

ONE

ITEMS FOR EXCHANGE

London, April 1785

Plausibility

He always forgets how unpleasant the crossing from Calais is. He's never once made the trip without encountering inclement weather, contrary winds and tides, unexplained delays, seasick fellow travelers, surly packet captains, or dishonest boatmen waiting to extort the passengers ashore. This time it's all of the above. By the time he reaches Dover, he has, of course, missed the stagecoach to London. He spends the night at the Ship Hotel, where he endures a hard, flea-ridden bed and a neighbor with a wet, defeated cough.

It's not an auspicious start to the journey. But Paul-Mérault de Monneron is not given to superstition. The next day brings springlike weather, a passable meal from the hotel kitchen, the stagecoach ready to leave on time, and an unsmiling but efficient coachman who gives the correct change. The only other passenger inside the coach is a man Monneron recognizes from the packet; the poor man had been gray-skinned with nausea most of the way from France. "Well, I daresay we are being compensated for yesterday's horrors," the man says. Monneron nods politely, although he doesn't agree. For him, the universe is not given to compensating one for past miseries any more than it exacts payment for one's successes. But he is not immune to the pleasures of a smooth ride on a lovely day. The Kentish countryside, or such of it as he can see through the coach window, is charming. Once he points out the window at a large bird, white-breasted with black and white wings, perched atop a post. "Please—what do you call that?" he asks. "I do not know the word in English."

The man leans over. "That would be an osprey, I think," he says.

"Osprey." It's rare that he learns a word in English he finds nicer than its counterpart in French. But "osprey" is undoubtedly lovelier than "*balbuzard*."

The brief exchange leads inevitably to an inquiry about Monneron's trip to London. Almost everything he says by way of reply is true: That he's a naval engineer, that he's leaving soon for the South Seas, that he's going to London to make some purchases for the voyage, that he was tasked with the errand because he speaks English—"Not that my English is so good," he adds, to which the man says, "Nonsense! You've hardly any accent at all." But part of Monneron's account is *not* true: that he's in England at the behest of a Spanish merchant, Don Inigo Alvarez, with whom he'll be sailing to the South Seas. Monneron will be sailing with neither Spaniards nor merchants. There is, in fact, no Don Inigo.

It's a French naval expedition he represents, a voyage of exploration meant to compete with the accomplishments of the late Captain Cook, a voyage that is supposed to be secret until it departs. This excursion to London is not just a shopping trip for books and instruments. He's supposed to find out the latest on antiscorbutics—scurvy-prevention measures—and on what items work best for trading with natives in the South Seas. For this he needs to find someone who sailed with Cook—someone both knowledgeable and willing to talk.

This is the first time he's tried the Don Inigo story on anyone. He's surprised by the fluency and ease with which he spouts the commingled lies and truths. He hadn't liked the idea of traveling under a pretext—had, in fact, challenged the need for secrecy at all, and when the minister of marine dismissed his query with an impatient wave of his beruffled hand, had considered turning the mission down. *Considered* it, but not seriously or for very long. There was no question of jeopardizing his place on the expedition. He would have stood on his head before the court of Versailles if required. Still, when the Spanish merchant ruse was first concocted, he'd burst out laughing. "*Don Inigo Alvarez?*" he'd cried. "It's like something out of a play." But the minister held firm: "People are inclined to believe what they hear," he said. "Speak with assurance, and no one will question you." So far, at least, he has proved right: Monneron's companion nods, interested, impressed, and apparently convinced.

Five Nights' Advance

The stagecoach arrives in London the following evening, and Monneron secures lodgings with a Mrs. Towe, recommended to him by his brother Louis, who often travels to London on business. The house smells unaccountably of stale cider, but it meets Monneron's most basic requirements—clean bed, convenient location, quiet landlady—and a couple of unusual ones—first, the absence of other lodgers, and second, a windowless storage room to which only he and Mrs. Towe will have a key.

Before going to sleep, he calculates his expenses since landing in Dover: a night's stay and meals at the Ship Hotel, then sixteen shillings and eight pence for the stagecoach, plus the fee for his baggage and a tip for the driver, not to mention a half crown for every meal and one night's lodging en route, and now, five nights paid in advance to Mrs. Towe. He's spent almost all of the English currency the minister gave him before he left. His first task the next day will be to go to the bank. So far he's had few choices about his expenditures, but now that he's in London, he'll be faced with myriad decisions, most of which will involve money. He can't spend too much, of course. But it might be worse to spend too little. He doesn't wish to squander the ministry's faith in him, of course. Above all, he doesn't wish to disappoint Monsieur de Lapérouse, the commander of the expedition. Staring up at Mrs. Towe's water-stained ceiling, Monneron reflects that there's still time to appoint another engineer—and plenty of ambitious young men of good family eager to take his place.

Costume

He wakes early, consumes without enjoyment Mrs. Towe's weak tea and cold toast, then faces the delicate task of getting dressed. For the past three days he's been hidden under an overcoat and top boots, but now he'll be entering establishments and homes, making impressions, gathering information. He doesn't wish to call attention to himself by looking too French, too naval, too fashionable, or not fashionable enough. Louis has advised him to dress more soberly than a gentleman his age in Paris might, but Monneron's not sure what that means. With all his years at

sea, he's quite used to dressing himself—in uniform. Civilian clothes are another matter altogether. In the end, he puts on the plainest linen shirt he owns and a pair of ribbed white stockings, and over them a suit he's borrowed from Antoine, another brother who is the same height as he. The waistcoat, breeches, and frock coat are all of the same, dark-blue woven silk—even the buttons are covered. Then he dons wig, shoes, and overcoat, in that order. He hesitates before picking up the thin, tasseled cane that Louis had pressed him to take instead of his sword. "Don't carry a sword or a hat," his brother had told him. "They will mark you as a Frenchman and an effeminate."

On his way out, Monneron appraises himself in the smoky mirror in Mrs. Towe's entrance hall. He looks like a Frenchman who is trying not to look French, he thinks. And he hates the cane. What an absurd country, in which wearing a *sword* makes one effeminate but carrying a beribboned walking stick does not.

Letters

He steps out into the fetid, fog-drizzled streets and makes his way to the Bank of England, where he exchanges letters of credit for more cash than he's ever seen in one place, much less carried upon his person. He's grateful for Antoine's tailor, who's adopted the innovation of interior pockets in frock coats. It's a place to stow the money. Still, he hurries into a cab, afraid the smell of so many bank bills will attract every pickpocket in London, and asks to be taken to an address on Oxford Street.

Monneron has another letter with him that morning—a letter of introduction to John Webber, a painter who was the official artist on Cook's last voyage. Monneron would have preferred an introduction to *officers* who'd served with Cook, but according to the minister, most of the officers who aren't dead are at sea, and of the small number who are neither dead nor at sea, two live too far outside London and the others are too highly placed to approach without arousing suspicion. "What about Cook's naturalists?" Monsieur de Lapérouse had asked. "Can't we approach one of them?" No, the minister said. Solander was dead. The Forsters were both in Prussia. Only Sir Joseph Banks, the famous naturalist from the first

Cook expedition, was still alive and in London, but he was now president of the Royal Society and close to both the Admiralty and the king. "Don't underestimate the usefulness of an artist as a source," the minister said. Monneron and Lapérouse had exchanged a glance, neither man convinced. What would a draughtsman know of antiscorbutics or appropriate items for exchange?

The cab deposits him before a narrow, dignified residence on Oxford Street. The door is opened by a narrow, dignified servant. The man takes Monneron's letter of introduction and soon after escorts him into a parlor where a man in a silk damask morning gown with a matching cap is finishing breakfast. When he looks up, Monneron is shocked by his youth.

"You expected an old man," Webber says.

Monneron cannot deny it. It's been only five years since Cook's third and final voyage returned to England without him, but it has already achieved the status of legend, and yes, one expects those who sailed with him to be grizzled old men.

"I was only twenty-four when the expedition began," Webber explains. Monneron makes some mental calculations: Webber is younger than he is.

The artist invites his guest to sit down, then has his manservant bring another place setting. Monneron puts up only a nominal protest before making quick work of strong, hot tea, smoked herring, a slice of cold veal pie, and a roll with marmalade.

"So," Webber says, "you're going to the South Seas."

Monneron nods through a mouthful, then tells him about Don Inigo and the need for scientific books and instruments. Also, information on antiscorbutics. *And* advice about appropriate items for exchange with natives.

Webber nods. "How long are you here?"

"Till Friday."

"Friday?" The artist sets his teacup down before laughing. "You're going to be rather busy, Mr. Monneron." He meets Monneron's eyes with a look at once frank and challenging. "I'm not sure how useful I can be to you. I'm no sailor."

Monneron is inclined to agree, but doesn't say so. "I know you returned from the voyage with hundreds of paintings," he says, remembering what

the minister said about artists. "You cannot have done so without learning many things."

Webber holds his gaze for a moment, then pushes back from the table. "Come with me," he says.

Knife

Webber's library is high-ceilinged, white-walled, lit by small windows above the bookcases. Books occupy the upper shelves; the lower shelves are filled with art and objects. "It's all from the voyage," he says. The drawings are his, he explains, sketches and paintings executed during the voyage; the rest are items he found, purchased, or was given.

Monneron steps forward to examine the drawings. They include landscapes and topographical views, botanical drawings and sketches of birds and lizards, portraits of natives and studies of their homes and canoes, and numerous scenes—natives dancing, feasting, receiving Cook, burying their dead. The drawings are of various sizes, but many are larger than Monneron expected, some an arm's length across. He tries to imagine his silk-gowned young host working on the busy deck of the *Resolution*, or pitching about in one of its smaller boats, or walking around a newly discovered island, all the while managing these large sheets of paper and drawing supplies, perhaps an easel as well, and it seems at once impossible, comic, and noble. "They're marvelous," he says.

"You're very kind," Webber says. They're standing before a portrait of a native man. The man has something long and thin thrust through his upper ear. His hair is up in a sort of topknot tied with string, and he has copious, though close-shaved, facial hair; he looks like a pleasant creature, except for the odd ear ornament. "He was from Mangea," Webber says. The expedition didn't land on the island, he goes on to explain, but men came out in canoes to trade with the ships, and this man—"his name was Mourua"—had been persuaded to come on board. "He was shaking with fright. I thought any moment he might fling himself overboard."

Monneron studies the painting a moment longer before venturing to say, "He does not *look* frightened."

Webber laughs. “That’s because we gave him a knife in exchange for some fish and coconuts,” he says. “That’s what he’s got in his ear. They all had these slits in one ear, the men of that island. Mourua slipped his knife right in like it had been made for the purpose.” He suggests Monneron advise Don Inigo to take a supply of similar knives, as they had proved popular with all the islanders they met. “I can show you where to purchase them,” he says.

Monneron turns to Webber. “You see? You are already helping me.” He hopes he doesn’t look as surprised as he feels.

Webber draws Monneron’s attention to his collection of objects—a headdress, ornaments, carvings in wood and bone, Tahitian dresses. He remembers everything: the provenance of each item, the circumstances by which it came into his possession, the appearance and behavior of the natives there, what they were willing to trade, and for what. Monneron is amazed. If only he can keep himself in this man’s company for the week, he thinks, his mission will be largely accomplished.

Their circumnavigation of the library complete, Webber opens the door leading back toward the parlor. On an impulse, Monneron says, “Do you still paint portraits, Mr. Webber?”

“My reputation is mostly in landscapes,” Webber says, then watches Monneron’s gaze travel around the room, taking in all the native faces. “Portraits of natives are really a kind of landscape painting too,” he says. “Why do you ask?”

“I’m going away for so long—anything can happen—I thought—only if you have time, of course . . .” Monneron says, his discomfort entirely real.

“You want me to *paint* you?”

Monneron laughs, embarrassed. “It would be for my mother. But you must be busy.”

“Not as busy as you this week.”

Monneron’s face warms. Indeed, he’s just shared with this man a long list of tasks he has less than a week to complete; this request for a portrait must sound absurd and vain. “Perhaps something quick, just in pencil or pen,” he says, “like one of these sketches from the voyage.” He stops, abashed to think he’s just characterized Webber’s work as something one can simply dash off. He puts a hand to his forehead, aware that it’s a nervous gesture people—women especially—find disarming.

Webber is smiling at him. "I'd be delighted to paint you."

Monneron laughs with relief. "I don't know how these things work," he says. "Is twenty-five guineas an appropriate fee?"

Webber shakes his head. "That's not necessary."

"It is necessary."

After some haggling, Webber reluctantly agrees to five guineas. He apologizes—he'd be happy to begin straightaway, but has engagements the rest of the day. Can Monneron return tomorrow?

"Come around three," Webber says. "The light is best in my studio then."

King's Ransom

Monneron has one more document on his person—a shopping list drawn up by Monsieur de Lapérouse himself. The minister had not been altogether pleased by it: "English' does not mean 'better,'" he declared. "We have instrument makers in Paris!" But Lapérouse had insisted. "We bring no glory to France by traveling with inferior instruments made at home," he said. The minister relented, and now Monneron is on his way to the Fleet Street atelier of George Adams, Jr., to purchase several of the world's finest compasses.

Mr. Adams is a young man—not yet thirty-five, Monneron thinks—who inherited from his father both his business and his position as instrument maker to the king. Mr. Adams does not suffer from false modesty. Indeed, he doesn't suffer from modesty of any kind. He subjects Monneron to questioning as if to determine whether his new customer is worthy of his wares. "Inigo Alvarez?" he says with a sniff. "Never heard of him."

"Ah, but 'e knows of you, Monsieur Adams," Monneron says, exaggerating his accent.

The combination of flattery and Frenchness prevails, and Adams is persuaded to part with two azimuth compasses. They're beautiful in their simplicity, each hand-painted compass face with its durable steel needle seated in a glass-covered brass housing suspended from an outer brass ring, which in turn is affixed to a wooden box, all of it designed to withstand

the motions at sea. Unfortunately, Mr. Adams has no dipping needles—used to adjust compass readings, essential on a long voyage into unknown parts. Monsieur de Lapérouse has especially requested them—two, in fact, one for each of the expedition's ships.

"I've had no orders for them in nearly a year," Adams says, peering at Monneron with renewed suspicion.

"Do you know anyone else who—?"

"No," Adams says, apparently not given to recommending his competitors even when he cannot meet a customer's needs himself.

The other instrument makers Monneron meets that afternoon are friendlier and less inquisitive. Not far from Adams, in their workshop behind the Sign of the Orrery, he meets the elfin Troughton brothers, who cheerfully sell him a sextant and a pantograph for the expedition's cartographers. At Nairne and Blunt's in Cornhill, he buys two of the most beautiful and expensive barometers he's ever seen; they will please the expedition's savants. Next door he finds hourglasses and magnetic bars. And at the famed Ramsden's in Piccadilly, he leaves behind what feels like a king's ransom and walks out with the promised delivery of two theodolites, two night telescopes, four thermometers, one large sextant, one small one, and four handheld compasses suitable for land exploration. But alas, no dipping needles. "You'll want to see Mr. Adams for that," they all say.

It's seven o'clock before Monneron returns, exhausted, cold, and hungry, to Mrs. Towe's. The fire has gone out in his room, and supper consists of watery boiled partridge and buttered potatoes so cold the butter has recongealed. But he makes his own fire and shrugs his way through the meal. He's eaten much worse in far greater discomfort. And he has every reason to be satisfied with his first day in London: he's made contact with a knowledgeable and forthcoming member of the Cook expedition and procured nearly everything on Monsieur de Lapérouse's list. There's even satisfaction in the knowledge that he's reduced the crown's coffers, in one day, by more than three thousand *louis*. He's understood all along that the expedition will be unlike any other that France has undertaken, its scientific mission paramount, no reasonable expense to be spared. Today he's done his part to make it so.

He tosses a cold, butter-coated potato into the fire to watch it hiss and

burn. If he could only find some dipping needles, he thinks, then throws in another potato.

A Treatise on the Scurvy

In the morning, the breakfast tray surprises by including a note from Sir Joseph Banks, the naturalist the minister said was too close to Admiralty and king to approach. It's a breathless, unpunctuated missive written in a hand more sure than legible:

Sir

*having just learned of your presence in London to assist Don Inigo Alvarez in preparations for his upcoming voyage I take the liberty of proffering my assistance as Don Inigo and I are acquainted he having as you are no doubt aware a great interest in natural history and was once good enough to send me two *Blepharopsis mendica* for my collection*

would be honored if you would call at 11 o'clock for conversation of mutual interest and benefit

JB

Monneron stares for several minutes together at the letter. He cannot decide which is stranger—that Banks knows of him at all, or that he claims acquaintance with the fictional Don Inigo. Banks must know on whose behalf Monneron is really here. But how? *Adams*, Monneron thinks, remembering the young instrument maker's disdainful, persistent curiosity. It must be. But what does Banks want? Does he mean to expose Monneron and embarrass the French government? And what is a *Blepharopsis mendica*?

The crux of the matter, however, is this: one does not turn down a summons from Sir Joseph Banks. As the bells of a nearby church toll the appointed hour, Monneron announces himself at Banks's residence at 32 Soho Square. Neither the square nor the house is at all what he expected for the president of the Royal Society: the neighborhood has the noisy, resigned air of a place abandoned by fashionable people, and the house,

with its narrow three-story frontage of red brick, is nothing if not modest. But inside, the home is large and grand, and so is Banks—tall and stout, a perfectly fitted wig on his sizable head, a fur-trimmed robe adding to his overall bulk. As if to diminish all the largeness and grandeur, however, he shows Monneron into a small, dense library fitted under the great staircase of his home.

He motions for Monneron to sit on one side of a crowded desk while he arranges himself into a red leather chair opposite, then says, “And how is the good Don Inigo these days?”

Monneron eyes his host warily. “I found him very well the last time I saw him.”

“Excellent.” Banks slides a framed specimen display across the desk. The case appears to contain, pinned to the canvas, a few thin twigs with their leaves—some green and mottled, some brown and crinkled—but no, they’re not twigs at all, they’re insects, insects with long, jointed legs and triangular heads, very like the *mantes* Monneron enjoyed finding in the garden as a boy.

“The Egyptian flower mantis,” Banks says. “*Blepharopsis mendica*.”

“*Man-tis*,” Monneron repeats under his breath, committing a new English word to memory. He stares at the insects and wonders if there might be a Don Inigo, after all.

“They spend their lives hanging upside down from tree branches whose leaves they resemble,” Sir Joseph is saying. “Their prey crawl or fly by, never suspecting a thing till they’re caught.”

Monneron’s attention swings back to Banks. “Caught?”

Banks smiles.

“Forgive me, Sir Joseph,” Monneron says, “but I did not know Don Inigo had written to you about my visit.”

“Oh, he didn’t,” Banks says. “I saw Mr. Webber yesterday afternoon.”

“Mr. *Webber*?” Not Adams. Monneron feels a twitch of disappointment. He hadn’t asked Webber to keep his presence in London a secret. Nevertheless, it feels . . . not like a betrayal of trust, exactly—that would presume too much of a morning’s acquaintance—but like an assumption of openness Monneron had neither known about nor agreed to. “Mr. Webber was kind enough to show me some of his paintings yesterday,” he finally says.

“He’s a competent landscape painter,” Banks says. “I must confess I don’t think much of his portraiture.” Seeing his guest’s surprise, he adds: “They’re pretty enough, but not very lifelike. His natives look too European. And his Europeans—well, they’re a bit savage. He did a most unusual oil of Captain Cook and presented it to his widow. I certainly hope it did not compound the grief of the long-suffering Mrs. Cook. It bore little resemblance to the great man.”

Monneron remembers the paintings and sketches in Webber’s library, how very warm and human the man from Mangea looked, for all he had a knife stuck in his ear. Is Banks simply voicing his opinion, or warning him off? What is it that he wants, anyway?

As if divining his perplexity, Banks says, “Mr. Monneron, my sole purpose in making myself known to you is to offer any assistance it may be in my power to provide.” The two men watch each other for a moment, then Banks says, “I understand you are tasked with learning about antiscorbutics.” He reaches for a fat volume at one end of his desk and hands it to Monneron: *A Treatise on the Scurvy* by James Lind. “The most important contribution to seafaring physic this century,” he says. “Take it. I have several copies. Be sure the ships’ surgeons read it.”

“Thank you, Sir Joseph,” Monneron says, then, silencing a debate in his head between suspicion and expediency, adds, “There is something I would be happy to have your advice upon,” and tells Banks about his unsuccessful search for dipping needles.

Banks closes his eyes, nodding as he listens. “I may be able to help you,” he says at last, opening his eyes. “I’ll send word.”

When Monneron leaves 32 Soho Square, he’s still not sure of the encounter. The least distressing conclusion is that Sir Joseph had prior intelligence of the expedition, has a purely scientific interest in offering his help, and is keeping up the pretext about Don Inigo to save Monneron from embarrassment. But how did Banks make the connection with Monneron through Webber’s report? Unless Webber himself knows—no, Monneron thinks, calling to mind Webber’s trusting, open face. He may know *now*, of course—which, Monneron reflects, pausing as he makes his way across the square, may make calling on Webber again this afternoon awkward. As for Banks himself, perhaps he’s beguiling Monneron with attention and promises of assistance, waiting for a slip, an unintended revelation, some

tidbit that will go straight to the Admiralty. But would a man who intends to expose you as a spy for the French Navy first press on you the latest in scurvy-prevention research?

Transparency

Back at Mrs. Towe's, he half expects to find a note from Webber regretfully explaining that urgent business will preclude them from meeting again. And when there is none, Monneron considers sending his own regrets, discovering a sudden compunction about having ingratiated himself with the artist under false pretenses. But Webber is too valuable a contact to give up over an uneasy conscience, and as Mrs. Towe's gloomy longcase clock sounds out two-thirty, Monneron sets out once more for Oxford Street.

The narrow, dignified manservant asks him to please wait in the library. Monneron paces the room, revisiting the paintings and objects that afforded him pleasure and instruction the day before, and looking in vain for evidence that Webber's natives look "too European." On a small table he finds the recently published official account of Cook's last voyage—*A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean. Undertaken, by the Command of His Majesty, for Making Discoveries in the Northern Hemisphere, etc.*—three volumes plus a folio volume containing maps and prints. Thumbing through the latter, he recognizes many of the pictures as engraved facsimiles of the paintings that surround him. The published images are very like the originals, but something is lost in the transfer of raw images produced in situ to engravings suitable for printing. The originals are in color and the engravings are not, of course, but it's more than that. Monneron closes the book and studies the nearest original, a painting of dancers in Tahiti. He can trace the creation of this piece from the first layer of pencil and chalk outlines to the washes and watercolor application to the final details added in ink. There's a transparency to the endeavor and its result that's missing from the published images.

"Mr. Monneron," Webber says, bursting in. He's dressed much as he was the previous morning, with the silk gown tied carelessly over faded trousers, stockinged feet shod in a pair of battered silk slippers. He crosses

the room and shakes Monneron's hand. "I'm delighted to see you again." His smile is unchanged—friendly, artless. Monneron expects him to say something about Banks—I saw Sir Joseph yesterday and mentioned your visit; he knows your Don Inigo, by the way; he said he would send—oh, he has already? You've met him? Splendid—but he doesn't, and his silence makes Monneron diffident about saying anything himself. He'd like to know what Webber said yesterday and what Banks said in turn. Was it "Don Inigo? I'm acquainted with the gentleman. What did you say this Frenchman's name was?" Or "Don Inigo? Ha! My dear Webber, your new friend is an agent for the French Navy!"?

But Webber is showing him out of the library and down a corridor to a bright room of north-facing windows. The space smells of canvas, wood, paint, solvents, pine resin, and wax, and Monneron is reminded suddenly, almost painfully, of being at sea. Then Webber surprises him by removing his gown, then his vest and shirt. His arms are thin, his chest almost hairless, his belly just softening into middle age. "My painting costume," he says offhandedly, grabbing a paint-splattered linen shirt from a peg. Monneron doesn't know where to look. At sea, he's unfazed by other men's nakedness, but on land, it's different. He wonders if Webber's lack of self-consciousness is an English affectation, a product of artistic temperament, a habit from his time at sea, or a more personal gesture.

Hostage

It's like being a boy in church—the more Monneron tells himself not to shift about or scratch his head, the more he needs to. But Webber must be used to restive subjects, for he tolerates it without comment. The studio is filled with unfinished paintings, and Monneron's attention settles on a large oil canvas perched on an easel behind the artist. It depicts a native woman, raven-haired and bare-breasted, with decorous tattoos covering her arms and a jasmine flower tucked behind each ear. A large white cloth wrapped round the lower half of her body fails to hide the outline of her generous hips. "She's very beautiful," Monneron says.

Webber turns to follow his gaze. "I'm finishing her for an exhibit at the Royal Academy," he explains. "She's a Tahitian princess who sat for me on board the *Resolution*."

Monneron regards the painting again. The princess is standing, not sitting, and appears to be ashore among heavy-fronded plants, not on the deck of a Royal Navy sloop. He supposes this license is allowed—perhaps even *expected*—of artists. “How did you persuade the natives to sit for you?” he asks.

“She was our captive and in no position to refuse,” Webber says. He studies Monneron then turns back to his work. For a moment, the light scratching of pencil on paper is the only sound in the room. “Several of our men had deserted,” he explains, looking back up, “and the islanders were sheltering them. The captain was compelled to take Princess Poedua”—he inclines his head toward the painting—“to press for the deserters’ return.”

“Did it work?”

“Of course.”

Monneron looks again at the painting, at the princess’s serene face, her pliant arms, the openness implied by her breasts, the nipples tipped slightly away from each other. One would never guess she’d been a hostage while this portrait was being done. Now he wonders—did she really have those flowers in her hair? That white cloth—did Webber add that to protect English sensibilities? And perhaps that’s not serenity in her expression so much as surrender. He looks back at Webber, who’s leaning in toward the paper before him with a piece of chalk, the pencil held between his teeth. He cannot quite admire a profession that allows so much dissimulation. His own engineering work demands meticulous calculation and is intolerant of error or alteration of facts. But then again, here he is in Webber’s home pretending to be someone he is not. They are, both of them, simply doing their jobs.

Webber sits up and takes the pencil from his mouth. “If I may make so bold as to offer my views on something, Mr. Monneron.”

“Please.”

“One wants to find a middle way with natives,” he says. “Neither too familiar nor too distant. Your Spaniards tend to be too harsh.” He looks at Monneron, then back at his paper. “But we English have been far too familiar. I think the humanity we extended toward them lowered us in their regard.” Monneron wonders how imprisoning native royalty constitutes overfamiliarity, but doesn’t interrupt. “I believe it cost us the captain’s life,” Webber says quietly.

“Were you there when—when it happened?”

“No, I wasn’t.” He dips his brush into water, then paint, and gently draws the brush across the paper in short, even strokes. “But I did have to paint it. The Admiralty needed it for publication—*The Death of Cook*.” He swirls his brush again in the water and leaves it there. “I had to read all the eyewitness accounts and talk with officers who were there, and—” He exhales. “It was like enduring it again and again.”

Monneron knows what it is to lose shipmates. During the American War, when he served on the *Sceptre* with Lapérouse, their campaign in Hudson Bay and the subsequent crossing back to Europe had cost almost one hundred lives. But he’s never lost a commanding officer; it would be akin to losing a parent. He’s fortunate in not knowing that loss either. “I’m sorry,” he says.

Webber looks up with a smile. “Well,” he says, standing up. “It’s not quite finished, but I think I can release you. What do you think?”

Monneron’s never seen his own likeness before other than in a mirror, and he still remembers the moment—he must have been eleven or twelve—when he realized that since reflections are reversed, he would never see himself truly, not as others saw him. Now he bends over Webber’s picture and regards the lines of his body in pencil, then chalk, watercolor washes indicating hair color and fabric. He’s standing, not sitting, in the picture, and the background is still blank, which makes him look like he’s floating. He does wonder about the proportions—he’s always imagined himself a longer-legged man. Is that what Banks meant about Europeans who look like savages? And then there’s the face itself, recognizable yet unexpected. It’s an anxious face, the face of a lost child. “Is that what I look like?” he says.

Webber laughs. “No matter where I am in the world, everyone says the same thing: ‘Is this really me?’”

Fishhooks

Webber insists that Monneron stay for dinner. By the time they’ve finished the codling, roast beef, potatoes in brown sauce, boiled cabbage, pudding, and a bottle of Graves, they’ve exchanged personal histories and dropped

the “Mr.” from each other’s surnames. Monneron learns of Webber’s early years in Switzerland and tells him in turn about his childhood in Annonay. He’s about to regret that it’s time he returned to Mrs. Towe’s for the night when Webber offers to take him shopping.

“What? *Now?*”

“I promised to show you where to buy knives.”

“Now?”

“It’s London. Shops are open late.”

Monneron accedes, and Webber takes him to an emporium of bladed and pointed things astonishing for the number and variety of its wares. Webber takes charge, collaring a shop boy on whom he loads samples for Monneron to purchase: small, cheap knives (“for your typical islander,” he says, handing them to the boy); longer, sharper knives (“for your minor chieftains”); sturdy axes (“for your village elders”); and lances of different lengths (“be careful who you give these to”). Upstairs they sample ten different sizes of needles, then enter an aisle filled with fishhooks. Monneron and his brothers are avid fishers, so he knows the price of a fishhook; these English hooks are quite inexpensive. Even with shipping costs, it will be cheaper to import these. The shop boy gives way to the owner’s son, who follows Monneron around as he orders “five hundred of these, a thousand of these, no, *two* thousand . . .”—almost eighteen thousand fishhooks in all, seventeen different kinds, to catch everything from smelt to shark.

It’s nearly ten by the time they return to Oxford Street. Over a late supper of white soup with warm bread, Webber prepares a list of shops to visit the next day. Monneron watches him write, admiring the artist’s pretty, precise script but also aware of a creeping impulse to snatch the paper away and make him stop. Instead, he tears at a ragged fingernail until it hurts, then asks, he hopes not too abruptly, “Webber, why are you doing all of this?”

Webber looks up, then turns his chair toward his guest and leans back in it with his long legs stretched out. “I’m happy if my experiences can actually be useful,” he says. “Most people who ask me about the voyage only want to know if I met cannibals or slept with native women.”

“Did you?”

Webber laughs. “No. Are you disappointed?”

A servant brings in plates of dried fruit and nuts and a bottle of port. Then it's nearly midnight, and Monneron is so relaxed and languid that when Webber invites him to stay the night, he allows himself to be led upstairs without protest.

Bolts of Silk

Some inchoate compunction alarms him into wakefulness, and without the fermented apple smell and watermarked ceiling of Mrs. Towe's, he can't at first place where he is. He turns over in the bed to make sure he's alone, and relieved on that point, remembers: Oxford Street, Webber, shopping, fishhooks, a bottle of port. A clock somewhere chimes nine, much later than he usually rises. He dresses quickly and heads down the stairs, but stops on the landing, accosted by a life-size oil of James Cook. He remembers again what Banks said about Webber's portraiture, and this time he sees it: a disproportion of parts, the head oddly simian, the wig looking outgrown and pinched, torso and thighs too thin, left hand too large for the arm above it, feet hidden behind a rock as if Webber didn't know how to render them. The late captain may not look *savage*, exactly, but he does lack dignity.

"Good morning, Mr. Monneron." The manservant appears at the bottom of the stairs. "Mr. Webber is in his dressing room and says you may join him there if you'd like."

No, he would *not* like, Monneron thinks, remembering the nonchalance with which Webber undressed before him yesterday. "I will wait for him in the library, if that is all right," he says.

Webber arrives five minutes later, dressed for another outing. "Monneron—breakfast before heading out?"

Monneron gets up with effort, suddenly exhausted by Webber's generosity, his indefatigable energy, the boundlessness of the man.

Webber cocks his head to one side. "Did you not sleep well?"

Monneron rallies himself to remember why he's there: the expedition, the minister, Monsieur de Lapérouse. He still needs Webber's knowledge, but only for one more day. "I slept very well, thank you," he says. "Breakfast sounds wonderful." He wills himself not to look away when he sees the relief on Webber's face.

After breakfast they venture into the city in a hired coach Webber has retained for the day. The artist has worked out exactly where to go, beginning at a notions shop for beads; then a foundry on Thames Street for unworked iron bars and copper sheeting; several grocers for samples of bouillon tablets, molasses, salts, preserved walnuts—all used as antiscorbutics on the *Resolution*; a brewers for spruce beer and essence of malt, a sickly sweet decoction Webber assures him is palatable when mixed with water or tea; and finally, back to Oxford Street for a fabric shop. Only then does Monneron understand that they have circumscribed a long, serpentine loop around London, a loop that will return him again to Webber's home for the night.

"Reserve these gifts for island royalty," Webber is telling him as he browses the display of silks and fine linens. "They're quite partial to red and gold—look at this, Monneron."

He holds out a bolt of silk taffeta, deep crimson shot through with gold thread. Monneron runs his hand over the fabric; its smoothness and color remind him of a well-dressed friend of his mother who visited Annonay one summer and was quite free with her favors. He has to clear his throat before saying, "It is exquisite," and when he looks up at Webber's smiling, oddly knowing face, he can feel himself flush. He turns away, oppressed by the man's nearness.

"You're tired," Webber says gently. "I'll take you home."

"Webber," Monneron says. "I must return to my lodgings tonight. I can take a cab from here."

Webber's face opens in disappointed surprise, and Monneron cannot suppress a flare of impatience. *I have spent a day and a half riding all over London with you*, he wants to say. *Is that not enough?* Instead he protests that he has much to do before he leaves, letters to write, accounts to check over—and it's all true, but still he sounds like a boor. "I am sorry, Webber," he says. "You have been so good to me." He does not add, *I no longer have need of you*. But the expression on Webber's face suggests he has heard it anyway.

He won't hear of Monneron taking a cab. They ride in silence to Mrs. Towe's. "I'll have your portrait ready tomorrow afternoon," Webber says when the driver stops.

Monneron gets out of the carriage, then turns around in the street. The portrait—he'd forgotten about it. And Webber can see that he has.

"I will come tomorrow, Webber," he says, then compelled by some need to address his indebtedness, says, "May I help pay for the driver?"

Webber looks stricken. "Please don't insult me, Mr. Monneron."

On a tarnished salver in Mrs. Towe's entryway lies a message addressed to Monneron. "It came yesterday," the landlady says from her parlor. The note is short and unsigned:

Sir

have secured dipping needles for expedition which I should be honored to entrust to your safekeeping at earliest convenience

Influence

Sir Joseph receives him the next morning in the study under the stairs. He pats the top of a large box on his desk, then says: "On loan from the Board of Longitude."

Monneron sits up. The Board of Longitude? Clearly they are well past the fiction of Don Inigo. Sir Joseph opens the box, pulls out an instrument, and sets it on the desk surface. It's an odd apparatus, looking like a framed vertical compass set over an adjustable tripod. "There's a second one like it in the box," he says. He looks pointedly at Monneron. "They were on the *Resolution* and the *Discovery*."

The *Resolution* and *Discovery*—the ships from Cook's last voyage! Monneron breathes in sharply. "Sir Joseph," he says helplessly. "How—?"

Banks smiles. "There are quarters in which I have some influence," he says. Then more seriously: "We are honored to cooperate with your government in this."

Monneron cannot speak. He's struck, as he has not been before this moment, by the real importance of the expedition he represents. But also by the pointlessness of the secrecy he's been compelled to maintain—a secrecy that now seems like so much bureaucratic posturing.

Banks packs the dipping needle back into its box. "Take good care of these instruments," he says. "Discover much. Write everything down. And then, come back. It's very important that some of you come back."

Five Guineas

He's loath to leave Mrs. Towe's after depositing the dipping needles in the locked storage room. But he needs to collect the portrait and pay for it, and more than that he wishes to unburden himself to Webber, so he returns one last time to Oxford Street. He's surprised and vexed to learn that Webber is out. He has no right to his vexation, of course; he knows that. He's gone from expecting nothing helpful from the artist to having scruples about taking advantage of him to feeling smothered by the man's wanton availability to being, now, annoyed by evidence that he has other things to do. How can an acquaintance of four days have grown so tangled?

The dignified servant says no, he doesn't know when Mr. Webber will return, but there's a parcel for Mr. Monneron, if he would just step inside for a moment. This duty discharged, the servant doesn't invite him to wait. "May I—I should like to leave a note for Mr. Webber," Monneron says. The man returns with pencil and paper, then departs without showing him to the writing table in the parlor. Monneron leans awkwardly over a ledge in the entryway to write.

What he wished to say in person—about Don Inigo and Lapérouse and the minister, about Banks and the dipping needles—he cannot safely commit to paper. So he settles for thanking Webber—for the painting, for his hospitality, his time, knowledge, friendship. "I will think of you often on the voyage," he writes in French (English would take too long), "especially when we begin trading with natives." Then he places five guinea coins on the sheet and folds it up as securely as he can. The coins slide around inside, clinking with metallic vulgarity, but it's the best he can do. He's a little relieved, after all, not to have seen Webber again in person.

Back at Mrs. Towe's, he unwraps the portrait and looks at it by the late afternoon light. Webber has filled in the scenery around Monneron, who is now standing on a tropical shore. Palm trees and native huts grace the beach while mountains, ocean, and cloud-dappled sky fill out the background. His facial expression is also altered—or does it simply look different in context? He doesn't look anxious and lost now so much as surprised and curious. The painting is like a wish for a successful expedition: the young explorer standing amazed in a new place. On the right side, partly

blocked by his own figure, Monneron can make out the image of a ship anchored offshore, a ship flying a white flag with three fleurs-de-lis. *So he did know*, Monneron thinks. He blinks back his regret as he rewraps the painting.

He can never sleep when he has to be up before dawn. He spends a few hours wondering if the stain above his head has grown, then gets up. By four o'clock, when Mrs. Towe knocks on his door, he's already dressed. The journey proceeds with clockwork precision: The stagecoach departs on time from the Golden Cross. They stop in Rochester for dinner, spend the night in Canterbury, reach Dover Saturday morning. He takes possession of his many purchases from the storehouse at the dock, pays the fees, watches everything stowed safely aboard the French mail boat, then takes his place on deck just as the right tide and a favorable wind arrive to speed the packet across the Channel.

In the past he's delighted in watching the approach of home. But today he keeps looking back at the receding white cliffs, fighting the sensation that he's left something undone. When England disappears in a veil of mist, the French coast comes at him too quickly, and he's astonished to find himself staggering on deck, dizzy and sick. A kindly crewman takes him below, murmuring that it's almost over, sir, some people are more sensitive than others, and Monneron cannot, dare not, open his mouth to put the man in his place, to tell him he's a naval officer, that he's about to circumnavigate the world, that he's never been seasick in his life.