewood Broadway to walk the rest of the way home, it was past lunchtime.

There was a placard outside the paper shop: 'Three killed by V2'. Anna was staring at the words and didn't notice that someone was holding the door open for her. She picked up a newspaper and read the first paragraph. Her eyes were blinking as she took in the news that five houses had been flattened and dozens of residents left homeless. It was what the paper didn't say that frightened her: the number of people left maimed and dying. There were no pictures of the victims. Her mind was whirling with images of families caught in a blast. In her head she could hear the wailing of someone who was searching for a husband, a daughter. She forced herself to calm down. She was forty-one for heaven's sake, not a child. By the

time she'd reached the head of the queue her breathing had slowed to a normal rate and the full-blown newsreel pictures in her head were scaled down to a silent flicker.

When she reached the counter she asked the shopkeeper for a pack of Passing Cloud cigarettes. He misheard her mumbled request and ran his hand past the Players and picked out a pack of Woodbines. Anna looked round anxiously and repeated the words 'Passing Clouds please'. A man behind her sniffed and raised his nose as she slipped the pack into her bag.

The smell of fresh bread wafted out of the corner bakery but Anna hurried on to join the queue at the sweet shop. If she was buying cigarettes for Nathan she couldn't go home without the usual threepenny bag of toffees and tiger nuts for Nina. She handed in the Child's Green Ration book and added a few pear drops to make up the two-ounce allowance for the week.

Anna walked along Walm Lane hoping not to meet any of the neighbours. Who knows what conversations they might have had with Nathan? He had a habit of mixing up their names on purpose and pretending not to know who they were. With a glint in his eye he would make some outrageous comment—waiting for a reaction—but most people failed to appreciate his sense of humour and walked away, wondering whether he was quite normal. Anna quickened her step as she walked past number 169. The woman who lived there was ugly—there was no denying it. Her chin rested on folds in her neck and her mouth was wide and drooping. She never went out without her bulldog—a crinkled looking creature with leathery folds in his skin. Nathan told Anna that he firmly

believed owners of dogs grew to look like their pets, so he named the woman 'Mrs. Dog.' Anna always feared that one day he would call her 'Mrs. Dog' to her face.

In the porch Anna took off her gloves and unwrapped the scarf. Nathan was in the back garden dealing with the chicken feed. He had a blade fixed to a long pole and was chumping a mixture of left-over porridge and potato peelings. He was wearing his usual crumpled clothes—an old sports jacket and baggy trousers. He'd never been one to care about what he looked like, so the restrictions on clothing didn't affect him at all. What did it matter that there were to be no pockets on pyjamas, no turnups on trousers? He was more concerned that there were no razor blades and he couldn't buy a new wireless to replace the old one.

He didn't hear her come in. She stood there watching as he mashed up the hot grey mess. When he had finished he put his hand under a pile of straw and pulled out a brown egg. He turned and smiled when he saw her:

"That makes five this week. You didn't think it would be worth the trouble, did you?"

Anna didn't answer.

"We might even have some left over to pickle."

Nathan looked up and saw that Anna wasn't listening. And then he noticed the tears on her face. He assumed she was crying because of Dina. He didn't know that his wife was terrified of the bombing. She couldn't admit her fears to anyone. She concealed them from Nathan, trying to stay calm as she waited for him to return from his fire-watching duties. When the air-raid warnings came, she hurried her daughter into the shelter, picking up her rag

doll and blankets and settling down to wait for the all-clear. Throughout the long months of the blitz Anna had kept control of herself, turning her face away when she passed bombed buildings; refusing to join the huddles of whispering neighbours.

Her terror had begun at the start of the blitz, with the V1s, the first kind of rocket. Who would have thought that silence would be the cause of panic? It was that moment when the roar of the rocket stopped and the engine cut out—that was when the missile began to glide down, bringing its destruction to the houses and people waiting below. In those seconds of stillness Anna's heart beat faster and the perspiration dampened her forehead. When the blast came, yards or streets away, she closed her eyes and covered her ears with shaking hands.

After months of V1 raids there had been a short respite. And then came mysterious explosions of a new kind. At first no-one could explain why a street would be there one minute, and gone the next. The terror was finally given a name: the V2. This was a missile that made no sound. It took less than five minutes to cover its two hundred mile flight and reach the target. There was no warning and no defence. Yet Londoners endured it all. They never panicked; they stayed calm; they remained cheerful. Only Anna was overcome by fear. She struggled to conceal it, letting Nathan believe that her mother's impending death was the sole cause of her misery.

Nathan put his arm round her and stretched up to kiss her on the cheek. He handed her a large cotton handkerchief. Anna leaned forward and stroked his face and the wisps of white hair. She'd never known him with a full

head of hair. He'd been bald when she met him but now, seven years later, he looked older than his age. Though he was only in his fifties he was used to people assuming that Nina was his grandchild and to be truthful he found it hard to summon up the energy to play with a five-year old. It was Anna who took care of the child; took care of him; bought the food; cooked it; cleaned the house; took down old curtains and made them into dressing gowns; mended their clothes and made sure the blackout material was in place when it grew dark outside.

The phone rang and Anna rushed in to answer it. Nathan wiped his hands and looked for a saucer for the egg. Anna put down the receiver and picked up her coat.

“It was Isaac. I have to go back.”



chapter 2

TO PICKLE EGGS:

Choose only the freshest hen's eggs. Put them in a pottery crock and cover with a 1: 9 mix of sodium silicate and water. This prevents air passing through the porous shell. Store covered for up to a year. Wipe clean before use.

Wartime recommendation, 1943

LONDON 1944—ANNA

The fog had slowed the traffic till it was almost stationary. From the bus stop Anna kept to the nearside edge of the pavement and counted the houses until she reached her mother's gate. She blew her nose and felt the acrid taste of the thick air in her mouth. When Isaac opened the door he stepped aside and closed it after her to keep out the mist that was already settling in the hall.

He was about to say that she had taken her time to get there but his expression softened; Anna knew then she was too late. Boni was in the doorway wiping her eyes with an initialled handkerchief. Isaac began an account

of Dina's last hours: how her chest began to heave and her breathing alternated from a gasp to a long, slow hiss. Boni joined in to say how her arms had suddenly become cool and mottled. Fifty minutes later—while Anna was halfway through her bus journey—their mother was finally still. The doctor had been called, had signed the death certificate and left.

Anna sat down, waiting for the tears to come. The thoughts whirling round her head brought a rush of misery. But it was too soon for the feelings of guilt and resentment to pour out; it was as if her brain had turned to ice, not yet able to melt.

Boni blew her nose and stuffed the handkerchief in her pocket.

“Anna, listen, Isaac's found this letter from Mother. Do you want to hear what it says?”

“I've seen it. It was open on the desk.” Anna stared at Isaac.

Boni followed her glare. She narrowed her eyes as she looked at her brother.

“Have you been going through her things?” she asked.

“Since when is it a crime to look for your mother's will?” he answered.

“It is, if she's still alive,” replied Anna. “I saw you had that letter on the table yesterday.”

“Well I seem to be the only one who hasn't seen it,” said Boni. “Typical. I'm always the last one to hear what's going on.”

Isaac pulled up a chair and opened the letter. He exchanged a glance with Anna and then read the first sentence.

Boni gasped.

“What did she mean, asking a doctor to cut her arteries? It’s too late, he’s gone now.”

Anna said nothing.

“Anna. What do you think?”

“Sorry, what did you say?”

“Well, it’s obvious,” said Isaac. “She had this fear of being buried alive. Bit odd really, because no-one thinks about that any more.”

“She was old-fashioned” said Boni. “She had this Victorian idea that doctors often declared someone dead who was just unconscious.”

“That’s why they introduced the bells.”

“What bells?” asked Anna, starting to listen to the conversation.

“Well, they used to attach a string to the finger of a corpse and then drill a hole in the coffin. The string was passed through the hole and attached to a bell by the grave. They had people whose job it was to listen for any tinkling. That’s the origin of the phrase ‘saved by the bell.’”

“Oh, shut up, Isaac,” said Boni. “Mother’s lying dead upstairs and all you can think about is stupid clichés. I want to hear the rest of this letter.”

Isaac continued to read:

“and it is my wish that after the funeral, you have one night of prayers only and then carry on with your lives as usual. Do not grieve, my dears, I have loved you all so much and one day we shall meet. Meanwhile, love my memory and let it keep my dear ones straight and happy,

facing the trials and turmoil of life with courage and fortitude.

Since making my last will I have been blessed with a grandson and a granddaughter. Please give them £5 each from their Granny.

God bless you all my children and grant you happiness,

Your very loving

Mother.”

“Trials and turmoil of life.” Anna sighed. “She certainly had those. I can’t remember her ever being happy.”

“She was, before you were born,” said Boni. “No, I didn’t mean that. You know what I mean. When you were little. Before she lost father. It affected all our lives. Things might have been different if we’d never left Lisbon.”

“All I remember is sharing a room with her,” said Anna. “She cried every single night, for years. I learned to sleep with my hands over my ears so I wouldn’t hear it.”

Boni sniffed.

“You were lucky. You shared a room with her. I had that boxroom at the end of the corridor and no-one cared if I had nightmares or couldn’t sleep.”

Isaac was looking uneasy, clearly wanting to find the will that he knew must be somewhere in the desk. He’d already looked through the pigeonholes but the lower drawers were locked. He went to the cabinet and started to search. There were cut glass bowls, coffee cups and a silver sauce boat—all possible containers for the desk key. Eventually he found it, behind the candlesticks.

The drawers contained a stack of notebooks. There

was a recipe book of Dina's dated December 20th 1897. There were pages of handwritten notes and further on, printed extracts on cookery hints from the time of the first World War. The instructions for German Cabinet Pudding had the title crossed out and the words 'Victory Pudding' written in pencil above. Anna and Boni picked up other books: an account book in their grandfather's handwriting dated 1860, and a book of faded pages with the inscription 'Emily 1849' on the front cover. Who was Emily?

Isaac was still searching through a pile of papers. At the back of one of the drawers was a drawstring bag with something heavy inside it. He passed it to Boni as he carried on leafing through a folder of letters. Inside the bag was something wrapped in newspaper—a small silver teapot. It was a perfect sphere with a spout that was shaped like the head of a camel. The handle was made of ivory. Inside the lid was a note:

'Remember the sorrow; use the teapot with joy.'

"Hmph" said Boni. "all we ever heard was that it came from that place in Palestine. It certainly didn't bring Mother any joy."

Anna was fingering the silver camel's head.

"I can't believe our grandfather got this when he was fourteen; that it was all tied up with his 'tragedy'—the one he never talked about. It's far more likely that he got it years later when he'd gone up in the world."

"No, that's not true," said Boni. "If he'd bought it in England it would have a hallmark." She turned it upside down. "Look, there's nothing, it isn't English."

Anna was thinking that she knew so little about her

grandfather David; only what her mother had told them, that he lived in Gibraltar when he was a boy and that something terrible had happened.

“She never told us anything about his life.”

“Why should she?” asked Boni. “She was too busy with her own problems.”

“Exactly,” said Anna. “Everything was hushed up. Maybe you knew more because you were older, but all I remember is Mother having secret conversations with the uncles. They used to stop whispering when I came in the room.”

They were so absorbed by the camel teapot that they didn’t notice Isaac. He was sitting in a chair, running his hands through his wiry black hair. A thick sheet of paper was on his knee. His face was white.

“She’s left me nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

“What did you expect?” asked Boni. “remember the money she gave you to start the button business, and the loan for all those cardboard boxes? She could hardly afford it and you frittered it all away.”

Anna was looking at the will. It was short and uncomplicated. The house and contents were to go to Boni, the jewellery and funds in the bank account were to be divided equally between the two sisters.



At the butcher there was a queue of about twenty people. It moved slowly and as the customers neared the window, they looked at the sign announcing the government allowance for the week: 1s 4d. People started murmuring

that you couldn't even get a scrag of lamb for that. By the time Anna reached the front of the queue the butcher was handing out a brown paper parcel to each customer. There was no point arguing. It wasn't as if there was a choice.

There was a rumour that there were onions at the greengrocer in Cricklewood Broadway but it proved to be wrong so Anna began the long journey to Petticoat Lane in the East End. She took the bus to Edgware Road and got the tube to Aldgate East. She couldn't remember the name of the greengrocer but joined a queue when she heard people talking about cabbages and sprouts. In front of her were two women with foreign accents. Everyone could hear them talking about buying food on the black market. She was ashamed to learn that they'd apparently paid someone £5 for a pineapple. When Anna got near the display of vegetables she was calculating how many potatoes she could carry and whether 3d a pound was reasonable for the onions.

With two heavy bags she moved on to a kosher delicatessen and waited her turn once again. When she reached the counter she asked if there were any pickled gherkins. The owner put his arm into a barrel with the greenish liquid coming up to his elbow.

"None left."

Without wiping his arm he put his hand into another barrel and pulled out a herring.

"Here, love. You can have this."

One last stop was a stall selling pieces of furnishing fabric. Anna picked through the remnants and found a bit of striped satin and a length of velvet. She was plan-

ning to make a toy for Nina. With a few inches of black-out fabric and an old cotton shirt she would have enough material. On the tube home she planned how to make the golliwog: a black face and body, legs in striped trousers and a velvet waistcoat. She fell asleep on the train and missed the station.

By the time Anna got home to Walm Lane it was six o'clock. Nina was in the back garden trying to catch one of the hens. It was her job to get them into the chicken house for the night. The bird flew out of her grasp and her shrieks made it even harder to catch it. Nathan was standing watching as Nina finally managed to creep up behind the hen and lift it into the coop. As she fastened the catch Anna called to her that supper was nearly ready.

A pile of bread and butter soldiers was on the table. Nathan couldn't understand why Anna wouldn't mix the butter ration with the margarine to make it go further, but she couldn't understand how he could consider mixing the precious butter with anything. She lifted the boiled egg out of the water and peeled off the top of the shell. Nina was just about to dip the bread into the yolk when the air raid siren began to wail. Anna hustled them all out of the back door and into the shelter, leaving the egg on the table. She settled Nina on the hard bunk bed and rushed back into the kitchen to grab the tin on the dresser. It would be bad enough if a bomb hit the house; far worse if the ration books went up in smoke as well.



chapter 3

ADAFINA—(SABBATH STEW)

Set the onions and potatoes into a large pot. Chop the meat fine and add to it spices. Shape into balls. Add dried beans and as much eggs as you can find, cover with boiled water and a splash of olive oil. Cook on the fire and keep warm overnight.

Gibraltarian recipe, 1840

1834—DAVID

There were never enough eggs. Hidden at the bottom of the pot was a hen's egg, deep brown, soft and creamy. It had a nutty flavour that came from cooking it with the meat for twenty hours. But there was only the one—to be shared between the six of us. When the Sabbath *adafina* was ready to eat, we searched for the egg in the deep pot, under the potatoes and the onions and the spicy meatballs that made the eggshell oily and dark. My mother wanted to divide it up—I wanted the whole egg. I argued endlessly that I'd rather have no egg for five weeks and then on the sixth week, have the pleasure of cracking the

shell and biting off the top, sinking my teeth through the darkened white to the golden yolk inside. This never happened. I was only eleven. I had no say in the matter. When we sat down to eat we each got potatoes, a meatball and a morsel of the egg.

My father had no interest in the pleasures of food. His mind was on higher matters. We had lived in Gibraltar until I was ten and then for some uncertain reason we had left there to go to that place—that dreadful place. I remember the journey—the sea voyage and the sickness; those high waves and my stomach churning; the rolling ship and that taste that creeps into your mouth before the vile mess lurches out on to the deck. Was it days or weeks till we arrived in Acre? We watched as the massive anchor disappeared into the sea—no longer a murky grey, but as blue as the beach sky we had left in Gibraltar.

A man with horses and mules was there to meet us. We rode for days, first over flat paths lined with prickly pear trees and then through fields of thistles six feet high. The path turned into a rough and stony road. The mountain side was silver with olive trees. We set up our tents and began to fall asleep. I heard the voice of our guide whispering with my parents. Like all young boys, I was eager to listen to their conversation but the clicking of the crickets blurred the sound and I only heard muffled words: ‘torrential downpour,’ ‘houses damaged.’ My eyelids were beginning to close but I forced them open as I overheard the man say to my father:

“Arab villagers attacked the Jews in the street. They stole their money and sent them off naked and barefoot.”

That was the first of many times when I wondered why

we had gone there.

The next morning was cloudy and we continued, now walking over rocks and stones. We kept our eyes down, the adults stepping cautiously from one flat place to another, and the children kicking and throwing the pebbles. The path ahead was like a snake—a dusty zig zag, climbing to the top of the mountain. From there we looked down, catching our breath. The hills were covered with trees in blossom. My mother knew what they were. Fingering the leathery leaves she told us that the pink flowers were oleander and the white petals would turn into lemons. Through the branches we could see the roofs of the town. If only our life there had been like my first view from the mountain.



I tried to put these thoughts out of my mind when I returned alone to Gibraltar three years later. I was coming back to a town that I remembered well. Its heart consisted of three or four parallel streets, with lanes and passages leading downwards to the docks. The dark central thoroughfare, Main Street, was in shadow for most of the day. Steep flights of steps on the east side led to the caves and tunnels of the Upper Rock. It took fifteen minutes to go on foot from one end of town to the other.

Every day for the next few years I walked to school. The street was bustling with excitement. Donkey carts bearing barrels of water trundled over the wooden blocks and charcoal vendors called up to the three-storey buildings on either side. A Moroccan egg seller set down his

wicker baskets at the corner of Tuckey's Lane, and chair menders worked in the shade of double-fronted doors. From the wrought-iron balconies women called to summon a tinsmith or a knife grinder. I never looked ahead as I walked, preferring to keep my eyes lowered. There was always a chance of finding something. I had seen a notice on a tree announcing that someone had lost a striped bag containing gold and silver dollars. Whoever found the bag would be rewarded with one-fourth of its contents. There was no sign of the bag as I dawdled along Irish Town, so I walked on towards home.

I lived with my guardian in a pink-washed house with a courtyard giving on to cool, shuttered rooms. At the end of the street there were forty-two steps, a sharp turn and then another twenty-seven steps. From the top you could look down over the curved roof tiles and wave at someone who was climbing up.

My guardian, Deborah Levy, was a spinster. She was in fact my aunt; a small, round woman, with pale skin. She was old—maybe fortyish—and apart from taking care of me, she seemed happy to spend her time cooking and visiting what she called 'connections'. Everyone who wasn't on the first level of cousins was a 'connection' so that included half the population of Gibraltar.

Every Friday afternoon I would take the *adafina* in its earthenware pot to cook overnight in the baker's oven. Before it got dark, the women would prepare the steaming pot of food for the Sabbath meal and someone would have to carry it down Baker's Passage. As the last of the loaves was taken out, the crocks were pushed into the oven to keep warm till the following day. The long slow

cooking made the meat sticky and soft and the beans merged into the brown potatoes.

Ours was less than half full, because there were only two of us. Aunt Deborah would have liked more company. She brought up the subject of other boys in my school.

“Why don’t we invite some of your friends for next week? she asked.

“I have no friends.”

To take her mind off the question of company I asked:

“Do you remember when I went to the bakery to collect our crock and brought the wrong one back? We only found out because it had an unusual taste.”

“It wasn’t the taste. There was enough meat inside for a family of ten. But it’s no more trouble to make a full pot. Don’t you want to celebrate your birthday?”

“There’s nothing to celebrate.”

“When I was a young girl a birthday was a big event. We took a carriage to the beach at Catalan village and waited for the Spanish boys who came with baskets of *calentita*. Ah, the peppery taste of those hot slices. And the boys ... ”

It was hard to imagine Aunt Deborah with flowing hair and a tight waist. She ignored my remark about having no friends and continued talking with the words spilling out of her mouth:

“It’s not as if I have a dozen nephews. And besides, how else should I spend my time? I’d be pleased to have company.”

How could I dissuade her? I was unable—or perhaps unwilling—to tell her what I was thinking. The 8th December was my seventeenth birthday. The memory of

that other place was coming back. I tried to forget about those Sabbath meals—the *adafina* with the meatballs—*albondigas* I think they were called. I had blocked it out of my mind, with everything else. Each time the thoughts began I forced myself to concentrate on what was happening now, to forget why I was in Gibraltar, alone except for my aunt.

In a small community you might expect to find one synagogue and school. In this tiny British enclave there were four. I wanted to go to *Shaar Hashamayim* which was a hundred paces from our house. The words meant ‘Gates of Heaven.’ I wondered whether the orange tree in the patio was symbolic of our life on earth: beautiful, but sour? Inside there were carved mahogany benches lit by an array of lamps, of Dutch, Portuguese or English silver, hanging from the ceiling. My aunt preferred to walk five minutes to another synagogue on the corner of Bomb House Lane. The main gate was facing the sea. Birds flew across the sunlit courtyard under a trellis of vines and sometimes found their way inside. My school was in the next building.

The day started with prayers at 7 am—we called it *tefila*. Then Jewish studies for the next two hours, English after that, and finally, at the end of the morning some history. This always seemed to involve a battle; but I didn’t care whether it was the Spanish or the English who won. Our teacher, Mr. Benzecry, had been telling us about the fourteen sieges and began to explain about a sortie in 1781.

“How big were the lead balls?” I asked. “How much powder did they contain? How did the fuse make the charge explode?”

Mr. Benzecry looked confused.

“David, if you want to know the details, go to the Garrison Library”.

It wasn't hard to find. Library Street continued up a ramp and the building was set in a garden, with a racquet court at one end and the premises of the Gibraltar Chronicle at the other. Science was the only thing that stirred my mind and I knew that there would be books inside those reading rooms. But how could I get in? The entrance was guarded by an officer who asked if I was a subscriber. He told me that visitors should report to the Deputy Librarian, Lieutenant Frazer.

The lieutenant was seated at a vast table in the Upper Reading Room. He must have been surprised to see a boy in the doorway and putting back a heavy bound copy of the Times, he gestured to me to come outside. We stood at the top of the staircase and I used all the words I knew to persuade him to allow me to look at some of the books. He turned over the pages of the Rule Book and read:

“Every Subscriber shall have the liberty to introduce a Stranger to read in the Library Room which is open on Weekdays from 8 am in the summer till first Evening Gun-Fire.”

“So may I be your Stranger?” I asked.

He smiled and whispered:

“If you obey the rules.”

“Strict silence is to be observed in the inner rooms and the sand glass must be used to determine the length of time a reader may spend with the daily newspapers.”

From that day I became a regular visitor, leaping up the

few steps to the doorway and searching for books in the glass-fronted shelves. School finished at noon. Everyone else went to the beach. I ran all the way home, eager to eat lunch and be back at the library in the afternoon.

I pushed open the big wooden door to our house, dropped my school bag and went into the dining room. Almost immediately the maid brought in the meal. Apart from her usual questions about my morning at school Aunt Deborah spoke little. We ate, in a pleasing silence. As the maid cleared the last of the plates, my aunt went upstairs to her bedroom for a siesta. I slipped out, ran along Cornwall Parade and pulled out my Visitor's Pass.

The library was a haven. In winter a log fire crackled in the fireplace at each end of the main reading room. Above each one was a mantelpiece with candelabra. It was always dark. The closed shutters protected the volumes from the sun that blazed down through the long, lethargic summer.

I carried books on physics and botany to the leather topped table upstairs and sat reading for hours. I never took them home or mentioned them to my teachers. At school we studied *Talmud* and worked in pairs. We were in the middle of a tractate—*Bava Metzia*—dealing with issues of ownership and business ethics. In the Rabbi's class we learned *mishna*, *gemara* and the mediaeval commentaries of Rashi. But my mind was buzzing with the excitement of chemistry. The patterns of behaviour of similar elements seemed like patterns of word-formation that grammarians tease out of our own language: mysterious and beautiful in their logic and terseness. Learning the equations and formulae was like learning a foreign

language. Unlike physics, chemistry didn't involve a great deal of mathematics. It was about understanding; the distillation of much information into a neat, one or two-letter symbol.

I was in the library when a consignment of journals arrived from London. Lieutenant Frazer piled a dozen of them on to the table, next to the weekly delivery of the Times and The Morning Chronicle. I didn't recognize the title—The Lancet. At first I thought it was something military—lancers, or lances, but then I discovered that these were medical journals. I began to turn the pages, stopping at sections on *How to remove a stone in the windpipe* and *Poisonous snake bites*. I suddenly remembered the snakes in that other place, gliding around in the dust, not harming anyone.

I looked at the clock—four hours had passed. I'd been reading about the dangers of gases emanating from a dead body and a full description of an operation to remove a fist-sized tumour from a man's lower jaw. This was better than *Talmud*.

The summer passed and there was a shiver in the air. I pulled on my top coat as I walked. The sky was still as blue as the baby gowns displayed by the dressmaker. Why should I think of babies? The thought had not crossed my mind since I left that other place.

Each afternoon I spent hours poring over the journals. I became engrossed in amputations and head injuries; the club foot and female incontinence. I also found a series of Churchill's manuals. They cost 12s 6d each and I glanced at the ones on *Chemistry*, *Practical Surgery* and *Pathological Anatomy*.

The best one was *'What to Observe at the Bedside and After Death in Medical Cases.'* Part One explained the procedure. After examining the liver, spleen and stomach the doctor was to carry out a further inspection. He needed to check the lungs, colon and abdomen. I hoped our doctor had read this book. It was good to know that even the blood circulation was to be investigated before a body could be dispatched to the mortuary. Even more fascinating was Part Two. For those investigating death under suspicious circumstances was the advice: *'Look for burns, marks around the neck, and, if a weapon is discovered, compare it with the wound'*. In cases of suspected poisoning, *'one should search for arsenic and the contents of the stomach must be carefully examined'*.

I worked my way through almost a year's supply of journals. In a copy of the *Lancet* dating back to the previous September I read the opening article: *'Advice to Students on Commencing their Studies'*. The idea that had been stirring in my mind for months suddenly made sense—I wanted to enter the medical profession.



chapter 4

SALT BISCUITS

Take half a pound of fine flour and a pinch of salt. Put it in a bason. Warm an ounce of butter and a sufficiency of milk to make a stiff dough (about a gill). Knead the mass and roll it out very thin. Prick over with a fork, cut into biscuits and bake in a very hot oven.

From Deborah's notebook, 1840

GIBRALTAR 1840—DAVID

My father knew nothing of science but like me, he was obsessed with learning. Did I ever see him without a book in his hand? I remember him reading aloud to my mother from a little book called 'Pat Lechem'—'A Morsel of Bread'. I believe the author was related to our family in some way. He was a great scholar but the aspect of his work that fascinated my father concerned the tiniest living things:

"Be especially careful, my child, with the vegetables of our time which are full of worms, and

are not clean. Pious women with good eyesight should examine them carefully, and they should do so three times."

"Is that why we can't eat mulberries?" I asked.

"Exactly," was the reply.

"But what about cauliflowers? Can't we just wash the worm out, if we see one?"

"But you can't always see them. That's why the vegetables must be examined."

To prevent any more questions he pushed a basket into my hand and said:

"David, I'm not disposed to talk about it. Please go to the market for your mother and bring back what she asks for."

In that place where he had brought us, there had been a thriving market every morning. The stalls were piled with wrinkled dates, oranges and mis-shapen peppers and the smell of fresh baked rounds of bread mingled with the scents of the spice pyramids, arranged on sacking under the awnings. My mother learned what vegetables she must avoid. My father immersed himself in Rabbinical texts—all to the same end, to pursue a pure life. He had a burning faith and was greatly admired. I found it hard to share their concerns at the possibility of consuming a minute worm or insect, and I let my thoughts wander as my father read out a different section each evening.

"We are accustomed not to eat lentils of the current year, but we buy lentils of the previous crop, which are at least twelve months old. Any worms have disintegrated, and are regarded simply as dust. Nevertheless we still examine

them, first in cold water, then in boiling water, and only then do we cook them. However beans and peas may be eaten in the same year, and the reason seems to be that they are large, and may be examined individually."



Aunt Deborah used to make pea soup when we had company for dinner. There were the uncles and Aunt Leticia and what seemed to be dozens of cousins—Levys, Cubys and Parientes. They all took a great interest in our lives. One of them had seen me run up the steps to the library and reappear many hours later. If you know Gibraltar, you'll understand that even a visit to the library was worth reporting and could be a topic of discussion in the family.

The subject came up when Aunt Deborah was heaving a huge pan off the hob. The pieces of beef had been simmering for a whole day and the stock had to be strained into another pot full of green peas with some sprigs of mint. Aunt Deborah was pushing the mixture through a strainer. She began to talk:

"David, I don't know why ...," she huffed, pressing the peas with the back of a wooden spoon "why you have to spend so much time surrounded by those dusty books."

"I like the library."

"But it would be better if you spent your afternoons on the sands."

"Better for who?" I asked, thinking about the sun smouldering on my back and the damp grains sticking

to the pages of my book. To put her in a better mood I told her that I left the library in time to join my friends at about five o'clock.

I didn't tell her the real reason for my reluctance. Since I'd spent most of my boyhood away from the sea I couldn't swim well. When my friends dived off the rocks I felt my inside doing the somersault. I would have liked to walk past Windmill Hill Flats near Buffadero and throw stones over the bluff. As it was, I arrived at the beach long after the others, so I could hardly suggest we meet somewhere else.

The green puree was nearly ready. It seemed such an effort.

"Aunt Deborah, why do you spend so much time making pea soup? Why can't you make something simpler? The soup we had in that place was a broth made from vegetables and the bones of a chicken."

My aunt didn't like it when I referred to 'that place'. She usually started telling me how lucky I was. She put down the spoon, wiped her hands on her apron and went to put her arm around my shoulder.

"Don't touch me," I shouted and stamped out of the door. I shouldn't have pushed her away. In the beginning she had tried to help me with the memories, folding her plump arms around me and holding me tight to stop the tears. I should have understood: I was the centre of her world. Why didn't I explain how the books in the library had opened my mind to so many new things? I could have given her the satisfaction of knowing that I was in better spirits, passing my time happily. But the thought of the soup had brought back the memory of the table and the

pile of spoons I used to put out. When the bad thoughts started coming I let myself remember the food, but for the rest, I pushed it away, out of my head, and imagined I was pressing hard against a heavy door which I had to keep shut.



Sardines. They weren't for eating. They were for buying and selling. The import export business seemed to support half the families in Gibraltar. In my last year of school Mr. Benzecry asked me about my plans.

"You could become an apprentice to one of the agents in Lisbon or London," he suggested. He knew that my mind wandered during the lessons and thought that I was dreaming of foreign travel.

"Do you remember when you sent me to the Garrison Library?" I began, thinking I might tell him about my interest in medicine.

"It seems you have become quite fond of the books there. We have books too. I don't know why you need to go there." He had long forgotten my original questions and had no conception of the world I had discovered in the scientific books and journals.

If I thought the subject was closed, it was reopened by my aunt a few days later. She also assumed that I was planning to enter the world of business. There was a package on the table.

"It's a gift, open it."

I began to unwrap the paper. Aunt Deborah was pulling at the loose strands of hair on her neck.

“It’s a guide. Mogg’s Strangers guide to London.”

“Now you’ve spoiled it. You’ve told me what’s in it.”

She looked sad. I pulled out the book and turned to look at the “*List of the principal places*” on the first page.

“When you work in business you’ll need to visit the big cities. I thought it would be suitable.”

I was irritated with the way she spoke. She pronounced the words ‘bissness’ and ‘vissit’. She spoke like many Gibraltarians with just a few words revealing that she was not quite English.

I didn’t want to tell her that I’d already been studying an illustrated map of London with pale coloured pictures of the important sights. I could see in both plans a number of green places. I liked open spaces, like the Cork Woods near the Rock. They were a half hour walk from my house; an escape where the sun barely streaked through the trees and wild flowers and ferns grew by the stream at the bottom. In London there seemed to be four parks. One called Hyde had a lake, Serpentine, in the middle. Then there were smaller green areas—Lincoln’s Inn Fields, Goodman’s Fields and an Artillery Ground. The big river snaking across the map divided the south from the north.

My eyes wandered over street names—Cateaton, Great Bland, Queenhithe and Baalzephon Street. Where did a name like that come from? It was more like a street in that place. As my finger traced the roads it stopped at the title at the top of the map, showing the date it was printed: January 1st 1837. That was the day. The actual day. When it happened. I closed my eyes to stop the thoughts. Breathed. Pushed them away with the map.

Picked up the September issue of the Lancet. Kept my eyes on the words:

“It generally happens that a student has decided, previously to arriving in town, upon the school to which he shall enter. If he have not, the point of first importance is the hospital which he can best attend, and secondly the school nearest to that hospital where he may attain the greatest amount of useful information. Having decided upon his hospital, the student’s next attention should be directed to the attainment of a lodging as near to the establishment of study as convenient.”

The chapter was full of information and the choice was confusing. Should I opt for an older hospital like St. Thomas’s or Guy’s in the south? Or apply to one of the newer ones like University College? For some reason the editor seemed opposed to King’s and Charing Cross. In a state of indecision I considered where to attend courses. There were private schools like the Hunterian at Charlotte Street for the less affluent but I also pondered the advantages of going to lectures at one of the hospitals.

On the next page was a list of teachers and fees at The London Hospital. One session seemed to cost from three to six guineas but you could attend an unlimited number for as little as ten. The sessions began with medicine at 8 am. Midwifery with Dr. Ramsbotham was on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays at 10 am and on the alternate days there was Chemistry with Mr. Pereira. He also taught Materia Medica three days a week at half past three. But that wasn’t all—the student still had to fit in Anatomy,

Physiology and Operations of Surgery by Messrs. Luke and Hamilton and a further session of Surgery by Messrs. Scott and Adams. The general fee for attendance at all of these lectures, qualifying for the examination at the College and Hall was £50.

It's strange how a page of details could make the black thoughts go away. I had to focus my mind on how to persuade Aunt Deborah to let me go to London, not as a visiting merchant selling sardines, but as an apprentice to a physician. Turning the page, I found the one fact that would convince her: The London Hospital employed a 'Hebrew cook' and had a kitchen supplying kosher food for the many Jewish patients there. There had to be Jews in London—at least that part of London.

I rehearsed what I was going to say. I walked into the kitchen to find Aunt Deborah baking salt biscuits. Her hands were covered in flour as she pulled and stretched the dough, rolling it out into thin strips till you could almost see through it. I was wondering how to begin:

"Aunt Deborah—I'm thinking of leaving Gibraltar."

No, that was too abrupt. She was pricking each strip with a fork and marking out the biscuits into two-inch lengths. When the trays were in the oven she began to talk about my leaving school and starting in commerce. I listened and said nothing.

"David, I shall miss you when you start to travel. But it won't be for long. You'll always be back here for *Shabbat*. We haven't done so badly, have we, since you came to live with me?"

Aunt Deborah went to take the biscuits out of the oven. I looked at the back of her head with her sleek hair parted

in the centre. She used macassar oil to make it smooth and then pulled it back into a chignon and kept it in place with an ivory comb. I took one of the biscuits and pushed it into my mouth with a piece of salty cheese.

Since I hadn't replied she continued:

“and to think a spinster like me would end up raising such a fine boy.”

I was far from 'a fine boy'. I must have been a disappointment. The boy Aunt Deborah had known as a child had returned with gangling legs and a face with broken skin and the beginnings of a stubbly beard. Did I remind her of my father, her only brother?

We existed side by side, in quite separate worlds. Her mind was occupied with cooking our food and visiting the cousins. As an afterthought she would pay attention to her appearance and choose a new bonnet for the spring. She was garrulous and inquisitive, sharing knowledge of the neighbours' lives in a tumble of English and Spanish words. I had little to say.

Our weekly visits to synagogue might have given me a chance to tell her my plans. But it was a short walk, often hurried as she wanted to be there in time to hear the weekly *Torah* reading from the scroll of the law. When we arrived she went up to the gallery and slipped behind the white ballustrade where the women sat. I picked up a fringed *talet*, threw it round my shoulders and joined in with the men, chanting the Hebrew words.

My father had taught me to read Hebrew. When I was very small he wrote out the *aleph bet* and I learned to put the letters together. But most of the prayers I knew by heart. We said them every day, from the moment we

woke up till we were curled up in bed at night. There was a prayer and a blessing for everything: on seeing the new moon, on eating a fruit for the first time in a season. As I got older my father left me to pray on my own, while he covered his head with his *talet* and rocked back and forth. He assumed I could follow and find my place in the book but the truth was that I would close my eyes and listen to the singing and not follow the words. I found that if I kept my eyelids half open I could make patterns with the light and see dancing cobwebs in front of my eyes.



chapter 5

JUMBLES

Unless you are provided with proper and convenient utensils and materials (butter paddle, hickory rods for beating eggs), the difficulty of making cakes will be great, and in most cases a failure, involving disappointment, waste of time and useless expense. Biscuits require only a mixing bowl and a baking tin.

Take equal quantities (a few ounces of each) of fine sugar, honey, butter and flour. Warm the sugar, honey and butter over a gentle heat. Stir in the flour, having first sifted it fine through a sieve with a pinch of ginger. Cook for a few minutes. Put drops on a well greased tin and flatten out. Allow room for spreading. Bake for about eight minutes. Lift off with a fish slice and press the biscuits round the handle of a wooden spoon.

From Deborah's notebook, 1840

Aunt Deborah was preoccupied with baking and bonnets. I passed my time in the library with Lieutenant Frazer, sharing items of interest from the Gibraltar Chronicle. The paper was full of information one might need at any time:

“Mr. de Vitry, Dentist to her Majesty the Empress Amelia, continues to fix without pain terro-metallic teeth. These teeth may be taken out and replaced at pleasure by the wearer. He also manufactures artificial Noses, Eyes and Palates. Apply Main Street, opposite the Exchange.”

I wondered about the eyes. Were these also done without pain? Why would anyone need an artificial nose? Would it work like a real one? I asked Lieutenant Frazer if he imagined Mr. de Vitry could replace the smell function.

He smiled and looked over my shoulder as I turned to the Shipping Section.

“Are you thinking of sailing somewhere?”

“As a matter of fact, I am.”

“Look,” he whispered. “the voyage to Southampton takes about five days. The Cunard Steamship Company offers *‘superior accommodation at low rates.’*”

Someone at the end of the table said “Shhh”. We carried on talking.

“I’m more interested in safety than comfort,” I said. “Here’s a report of a fire at sea. It says the crew were saved and taken to Dunkirk. I wonder what happened to the

passengers?"

Lieutenant Frazer was pointing to a paragraph about an execution at Lisbon:

"To check the nightly recurrence of murders and robberies, the poor victim was hanged, after being paraded round the city for three hours."

"I hope my Aunt Deborah hasn't read this." I said.

"Why?" he asked. "Are you going to Lisbon?"

"No, but I have other plans."

Before I could stop myself, I began talking about hospitals and schools of medicine.

Lieutenant Frazer reminded me of the 'strict silence' rule. We continued the conversation outside the reading room.

"Do you know enough physics and mathematics to study in London?"

"That's where you come in," I said. "Perhaps...maybe you could write a letter to say that I've been studying privately with you for some months?"

"I suppose you've taught yourself something poring over all those books, but a letter ..."

I told him that I could write a few lines on what I had been studying and all he had to do was sign it, perhaps omitting his military title. I managed to convince him and then I broached another problem.

"I have to tell my aunt that I am leaving. And my teacher, Mr. Benzecry. He keeps asking me what I'm learning at the library."

"Haven't you told him that you spend nearly every afternoon here?"

"No, he thinks I go to the beach with the others."

“You’re a funny lad, David. Give me the choice and I’d rather be sitting on the long sands looking out at that blue line on the horizon. And you.. you’d rather be sitting here reading the Chronicle.”

“How am I to tell them? They’ll never let me go to live in London.”

“Why don’t you invite this Mr. Benzecry to meet your aunt and you can tell them together?”

“I certainly can’t tell him first. The news will reach Aunt Deborah before the end of the afternoon. Gossip travels fast in Gibraltar. Do you know that story about the young woman who was visiting from England?”

We began to walk down the stairs together.

“What does this have to do with your aunt?”

“It isn’t related to her. It’s about this place. The young woman I was talking about, she wanted to buy a gift for her mother. She went in and out of several stores, looking at different objects. In each one the shopkeeper took pains to bring forth a selection of goods. It was hard for her to decide: should it be the heart-shaped jewellery box or the porcelain doll? Maybe a hand-painted mirror would be more to her mother’s taste? The young woman finally chose the doll.”

“And?”

“Let me finish the story. By the time she returned to her lodgings the landlady already knew what she had bought. She even knew how much it had cost.”

We agreed there should be no subterfuge. It transpired that my aunt was delighted at the thought of meeting Mr. Benzecry. The next day she sent me to school carrying a small envelope inviting him to come for tea the follow-

ing Tuesday. I could already hear the conversation in my head:

"I'm planning to book a passage to England and find lodgings in London."

Aunt Deborah would faint; Mr. Benzecry would help her up from the floor and my plans to study medicine would be finished. I needed a gentler introduction and imagined bringing the conversation round to a discussion of his family:

"Mr. Benzecry, don't you have a sister who lives in Secretary's Lane near the Cathedral? The one who was very sick last year? Wouldn't it be marvellous to learn how to cure people?"

The reality was rather different. On the dot of three o'clock there was a tap on the brass knocker and standing at the front door was Mr. Benzecry, removing his leather gloves to extend a hand to my aunt. She was wearing one of the new fashionable crinolines and her skin was paler than ever with a dusting of pearl powder and some rouge tentatively applied to her cheeks. She led him into the parlour and invited him to sit in one of the high-backed chairs, smoothing down the starched linen of the anti-macassar. The maid brought in a polished tray with a silver teapot and matching sugar basin and cream ewer. She set down a tiered stand with a cake made from Jordan almonds and a large plate of butter biscuits. On the top was a small plate of crisp, lacy jumbles.

A few hours earlier we'd had an argument about the jumbles. Aunt Deborah was spooning little mounds of the warm sugar and butter mixture on to trays when I came into the kitchen. She slid them into the oven where

they bubbled and flattened and turned a dark brown. Immediately they were cooked she had to lift them off and roll them around the handle of a wooden spoon to make them curl. Of course some of them broke and I made myself useful by putting the broken pieces straight into my mouth.

Aunt Deborah slapped my hand:

“Stop it, David, there won’t be any left.”

The biscuits were tricky anyway, but the thought of the forthcoming tea made her nervous, so she wasn’t working fast enough and many of the jumbles stuck to the tin or cracked as she peeled them off. She piled the few good ones on to a plate and put it on the top tier.

As she poured the tea I remembered the other silver teapot we never used. It was the only thing I brought with me from that place. It stayed in a cabinet in my bedroom, a precious possession, kept out of sight.

The conversation was in full flow with my aunt and my teacher discussing people they knew.

“David’s a good student, you know” said Mr. Benzecry “but I think his mind is sometimes on other matters.”

This was my opportunity.

“Aunt Deborah. What would you think if I were to go away, to live in London?”

“But there’s no need. You can work as an agent and make the occasional visit to England.”

“I’m not going to sell sardines. It’s not what my father would have wanted.”

“And what would he have wanted? He’s not here. God rest his soul.”

She was pulling at the sleeve of her dress, looking from

me to Mr. Benzecry. The tea was getting cold.

“I’m hoping to become a pupil to study medicine at a London hospital”.

There was a long silence. Aunt Deborah was close to tears.

“Medicine? Mr. Benzecry, some more cake?”

He nodded and held out his plate. Flicking the crumbs off his trousers he said:

“That means years of study. How will you manage?”

Before I could say anything Aunt Deborah began a tirade:

“You’ll be on your own in London. There’ll be no-one to cook for you. There are dangers... .”

She was twisting her handkerchief into a knot. She turned away to refill the teapot.

Mr. Benzecry sat uncomfortably in his chair. He coughed and said:

“I know a man called Mendoza who can help David find lodgings. And there are kosher butchers and bakers in Whitechapel.”

“Mendoza—Eliezer, isn’t it? He’s a connection” said my aunt. “So David will be acquainted with one Gibraltarian in a vast city.”

“Perhaps we could telegraph and send word to his office that I will be arriving?” I suggested.

Aunt Deborah looked stricken. I wondered if I was right to stand by my decision to leave Gibraltar. Mr. Benzecry was finishing his cake. He set down his fork and then suddenly he was leaving and I was alone with my aunt. She turned away and brushed past the maid who had come in to clear away the plates. For the rest of the

evening Aunt Deborah stayed in her room.

The next day I found her sitting at her desk looking through some correspondence. I asked what she was doing and for a full five minutes she said nothing. Eventually she sighed and said:

“David. I’m not sure this is wise.”

“But my mind is made up. I’ve been considering it for weeks. It’s not a decision I have made lightly. I’ve been finding out where to study and how much it will cost.”

At the mention of money Aunt Deborah raised another objection.

“I’m not sure if there are enough funds to support you for five or six years.”

“Funds? what do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, I told you some money was raised when you came back to Gibraltar.”

I had a vague memory of that first week when I was taken to Aunt Deborah’s house. The parlour was filled with people, neighbours who lived in the surrounding streets. They poured into the room and whispered in groups. They all knew my parents.

“Yes, but where did the money come from?”

“All the neighbours in Engineer Lane wanted to help,” she began. “When the word went round even those who lived further on in Governor Street ... they all contributed to the fund. It’s a considerable sum. I suppose now you are nearly eighteen, you are entitled to it.”

Aunt Deborah sighed. “I have no notion of how much the lodgings and fees will cost.” She had difficulty keeping her voice from trembling. “But be cautious, David, don’t fritter it all away.”

I wanted to thank her for everything she'd done for me; to say something to show how I appreciated her letting me go. Instead I put my arm round her shoulder and brushed my lips against her cheek, breathing in the faint perfume of powder. My face was damp. She dabbed at her eyes with the handkerchief.

The following week I bought a large trunk and began to fill it with newly acquired clothing. On top of the boots I packed trousers, some narrow cut with straps under the instep, others cantoon or 8s 6d tweed. I was arranging the waistcoats and ties when Aunt Deborah offered to fold my lounge jackets. She spread out sheets of tissue paper and then suddenly left the room. She returned a moment later with needles and thread.

"There'll be no-one to sew your buttons on," she said.

We finished packing in silence. She passed me porcelain cups and saucers, a tea caddy and cut glass tumblers. I looked round my bedroom and gathered together my hairbrushes and cuff links, hesitating over the writing case and pens—surely I'd be able to purchase some in London? I didn't think there would be room for the linen sheets and pillow cases, but it made sense to tuck them in around the heavier objects.

I picked up the velvet bag containing my *tefillin*. It was a long time since I'd used them at morning prayers. On the day of my *barmitzvah*, my father taught me how to place the black box on my forehead and showed me how to wind the straps around my arm. I'd done it every day since I was thirteen and even continued when I returned to Gibraltar and was given a new set. At the end of this school year I brought them home but I never prayed with

them. They remained in the bag, untouched. I threw them on top of the linen, with my woollen fringed *talet* and last of all, the camel teapot. I closed the lid of the trunk, fastened the locks and moistened the luggage labels with my tongue, pressing them down, so they could be clearly seen by the porters.

At the quayside there was a large sign 'Peninsula and Oriental Steamship Company'. The whole of Gibraltar seemed to have turned out to see me off. Aunt Deborah wore a new, wide-skirted dress. Her bonnet was tied under her chin with a large bow. Small boys from the school in tunic suits with close fitting jackets jostled to get a better view of the ship. Their parents put out protective hands to ensure that the smart clothes stayed clean and unruffled. In the distance I heard the sounds of the Regimental Band in the Cathedral Square. I thought about Lieutenant Frazer. The letter he'd given me was safe in my pocket.

Mr. Benzecry came on board with me, found the steward and gave him half a sovereign. Aunt Deborah was pressing a handkerchief to her eyes. She pulled a shawl up to her throat and the fringes blew in the wind as she made her way down the gangplank. Alone in my cabin, I closed the door. I tried to recall some advice for frequent passengers that I had read in the Chronicle:

Never take a place opposite a newly married couple. It is tiresome, tantalising, disgusting.

Never play at cards. Some people know too little for your temper and others too much for your pocket.

If the berths are over each other, let the young fellow climb and you take the lower one.

Biting my lip, I arranged my pyjamas on the top berth. Presumably, being the 'young fellow' I had to be the one to climb.

The ship was due to stop at Cadiz, Lisbon and Oporto before finally arriving at Blackwall. My companion was pleasant but untalkative and apart from assuming that the middle aged couple waving to me from the shore were my parents, he asked few questions and seemed keen to acquaint himself with the various decks, shipboard activities and meal times.

Sea travel held no excitement for me. I studied the daily weather forecasts as I was anxious about passing through the Bay of Biscay and the infamous storms and high seas often encountered there. But the passage proved uneventful and I passed the days sitting on deck reading.

The front page of *The Morning Chronicle* was a light relief from the more serious literature I had brought with me. A small announcement caught my eye:

'Patent Aquatic Life Hat, guarantees total prevention from drowning, possesses such extraordinary buoyant powers as to support four persons from sinking.'

I was trying to imagine how four people could wear the hat. Unfortunately it was not on sale on board ship but was to be demonstrated every morning and evening during the bathing hours on the *Serpentine*.

Disembarkation was slow and progress through the customs house even slower. I was told I could leave my

trunk at the shipping office and collect it later. I made my way from the port to Smithy Street near Mile End Road. I was looking for Eliezer Mendoza, the 'connection' who had set up a business in the East End of London. He specialized in sardines, buying in Spain and selling, through agents, to Britain and Holland. His London offices were a couple of rooms at the top of a terraced house about half a mile from the river. When I arrived he was perched on a chair at a high desk, writing in a massive ledger. He asked me to wait while he entered the latest transaction, the name of the bank and the cash received. When he got down I was surprised to see how short he was. He enquired politely about my relatives in Gibraltar and handed me a list of addresses. Walking down the staircase with me to the front door, he barely came up to the height of my chest.

I took out one of my maps and set off along Sidney Street. The smell from the horses and the grime beneath my feet made me speed my pace, past Fieldgate and Stepney. I needed to get away from the bustle and chatter in the streets so I walked on to the castle, one of the monuments I had read about. It was less than a mile away and the round turrets were just visible above the slight fog. The Tower Ditch surrounded the castle on three sides. I looked at the vivid green lawn, so unlike the parched grass of Gibraltar or the sandy paths of that other place, and felt the cool grip of loneliness spreading up my chest.

