

Roland: Of Pirates and Patriots

A Novel by Timothy Freriks

PREFACE

Americans generally do not understand how close the young United States of America, barely thirty years old, came to returning to the control of England in 1814.

My beloved grandmother bequeathed to me her great-great-grandmother's set of American History books which was originally written in 1842. Through the words of

the author, Mr. John Frost, LL. D., a man who died more than 150 years ago, the time period surrounding the War of 1812 came alive for me. First printed long before the Civil War, his work unrolled stories of individuals, events, and intrigues lost to most historians today. Mr. Frost's perspectives were as fresh to him as the Iraqi Wars are to us today.

Buried deeply in the fragile pages of that manuscript was a reference to a man and an incident that captivated my imagination. *Roland* is fiction but is based on actual events and real people, pirates and patriots who loved America and gave so much to preserve its freedoms.

CHAPTER ONE

September, 1800, somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean

The sun was dying again, extinguished by the horizon of water in the distance. The wispy clouds above looked like the eyebrows of an old man, turning slowly from white to orange to dark gray. Then it was gone, absorbed into the night that was just starting to swallow the remaining day. The ocean was a polished table, flat and still; it was a cause for concern, of course, among the captain and crew of the merchant vessel, but Roland didn't understand that. His twelve-year-old eyes only saw the beauty of sunset, the purity of nature entering another cycle of wonder. He had come to love the ever-engaging, ever-changing canvas of the water and the movement of the schooner, rocking softly in shallow waves. It had been this way for the last twelve days.

Being worn and tired and sodden by years of having boards and seas under his feet, sails over his head, and an endless line of worn and tired and sodden men to command, Captain Charles Bigelow watched the boy standing by the rail. Roland's elbows rested on the wood, his woolen sailor's cap pulled tight over his ears, his cheeks cradled in his hands as he stared out to the west. The captain tried to remember what it felt like to be absorbed in

wonder, but couldn't—it was just too long ago. Given their present predicament, he doubted the feeling would come through anyway. For two weeks they had floated without a puff of wind. Nothing had guided them. Nothing had pulled them out of the inevitable force of the slow and merciless current pushing his vessel closer and closer to unknown waters. It was like so many other recent events he could do nothing about.

He choked back tears as he looked out at the last gasp of day and thought about his only son, James, who was now lost to him, taken by his ex-wife, along with almost everything else. The only property he had kept was the warehouse on Cahir Street in the Isle of Dogs, the center of London's marine commerce.

However, as the violent events of three weeks before flashed through his mind, he wondered if that had been wise. He had not killed those men, to be sure, but he had been responsible for the events that caused their deaths. His body tensed as he saw again the blood and heard the dizzying whirlwind of movement and screams of men dying on the docks next to his vessel. He tried to close his mind's ears to the gunshots and plunging knives. The

sounds that the four murdered men had made as they passed from this world would haunt him forever, he knew. As would the last earthly words of his dear friend, which pulsed in his consciousness: *take care of Roland*.

Bigelow wondered what awaited him when, if, he reached his destination. He put his thick fingers to his jaw, still square and strong after all the years that managed to soften other parts of his face, and rubbed the sandpaper beard, considering the decisions he had made.

Was it worth the risk? Was it worth the cost?

He examined his heart. More than the marriage had died; he was done with it all. His life in England had come to an end; America is where he belonged. Whereas England had become dirty and cruel and oppressive, America shone fresh and clean and free. If his acts came to benefit his new allegiance, then so be it.

Roland was the same age as the boy he had left so often to sail the ocean and make love to his own lover, his mistress, the sea. Bigelow hoped James would grow up to be like him. Roland

had strength, depth, a confidence and wisdom that didn't belong to many men even three times his age. He had lived a short, but good, life with a fine man for a father; Bigelow knew it was a strong foundation. He would have a good future.

His mind switched to a projection of his own future: uncertainty generated a different kind of hollowness. Had his treachery been found out? News carriers from London had certainly arrived in Baltimore by now.

Trying to erase the sounds and sights of the wharf, Captain Bigelow removed his old black tricorne and ran his fingers through his thinning hair. He focused on the sleek 95 foot shape of his Baltimore Clipper stretching out before him. The schooner's two bare, raked masts eagerly waited to push against the bones of the hull below with a trailing wind that hadn't come yet. The *Passage* was a fine vessel. Built ten years before, it presented a beautiful vision when all sails were full and drawing. But no sails were full now except the square-rigged fore topsail, which luffed helplessly. No need. No air, and little prospects for air by the look of the deepening blue-black sky above. Following

Roland's gaze, he could see his son's eyes faintly in the few remaining clouds that chased the sun down into the depths.

“Captain?”

Bigelow replaced his hat and pulled his thoughts back to the moment. “Yes?”

“I believe I see dark water in the southeast.” First mate John Robinson pointed aft.

The Captain rotated his head and his body followed, his eyes squinting. He couldn't find any trace of wind on the water. “I don't see it. Maybe it was a school of fish.”

“I'm sure I did,” he said as he peered into the darkness then shrugged.

Bigelow turned back and smiled. “I'm sure we will find some soon.” This counted as the eighth false alarm in a week. “Get the sextant and try to determine our position. I'm retiring.”

“Yes, sir.”

As was his custom, Bigelow rose early the next morning and took the helm to watch the day come alive, although with no wind it hardly seemed to matter: the rudder gave him no traction.

The southwestern sail from London to the Azores had passed quickly; he'd dared to hope that the weather would hold. But two days after leaving port and turning directly west to catch the equatorial current north of the doldrums, the wind died. He had never experienced ten days of a dead calm and even though he knew they were being pushed at two or three knots, it was as if they had dropped anchor. The trip should be taking forty-five days; now, sixty would be a gift.

He looked for Roland and found him, curled up like a dog against the railing amidships, the dirty gray woolen cap under his head, dreaming about what, the captain had no idea...something beautiful, certainly. The guilt hit him again: Bigelow couldn't help thinking that he was being punished for being an absent father; how he wished it could be different; how he wished it was James curled up on the deck.

Bigelow caught himself day-dreaming when the first kiss of wind touched him, gently luffing his bloused sleeves. He removed his tricorn again and raised his gaze to the main mast telltale, which fluttered at a 10 degree angle in the faint early

light of dawn. Wind began to arouse itself from close starboard as the morning considered opening its eyes.

“First mate!” he called loudly, his voice cutting like a blade through the stillness of the ocean landscape, reaching through the hatch into the officer’s cabin just under the captain’s feet.

Moments later John Robinson appeared, wiping sleep from his eyes, fumbling with the brass buttons on his deep blue open-faced waistcoat while straightening his fashionable white cravat. He stumbled the rest of the way up the companionway. “Yes, sir?”

“I believe we are getting some wind,” he said, pointing ahead, northwest across amidships. “Awaken the riggers and prepare to unfurl the fore topsail and the staysail for a close beam reach. We’ll test the strength and direction then raise the foresail if it holds.”

There was no reply.

“Mr. Robinson? Did you hear me?”

But the first mate stood frozen, his black tricorne paused halfway to his head, staring at a point far behind the vessel on the port aft-quarter. “It won’t be a beam reach, sir.”

The captain turned, following Robinson’s gaze, and gasped. “Dear God.”

CHAPTER TWO

May, 1800, Baltimore

Five months earlier, Charles Bigelow had made his way east down Fleet Street. Somewhere just past the Hartford Run Bridge, his comfort level started to wane. Turning left, he proceeded south down Bond Street towards Baltimore's rough dock area, where no self-respecting man of value should ever be after dark, especially alone. But that's where the Frenchman's note had directed him: *Meet me at the Crooked Eagle Tavern, 10pm. I will have a red scarf on my table.*

Captain Bigelow could face storms and rebellious sailors on his ship, but on dry land, even though he was built like an ox, his confidence was lacking. The songs sung by drunken men huddled around small fires among the carts and wagons scattered along Thames Street

sounded like sea shanties of any sailor anywhere in the world: comforting but ominous. The familiar sounds of the docks gave him some ease, but not much; he knew these men would attack anyone they thought might have a few gold coins in their pockets. Captains were especially prime targets and Bigelow hoped his borrowed shabby sloppes and hunched walk would be a sufficient disguise.

Regardless, he quickened his step.

Upon entering the tavern, Bigelow quickly identified the man he was to meet; wearing the woolen hat and striped dungarees of the common sailor, he was carefully and quietly ensconced in a small booth near the rear of the room. *No worry about being overheard*, he thought—the singing of the rough men would absorb any spoken words.

“I have no name,” the slightly built Frenchman said.

“Identify me only as Henri from this moment forward.”

The sense of apprehension only deepened at this hint of the clandestine nature of the meeting—not that Bigelow didn't understand the danger already. If any American or English authorities were to overhear their discussion, both would be summarily disposed of.

Henri's small black eyes continuously darted from one side of the room to another. "You come highly recommended, captain. Our friends who approached you believe that you are a man of honor. France respects your service in the past."

That was for the French people, not the power-hungry First Consul, he said to himself. And certainly not for the money-hungry Americans who are financing this treason.

"You are British, yes?"

"I was born in London," Bigelow forced a smile to cover the bile rising in his throat from the lie he was about

to utter. “It holds my allegiance. But France holds my heart.”

“Excellent.” The Frenchman removed a paper from his cloak and with the barest of movement, pushed it across the table with his delicate hand. “Do not look at it until you are alone. It is a map and directions as to where the shipment of quarry tile must be hidden once you reach London.”

The shipment was, of course, not quarry tile; it was gold, raised by wealthy Americans who wanted to support the new French Republic and its First Consul, Napoleon Bonaparte, in their fight against the British. Bigelow had supported the French revolution years before, as did most newly proud Americans, but Napoleon was not a freedom-fighter; he was an opportunist. These rich Americans were, as well. They sought nothing more than for France to defeat England, who was a treacherous mistress when it came to commerce. But these men did not understand the French

like Bigelow did; France would be a greater enemy. These men were not patriots; they were selfish seekers of power and money. Traitors.

Although raised in London, Bigelow had become an American in his heart. He was a rebel, hating the royalty and the powerful men who cared little about the common man. America was his only allegiance now—he would support neither England nor France.

But Henri represented Napoleon and did not—could not—know Bigelow’s true loyalty or his plans: the gold would never reach the First Consul; it would never bring harm to America. To Henri, Bigelow would be a traitor. To the powerful men whose money had paid for it, he would be a thief. Either way, it would not have pleasant repercussions—but it was a risk worth taking. Somehow, America must be the only beneficiary.

Bigelow slipped the paper in his pocket without visible movement and nodded.

“Tomorrow,” Henri continued, leaning closer to Bigelow. “I am sailing on the *Invincible* to London to arrange the concealment and the transfer. I will meet you at the dock. Your job will be done when you offload the cargo.”

Later that night, Captain Bigelow studied the map in the faint light of a single candle as he waited alone in his small gray room on Fleet Street. It showed the location of the hiding place in the Isle of Dogs district of London; a warehouse on Stebondale Street, northeast of the East Ferry docks where he would tie up.

Shortly after midnight, he heard a soft knock on his door.

“Did anyone see you, William?” Bigelow asked as he cracked open the door.

“No one, Charles.”

“Good.”

With a quick look down the hallway, lit sporadically by dying candles, he closed and latched the door behind the stout man and led him to a table pushed up against the wall.

Captain Bigelow spoke first as they sat. “They will load the gold into ten boxes marked ‘Quarry Tile’ tomorrow. With that in the deep hold, we can bring the other cargo onboard and be under way by Wednesday.”

“Excellent,” William said. “How many bars?”

“One hundred and twenty.”

William’s eyes widened as he made some quick calculations. “That is almost one million dollars specie. I did not know it would be that large.”

“Yes,” Bigelow said. “It will buy enough munitions or ships to make a difference in the war that is coming.”

“Indeed.” William grunted and ran his hand across his high forehead and pondered the enormity of the shipment then leaned forward. “Did he give you a map?”

“Yes.” Bigelow pulled it out.

William withdrew a pen and started to draw a copy with his stubby fingers. “Stebondale Street. Clever hiding place.”

“It is. I assume our hiding place is as equally clever?”

When William finished his sketch, he removed a paper from his waist coat pocket and opened it. “I hope so. Charles, you must memorize these directions to the new location. I cannot risk the information to paper.”

“I understand.”

“As usual, you are assigned dockage on the Ferry Street Wharf on Isle of the Dogs. Our people in London will intercept Henri as he arrives at Stebondale and take control of the shipment. A man named Thomas will introduce

himself to you on the docks. Tell him that he must deliver the load to this place.” He pointed to a spot on the map. “It is an empty warehouse with a Bullard’s Millry Deliveries sign over the entrance. Do you know it?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Your friend, Richard Watersteet, has arranged for it to be empty.”

“Is Richard going to take care of the paperwork, too?”

“Yes, customs will be cleared with no problem.”

“After they arrive at the Bullard’s Millry, then what?”

“Tell Thomas that once inside, he should place the shipment behind the false wall opposite the entrance door. The release handle is a statue on a shelf of an old bookcase. Once hidden, Thomas will arrange for our countrymen to retrieve it and convert it to gold coins. Untraceable.”

Bigelow nodded. “I understand.” He looked up. “Are there further instructions for me after that?”

William took the captain's hand. "Charles, your job will be done in London. The less you know, the better for you. This money is going to make a critical difference to our country at some point in the future. It is a good thing we do. Now, repeat all of this back to me."

First mate John Robinson hadn't been able to sleep and lay awake in the room next to the captain's. He had heard the door open and the low voices that followed. The bed was pushed against the common wall, so the sound of creaking of wood was clear as the captain and a visitor sat at the table. Although their voices were distinguishable, he shifted his weight to hear better.

Gold? His attention was peaked immediately. As he listened to the secret plans unfolding in the next room, he thought of many things: treason was one. He didn't have any idea for whom the gold was intended, but if 'our country' meant that Captain Bigelow, who was British by

birth, was smuggling gold to the British, or even the French, it was the act of a traitor to American interests.

Captain Bigelow had heard the squeak of bed springs. It alarmed him, but had quickly put it out of his mind as he and William discussed a number of other details.

“I am not going to London,” William said as they stood and shook hands. “Someone else is departing on the *Invincible* tomorrow to arrange things with Thomas before you arrive. Remember that Thomas’ people will take care of Henri’s crew before he comes to you for these instructions. He does not know the final destination. Only you know it.”

“I understand, William. Thank you.”

“I wish you trailing seas, Charles.”

Bigelow closed the door and looked at the wall next to the table, remembering the sound of bedsprings. He would

slip into Robinson's room in the morning and see where the bed sat.

After he heard the door close behind the visitor, Robinson had reviewed and memorized the directions. He adjusted his powdered pigtail and pushed his head deeper into the pillow, staring at the planked ceiling. Thoughts rolled through his mind and he tried to put it all in perspective. Rich Americans were sending gold to Bonaparte to protect their business, but Charles' was going to steal the shipment for the benefit of...he wasn't sure.

After a minute, he relaxed. The simple fact was that he really didn't care to whom it was going. Nothing political interested him. The only thing he cared about was bettering his own miserable life—leaving the cruel sea forever—and gold would clearly be a good start toward that goal, the life he deserved.

Robinson's mind turned to the visualization of the wealth a shipment of illegal gold would bring: fine clothes, elegant women, and a tasteful home. One thing was certain: no more dirty mattresses covered with canvas stained with sweat from all the filthy men who had laid there before him.

But, he needed a plan and conspirators in London. Only one name appeared to him, only one man he could trust: Louis Becker, a friend with whom he had dined two nights before. *Divine providence is with me*, Robinson thought: Becker was to sail on the *Invincible* the next morning to London. He pulled on his white stockings, silk breeches, and white blouse then quietly slipped out the door.