

The Remarkable Rachel Romain

A novel by
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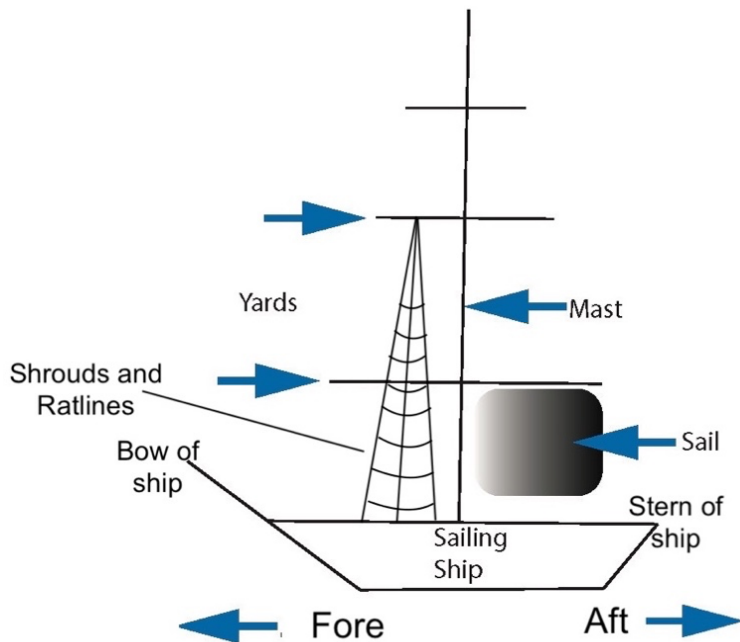
Factual events will be written in *ITALICS*, *although some facts of history are always debatable.*

***"A smooth sea never made a
skilled sailor."***

Franklin Delano Roosevelt

To G.B.G.

Merchant Ship – 1800s



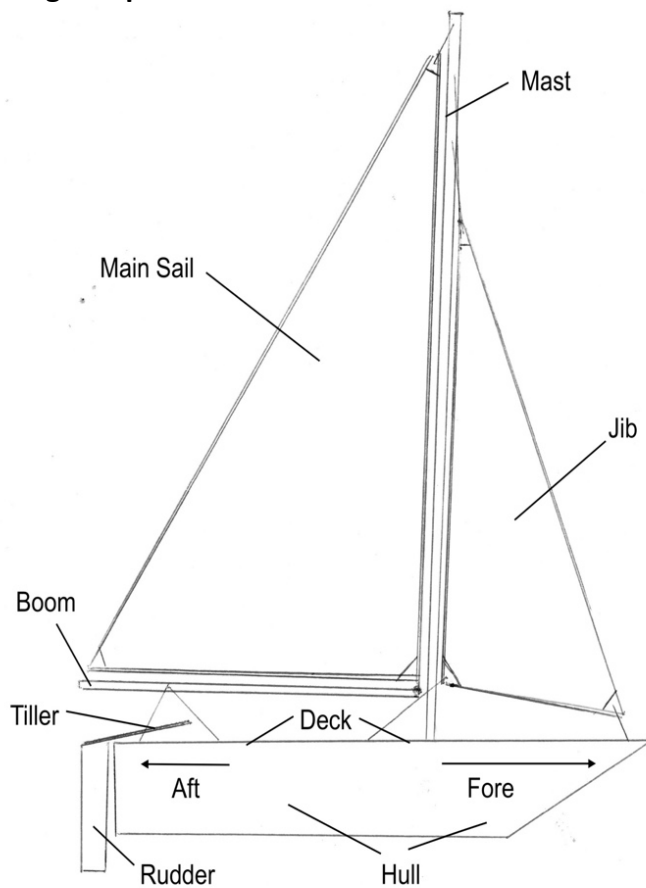
Yard: A long horizontal piece of wood attached to the mast and used to support and spread a sail.

Mainmast: Principal mast of a ship, usually the second mast of three on a sailing ship.

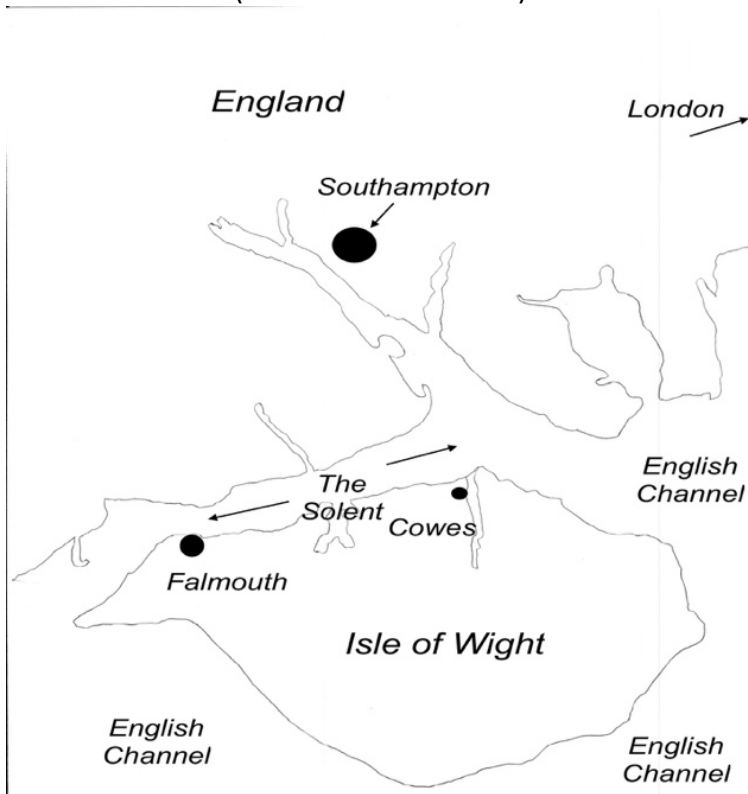
Shrouds: Ropes leading usually in pairs to give support to the masts.

Ratlines: small ropes fastened across a sailing ship's shrouds like the rungs of a ladder, used for climbing the rigging.

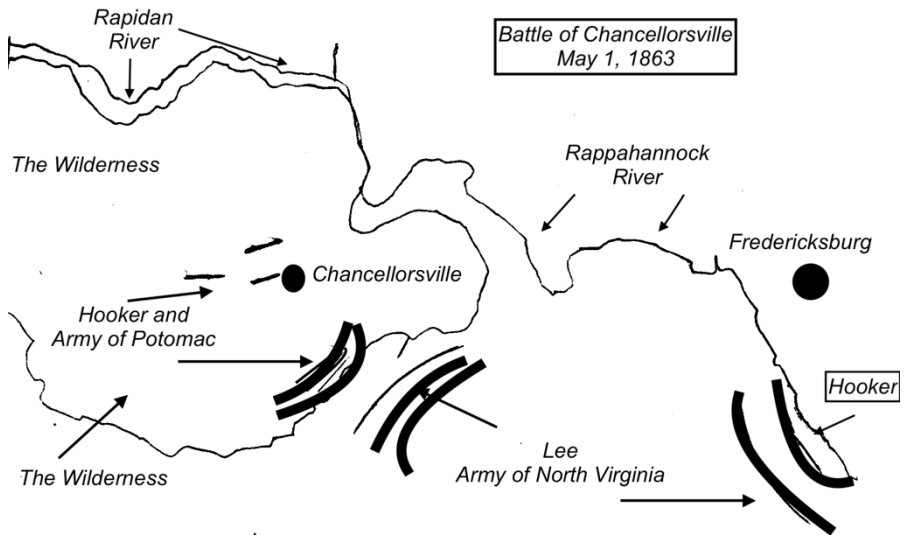
Racing Sloop 1860



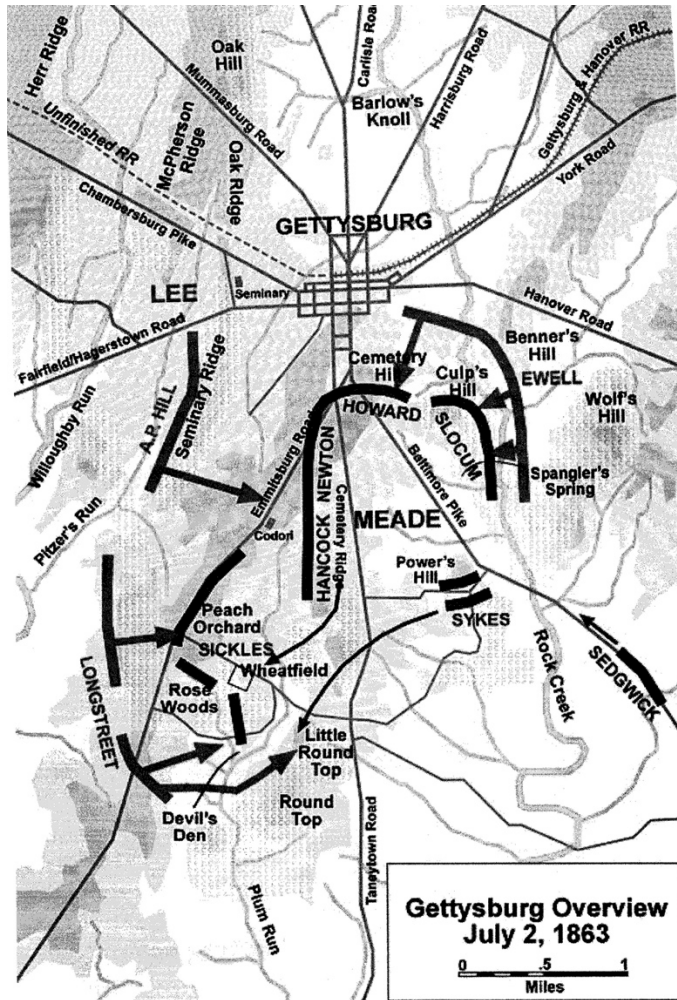
Isle of Wight and Southampton and the Solent (southwest of London)



Battle of Chancellorsville, May 1, 1863 – First day
(Virginia, United States)



Battle of Gettysburg July 2, 1863 – Second day (Pennsylvania, United States)



Prologue
December 1844 - East Indian Ocean
Ray/Rachel

The *Sol Quest*, a four-hundred-ton British merchant ship, had been fighting rain and gale winds for more than twelve hours. By sunset, the crew had reached the point of total exhaustion.

The ship's captain, Jacob Romain, rugged, with a weathered face belying his forty years, went below to check on two sailors injured trying to furl sails earlier in the storm. Romain left the helm in the hands of his trusted first mate, Ol' Tom Voz, a seasoned sailor, a decade older than his captain.

Fifteen minutes later, Ol' Tom came down to the sailor's quarters. "Cap'n, need you up top. We got a problem."

"Get it out, man," Jacob demanded, pulling on his oilskin topcoat.

Ol' Tom spoke quickly.

"The yard in the middle of the mainmast has cracked. I've sent a man up to release the sail but the yard won't hold his weight. I'm afeared the flapping sail will pull the entire mast down."

Arriving on deck, Jacob and Ol' Tom looked up to see the crack in the yard and the attached sail flapping hard in the wind. The mast itself was bent toward the weight of the dangling sail.

"We've got to get that sail released," Jacob yelled against the wind and rain.

Ol' Tom screamed back, "Anyone who climbs out on the yard will crack it the rest of the way. God help them then."

"Ray weighs less than fifty pounds and can do it."

"Too dangerous, Cap'n."

"We'll tie a safety line. At worst, Ray may dangle a bit but won't fall."

“Unless the entire mainmast comes down,” Ol’ Tom warned. “You can see it’s stressed. Dunno know how much more it can handle before snapping.”

“It needs to be done now. Once it’s dark, we won’t be able to free it. We’ve got to take the chance it won’t snap whilst Ray’s up there. We could lose the ship in this storm if we don’t cut that sail loose,” Jacob said.

Jacob left Ol’ Tom to conscript Mick Backes, a strong sea dog, to climb the mast above the cracked yard with a safety line. Jacob ran down to his cabin to awaken Ray. The cabin boy was now ten years old, his only child.

Minutes later, Ol’ Tom, Jacob and Ray stood on the windy deck looking up at the cracked yard.

“Ray, you think you can crawl out there and cut the sail loose?” Jacob yelled. “We’ve no other choices, or I wouldn’t ask you.”

“I’ll give it my damn best, Cap’n,” Ray yelled back. He always referred to Jacob as Cap’n, instead of father or Pa.

Despite the darkening sky, freezing wind and rain, Ray stripped down to a thin linen shirt and pants revealing a thin but wiry frame. Jacob tied the safety line at Ray’s beltline, then Ol’ Tom tucked his knife under Ray’s belt. Mick, already on the mast above the cracked yard, held the other end of the safety line.

Without another word, Ray started up the ratlines to reach the cracked yard where it joined the mainmast.

Watching his only child climb toward danger, Jacob grabbed Ol’ Tom’s arm and muttered, “What have I done? God help me.”

Ray looked up to see that Mick held the safety line tight, then crawled out onto the yard. A large crack in the yard opened and closed with each sway of the ship and each gust of wind. As Ray inched close to the crack, a huge wave tilted the ship to the port.

Jacob and Ol’ Tom yelled, “Hold on,” but it was too late. Ray was thrown over the side of the yard.

Jacob and the crew below let out a collective gasp as

Ray spun like a top in the wind, held up only by the safety line.

Mick pulled hard to allow Ray to grab the yard with one hand, stop spinning, and then get hold of the yard with both hands.

Ray swung a leg onto the yard, then Mick used the safety line to pull Ray back atop it. Undaunted, Ray waved to Jacob below, then inched over the crack out to the end of the yard.

Ol' Tom looked over to see Jacob's rigid face and said, "Cap'n. You might consider taking a breath here or there."

The yard's crack stayed open with Ray's weight, but did not break. Ray took Ol' Tom's knife and sawed through the line holding up the massive sail. The entire sail plummeted to the deck. Ray dropped the knife atop the released sail. As Ray inched backward toward the mast, the yard began to fail with a loud crack.

"Heave me up, damn you," Ray shrieked. "It's going."

Mick pulled tight, relieving all of the weight on the cracked yard until Ray reached the safety of the mainmast. Seconds later, the yard splintered with a cracking roar and separated, crashing to the deck, barely missing two sailors.

Ray and Mick descended the ratlines in double time. Teary-eyed, Jacob hugged and spun Ray in the air while Ol' Tom and the sailors on deck shouted, "Huzzah, Huzzah," congratulating Ray and Mick for saving the ship.

"You owe us an extra tot¹ of rum, Cap'n," Ray said with a smile, knowing there'd be no rum at all for the next ten years.

Mick nodded agreement. "Perhaps two tots, Cap'n."

After receiving a hug from Ol' Tom, Ray returned to Jacob's cabin to dry off and change clothes.

As Ol' Tom and Jacob watched Ray head off, Ol' Tom

^{1 1} Tot: about two and one-half ounces. The standard daily allotment of rum for sailors in the British Royal Navy.

put an arm around his captain's shoulder and said, "Got nerves of steel, that one. Remarkable."

Chapter One

London, December 1832 - twelve years earlier

Paul Romain, a successful Jewish merchant, traded in cotton, tea, and spices. Paul and his wife Gayle had a son, Jacob, early in their marriage.

Jacob took to the sea at sixteen with Paul's blessings, encouragement, and financing. By twenty-one, Jacob captained his own ship, *The Sol Quest*.

To the surprise and concern of everyone, Gayle became pregnant at the age of forty-two, twenty years after Jacob's birth. She delivered a healthy boy, Simon, but a postpartum hemorrhage took her life later that day.

Paul, devastated by Gayle's passing, never remarried, allowing nannies, tutors, and private boarding schools to raise Simon.

Simon, sixteen, returned home from boarding school for the winter holidays to find brother Jacob in town – a rare event.

Paul, now in his late sixties and used to being without family, shed his loneliness and appeared ebullient. Jacob, though broad-chested and powerful, was weather-beaten and seemed much older than Simon remembered from his last visit.

Being Friday night, Paul lit candles and standing together the three men chanted the Sabbath prayers before dinner.

"Tell me, little brother," Jacob asked, "are you ready to give up all this school nonsense and learn a real trade as I did at your age? I've talked to Father, and you'll join me next week as I sail to Venice, then Cape Town and back."

Simon had feared this offer. He looked despairingly at his father.

"I agree. Enough of schooling," Paul said. "It's time."

"No, Father. Please," Simon begged, shaking his head. "I've no desire to be cooped up on a ship."

Jacob's face darkened. "It's an exceptional and lucrative life," he insisted. "After this voyage, I'll go mainly to the Far East. Ports of call and beautiful women everywhere. You'll love the excitement of Osaka, Singapore, Hong Kong, Bombay, Calcutta, Madagascar, and Cape Town. Once you're seaworthy, father will find you a ship of your own."

"That's right, son," Paul said. "It's time you joined the family business."

"No," Simon said with clenched fists, "I've heard you talk to father about life at sea the few times you've returned home. I've no desire to fight storms, loneliness, pirates or disease. I want to return to school to continue my studies."

"To what end?" Jacob demanded, exasperated.

"I want to be a physician, perhaps a surgeon. I like science and I'm good with my hands," Simon said. "I've known for a year. I didn't tell Father because—"

"Impossible," Paul cried. "You'd need to attend medical school and none exist in England for Jews."

"So I've been told by my professors," Simon said. "I would move to France, Prussia or Austria to study medicine."

Paul and Jacob exchanged a look.

"You don't know French or German," Jacob countered, shaking his head.

"I've finished my levels of Latin and *ich lerne Deutsch et j'étudie le français*. I'll be proficient in both in a year."

"Even if you succeed in getting a medical degree," Paul said at last, "The Royal College of Physicians and the College of Surgeons may not accept you. Even if they do, many of the hospitals won't allow you staff privileges."

"Jews are allowed now and with my education they cannot in good conscience refuse me," Simon said.

Paul and Jacob, surprised, looked at each other in silence as Simon seemed to have answers for all their concerns.

Jacob quipped, "A foolish decision, I fear, dear brother."

"Enough of that, Jacob," Paul said sharply.

Jacob looked surprised, but held his tongue.

Simon crossed his arms. "I've decided and I will not turn back. Even if I have to move to the Americas, I will be a doctor and surgeon."

"Are you sure about this?" Paul asked.

"Yes. Absolutely."

"Then I will support you," Paul said. "You seem to have made up your mind anyway. I think your mother would have been proud. She wanted Jacob here in London to be a scholar, you know. She only reluctantly agreed to him going to sea."

Simon smiled and gave his father a rare hug before sitting for dinner.

At the age of twenty-six, Simon finished his medical training in Strasbourg, France. On a fine spring day, he strolled to the post office to dispatch the last letter he'd send from abroad to his father:

1 March 1842

Dear Father,

I have passed my exams and will complete my studies this coming May. Then I will return home to begin my practice of medicine and surgery. Thank you again for your support and blessings. I am excited for the future.

During my training at the hospital, I've had the pleasure to make the acquaintance of a twenty-two-year-old Jewish-French nurse named Cynthia Goldhammer. She is widowed and childless and her English is excellent. Every week our affection for each other

grows. I've asked her to marry me and she has accepted, although her family is not keen about her leaving France. Bowing to Cynthie's family's wishes, we will marry here in Strasbourg at the family's synagogue before returning home. I know you will adore her as I do.

Simon

Simon had cleared one major hurdle before sending the letter to his father – Cynthie's elderly parents. French Civil Code required parental permission for brides less than twenty-five years old.

The Goldhammers were ecstatic to have their youngest child find another spouse after Cynthie's first husband's tragic and untimely death. However, they had concerns about Simon being raised without a mother and his formative years spent in boarding schools away from his father.

When Simon sat with the Goldhammer's at their home to ask for her hand, he assuaged their fears. He explained that his father, Paul, had taught him life's important lessons - how to be a man and how not to be a father.

As a man, Simon would follow Paul's example - he would work hard, be honest, and attempt to earn the respect of the community. As a father, Simon would act in the opposite direction. Simon hoped that he and Cynthie would have a large family. More importantly, his children would stay home to be raised by Cynthie and himself. No child would be sent away to boarding schools.

Upon their arrival in London, Simon and Cynthie moved into Paul's large house with the hopes of starting a family. Simon opened an office and began his medical practice, with Cynthie acting as his nurse and assistant.

In time, Cynthia, tired of correcting English patients, began calling herself Cynthia.

With Simon and Cynthia as permanent residents of his house and London, Paul shed his loneliness. He adored Cynthia and when Simon was occupied, the father and daughter-in-law would spend hours together, reading, talking, playing card and taking short walks.

A year into their new life, Paul died unexpectedly from an apparent stroke at the age of sixty-eight. Grief-stricken, Simon saw to his father's funeral the day after his death, per Jewish custom, and sat for the proscribed mourning period of seven days.

Jacob arrived in London a month later. Jacob and Simon had not seen each other for almost four years and Jacob had never met Cynthia. As expected, Jacob, the eldest, had power of attorney for all family matters. Jacob spent the first week at home assessing Paul's business and assets. Once accomplished, he called for a meeting with Simon without attorneys. Anxious to return to sea, Jacob, already wealthy, would not take advantage of his position. Simon demanded that Cynthia be present for any discussions.

Jacob, Simon and Cynthia sat in the family's parlor to hammer out the details of Paul's passing.

"I for one," Jacob said, "have no desire to stay in London and run Father's business."

"You don't have to ask me," Simon said. "I wouldn't know what to do."

"Agreed then, we sell the business and house and split the proceeds."

"No," Simon said, looking to Cynthia. "We would like to remain here in our house and start a family. I promise that whenever you return to London, you'll always have a welcoming place to stay."

Jacob assented, and the brothers shook on it. He boarded the *Sol Quest* two days later and set sail for Venice. He had no idea how his life would change and would not return to London for seventeen years.

Despite the various forms of antisemitism Simon faced by the London medical and surgical societies and hospital administrators, his medical practice flourished.

Simon, with Cynthia at his side, had a virtual monopoly on London's middle class Jewish population, which numbered thirty thousand. Only the wealthiest Jewish merchants, bankers and politicians used the prominent Gentile physicians who treated British royalty and members of the House of Lords.

When Simon applied for membership to the Royal College of Surgeons, his pedigree and medical diploma from Strasbourg left the College with no option but to accept him. Dr. Simon Romain reverted to Mr. Simon Romain in accordance with the uniquely British tradition of address for surgeons.²

In 1846, surgery made a monumental step out of the virtual obscurity with the successful introduction of general anesthesia (ether and chloroform). General anesthesia opened the doors to a variety of surgical procedures thought previously impossible.

Not surprisingly, Simon's surgical practice increased exponentially.

² *The uniquely British tradition of addressing surgeons as Mister dates well before the 19th century. Surgeons arose from the barber colleges – thus Mister rather than Doctor. The 'Mister' title remains to this day.*

Chapter Two

1848 – South China Sea

Rachel/Ray

Jacob Romain slept comfortably, gently swayed by the South China Sea. Rain clouds peeked through the damp shutters in his ornate captain's quarters and five bells³ rang, meaning it was 6:30 a.m., and time to rise.

Just as Jacob opened his eyes, there came a knock on the door. This often meant trouble. When he saw that Ray's bunk was empty, he was alarmed at first, before remembering that Ray had asked for the 4 a.m. to 8 a.m. watch with Ol' Tom. He smiled as he opened the door to his cabin.

Ray, wearing an oilskin jacket, pointed hat and white linen pants, stood there with tears flowing down her cheeks.

"Cap'n," Ray wailed. "I'm dying."

"You're not," Jacob said, concerned nevertheless because Ray, now fourteen years old, never used histrionics to make a point. "What's the matter?"

"There's blood seeping down my leg. I could feel the wet but I thought it was rain. I didn't see it until Ol' Tom told me I was bleeding."

"C'mon in and we'll have a look," Jacob said, already suspecting the problem.

Jacob and Ray had shared the Captain's quarters since Ray became a cabin boy and permanent member of the *Sol Quest's* crew at age six.

Jacob's wife, Ray's mother, had died when Ray, born Rachel, was one. Rachel, raised by nannies in Hong Kong, saw her father seldom, ached for his attention and threw tantrums whenever he sailed away. Years earlier,

³ Bells: Ship's bell time originated in sailing ship days, when the crew on duty four hours, then off four hours. One stroke of the ship's bell indicates the first half hour of the watch. Then an additional bell is struck for each succeeding half hour. Watches began at 0400, 0800, 1200, 1600, 2000 and 2400.

when Paul Romain sent young Simon to boarding school, Jacob had argued that Simon should be kept at home. Jacob's complaints fell on deaf ears.

Jacob then had the same predicament with his motherless daughter and decided to bring her on board the *Sol Quest*. Jacob knew there were no female sailors, and he needed to raise Ray, Rachel's new name, as a boy and keep her real gender a secret. Other than Ol' Tom, Jacob believed that no one on the *Sol Quest* knew that Ray was a girl.

Jacob had explained long ago the differences between male and female anatomy to Ray, but hadn't described menstrual cycles. But now Ray's body was changing. There was a sinking feeling in Jacob's gut; the ruse couldn't last forever. They would need a new plan.

"Have a seat," Jacob said resignedly as he went to his sea chest and removed the menstrual cloths he'd secretly purchased in Hong Kong a year earlier. He spent the next hour explaining, as best he could, the changes that puberty would bring.

"It's Friday," Jacob said, "I'll be back in a couple of hours and give you some time to think. Tonight, we can light the Sabbath candles together. Okay?"

Ray could only nod acceptance.

Jacob needed advice and headed out of his quarters to look for Ol' Tom.

"Figure we're 'bout four days from Singapore if the winds hold," Ol' Tom said when Jacob joined him on deck.

"S'pose so," Jacob responded.

"You got a problem on your hands," Ol' Tom said.

"You asking or telling?"

"Telling. Ray's about to be grown and cropped hair won't hide it no more. The crew's been suspicious ever since her shirt got drenched in that sun shower outside Hong Kong. And she gets prettier by the day. They'll give her a wide berth as long as they be sober, which ain't too often. I'd be worried and she's gotta be prepared."

“Ray sleeps in my cabin,” Jacob said. “She’s quick, strong, and carries a folding dirk⁴ with a Marlin spike.”

“Little that’ll do if she’s surprised. You can’t be letting Ray go ashore with the men alone no more. If they get soused, you don’t know what they might do and they may not be able to protect her from others.”

“I’ll talk to the men.”

Ol’ Tom shook his head. “Cap’n, you’re not listening. I’d give it six months, a year at most. The *Sol Quest* will be no place for her.”

“She won’t take kindly to being put ashore,” Jacob lamented.

Ol’ Tom nodded agreement. “I’d rather face a typhoon in a bathtub than have that conversation.”

⁴ Dirk: a long straight-bladed dagger favored by naval officers