

Dead Cats Don't Meow: The Legend of Eric Cobham
Excerpt

By Ben Pittman © 2005
(With support from the Canada Council for the Arts)

ACT I, SCENE I - 1781

The soft glow of embers in the wood stove is the only light. Heavy rain and bellowing thunder is heard. Lightning flashes and lights rise slowly on Center Stage (CS). It is night. Eva enters from Offstage Left. She has returned from the woodpile (assumed offstage). She wears a damp cloak with her hood up and carries a chunk of wood. She cradles the log to keep it dry as she moves Downstage Center (DSC). She peers out to the sea (audience).

EVA

A ship! The Captain must be mad to dock in these heavy swells.

Thunder and lightning resounds, Eva runs into the house (CS) and drops the log by the wood stove. She retrieves a spyglass from the desk and runs back outside. She returns to DSC. She finds the ship in the spyglass.

No, not docking... anchored offshore. Land sakes! *(She focuses.)* A small boat rowing from the ship. Lord they are foolhardy to sail on a Friday. Everyone knows that it is bad luck to sail on Friday. *(She lowers the spyglass.)* Who could it be?

Eva enters the house through the front door. She sneezes and there is a flash of lightning. She pulls back her hood and smiles at the cross hanging over the SR "wall" of the cabin. She kneels to pray before the cross. Lightning flashes again. Thunder quickly follows the lightning.

Lord, it is grand to hear you. The thunder... your voice in my lonely ears. The lightning... illuminating this dark Newfoundland night. Thank you for the company my Lord, you are most welcome. It is preferable to the silence of solitude. Please Lord, whomsoever is arriving... let them not bring evil or disease.

Thunder roars, Eva rises and places the log in the fire. Lightning flashes, Eva moves to the door DSC. She opens the door and steps outside. She puts up her

hood again and looks at the rowboat through the spyglass. She sees something on land.

There is a man walking up the lane! It cannot be Mr. Swyer, he is not due for days. He must have been on that ship. *(She tries to see him but cannot.)* It is pitch... I cannot tell. *(Beat.)* He is heading this way!

Eva quickly runs inside, replaces the spyglass, takes a musket from its mounting on the US wall and with surprising speed and skill, dashes some gunpowder in the barrel. She pumps it with a rod and points the musket at the DS door. She slowly walks toward the door.

I hope he is not a murderer... or a rapist. *(She cocks the musket.)* I hope he is a gentleman. Lord, I will give anything if you make him a gentleman.

Father Montclair enters from the audience and steps onstage SL. He is wearing a cape with the hood up and he carries a satchel. The audience will not be aware of his profession, as he is covered (scarf around neck to disguise collar). He coughs uncontrollably and knocks hard on the door. Eva makes no sound. Montclair knocks again.

MONTCLAIR
Bonjour? Hello?

Eva is silent but moves closer to the door.

Please I mean you no harm, just open the door.

EVA
What do you want?

MONTCLAIR
To dry myself. Please... I have traveled many miles.

EVA
If you are a robber, you have traveled for nothing. I have no money or food. If you are a pirate... and come through this door, you will find only a loaded musket. Return to your ship.

MONTCLAIR
Is this the Swyer home?

EVA

How are you acquainted with Swyers?

MONTCLAIR

Your caution is justified but in this instance there is no need. You are safe this night. *(He coughs again.)*

Eva stands nervously contemplating opening the door. She eventually notices the crucifix and makes the sign of the cross, gaining courage to open the door. She stealthily creeps to the door, and quickly opens it - pointing the musket at the man.

EVA

You have not answered my question.

MONTCLAIR

Please lower your weapon Mademoiselle. *(She lowers the musket.)* Merci. May I please come inside and dry myself? I am on a mission. Please I...

Father Montclair falls to the ground, exhausted and barely conscious. Eva puts her weapon aside and helps Montclair to his feet.

EVA

You are soaked to the bone. *(She helps him to the bed.)* Is it consumption? *(She puts a hand over her nose and mouth.)*

MONTCLAIR

Just a cold, I need to...

Montclair falls into a deep sleep.

EVA

Sir? *(She inspects him closely.)* You best remove that wet cape.

Eva removes his cape and jumps with a fright when she sees a priest's collar around his neck.

My Lord! What have I done? I pointed a weapon at a priest! Please forgive me Lord. *(She places her palm on his forehead.)* You have a fever. I'll take care of you Father.

Eva pulls a quilt over Montclair to keep him warm. She takes off his boots (placing them by the bed) and exits upstage. Lights down. The rain intensifies and after a few moments ceases. Lights rise again. Montclair slowly wakes and inspects his surroundings. He coughs and Eva enters from the US doorway. She carries a bowl of rabbit stew and a hot cup of tea on a platter.

I can put some more wood on the fire if you like Father.

MONTCLAIR

Montclair. (*He coughs.*) Father Montclair.

EVA

I'm Eva. Eva Messervey. Are you cold?

MONTCLAIR

No, quite comfortable. You are Eva?

EVA

Yes. (*Beat.*) You should eat something. (*She places the platter in front of Montclair.*) There's some rabbit stew and tea. Oh I forgot the biscuits. (*She exits quickly USC.*)

MONTCLAIR

(*Tries the stew. He approves and eats hungrily.*) Do you work for the Swyers?

EVA

(*Returning with the biscuits in a small bowl.*) Yes. (*She places the biscuits next to Montclair's bowl of stew. She is feeling awkward and awed by the priest's presence. Eva begins to quickly tell Montclair her story as though in confession.*) I cook and tend to the house, clean fish, care for the garden, weave nets... all sorts of work.

They are silent. Montclair stares at Eva with curiosity. Eva is nervous.

I... I... inherited my position as their servant when my mother died of the consumption; Her name was Margueritte. Mr. Swyer kept me on to fill her shoes I suppose.

They are silent again. Montclair looks at her with admiration. She is still nervous. She shakes the rain from his cape and hangs it up to dry.

My... my Father was lost at sea. His name was Rene', he... he and Mr. Swyer came from the Channel Islands with the French fishing fleet. My mother would have been destitute had not Mr. Swyer taken her on after my Father died. I... I was an infant, I... I don't remember. *(Beat.)* Father?

MONTCLAIR

Yes Eva.

EVA

I apologize for the manner in which I greeted you. Here... in this place... one never knows.

MONTCLAIR

Think nothing of it. *(He continues eating.)* This is a dangerous part of the world, even more so for a young girl by herself. There is no civilization and no accountability. It is good to see that you can defend yourself. *(He takes a sip of tea.)* When will your employers be returning?

EVA

Two days. Perhaps three.

MONTCLAIR

(Finishes his stew and places the platter on the bedside table. He sips his tea.) Where are they?

EVA

Red Island. They have family there. Mrs. Swyer is French... she goes this time every year.

MONTCLAIR

It must be lonely for you.

EVA

I manage. The Good Lord is with me always.

MONTCLAIR

(He smiles approvingly at Eva.) Where are my things?

Eva retrieves his satchel and hands it to him. He holds it close.

Good... bone dry.

Montclair looks inside and inspects his belongings.

EVA

The Swyers will be days yet; your business with them can surely wait. Let me care for you and when they return you'll be good as new.

Montclair nods, "yes". Eva smiles and takes the finished meal and platter back to the kitchen.

MONTCLAIR

(Loudly to the kitchen.) After being at sea for a month, your rabbit stew is like ambrosia. It tastes akin to the stew made by the brothers of my Church in France.

EVA

(Enters.) Father Montclair? *(Beat.)* If I may be so bold to ask, where do you plan to build the church? One side of Sandy Point is very rocky and the other quite naturally, is sandy. *(Answering her own question)* I suppose you'll put it in the middle.

MONTCLAIR

Church?

EVA

Before fainting you mentioned you were on a mission.

MONTCLAIR

I am.

EVA

I think it's the most wonderful thing - traveling the world, building churches and bringing the word of God to those whom need it. The settlers here made a request for a missionary some time ago, they will be overjoyed to see that their request has been granted. *(Beat.)* I prayed that you would come.

MONTCLAIR

You prayed for me?

EVA

Yes Father. I am a good Christian. I pray as often as I can and I read the Bible.

MONTCLAIR

Do you?

EVA

Yes, it is the only book the Swyers own, well... that and one other. The legend of Robin the Hood. *(Beat.)* I can close my eyes *(she does)* and see Sherwood Forest all around me. The lush canopy, the sweet dew of morning, every shade of green I can imagine. Standing there in a clearing are the merry men. Brave rebels battling for justice. Robin and Marion... lovers and outlaws to the end. *(She opens her eyes.)* It is all so romantic and exciting.

Montclair opens his satchel and takes out a leather bound book wrapped in a piece of oilskin. He removes the wrapping.

Is that your Bible Father? Are you going to read a passage? *(She is excited.)* How wonderful!

MONTCLAIR

This is not the Bible, have a look. *(He hands her the book.)*

EVA

(Reading the cover.) "The Memoir of Eric Cobham.- 1780." This was written last year.

MONTCLAIR

If you like romance and excitement, this story leaves the rest behind.

EVA

Is it a true story?

MONTCLAIR

I suspect that most of it is. The man had an eventful life. Do you know his name?

EVA

Cobham? I don't believe so.

MONTCLAIR

(Surprised) No?

EVA

No Father.

MONTCLAIR

Well... (*distracted*) ah... he was a pirate and they have many names. He last lived in France where he was considered a privateer.

EVA

Cobham does not sound like a French name.

MONTCLAIR

He was English, born in Poole. (*Beat.*) Read to me.

EVA

Father, I'm not very good. I...

MONTCLAIR

If you can read the Bible, you can read this. (*Beat.*) Please.

EVA

I would love to.

Montclair gets comfortable and Eva pulls her chair a little closer.

Are you comfortable Father?

Montclair nods and Eva opens the memoir. She starts reading aloud to Father Montclair.

"Why does a man write the story of his life? The truth is there are many reasons, one for every man. For me... my conscience demands it. As I knock on death's door, I think of the many times I opened that door and threw some poor soul through it. Now, at the end, I'm experiencing what everyone else does... fear. No one wants to go to hell and even if they don't believe in it... what if? What if our deeds really are weighed on some cosmic divine scale? They say the truth will free the soul. I hope they are right. This memoir is my confession, my apology to all I've wronged and my tears of shame to God."

Eva turns another page. Lights go down on CS.

ACT I, SCENE II - 1735

Lights rise on DS. The sound of a bustling 18th century Plymouth is heard. Eric Cobham enters from SR. He still has his sea legs and is happy to be on dry land. He turns to the audience and picks up where Eva left off.

ERIC

I was born in Poole, but as a young man, moved to Plymouth. I found work with the Trans-Atlantic fishing fleet and had just returned from the Grand Banks. The stocks of codfish off the Newfoundland coast were like none the world had ever known and many men went in search of wealth. The only ones who found it were the merchants and ship-owners. The rest found debt... or death.

As for me, I knew I would die a poor young man if I kept fishing. It was very dangerous with very little reward. After one voyage, I knew there had to be an easier and faster way to make a living. I was young and open to any and all possibilities.

In 1735 I returned from my final fishing voyage, and spent many nights in Plymouth's seedy underworld looking for a more agreeable road. I finally arranged a meeting with a certain Frenchman who would be able to help me rise above the rabble. (*He looks around impatiently.*) The Frenchman was late.

Captain Fairfax and Lieutenant Leeds enter from SR and cross in front of Eric. They stop just DSL of Eric. Eric listens.

FAIRFAX

(*Exasperated*) Honestly Lieutenant Leeds, if you want to climb the ranks of His Majesty's Royal Navy you'd better learn a little tact.

LEEDS

Yes Captain Fairfax sir.

FAIRFAX

You were smiling from ear to ear! That Prisoner was begging for his life and you were laughing at the man. Your sadistic giggle did nothing more than cause him distress and panic.

LEEDS

He was a murderer Captain. I simply enjoy the justice being delivered.

FAIRFAX

Don't lie to me Leeds. I've sailed this world over and I think I can recognize bloodlust in a man's eyes. I can appreciate justice dealt appropriately but an officer must have compassion as well.

LEEDS

Permission to speak freely Captain?

FAIRFAX

Permission denied. The hanging of a man is nothing to smile about - no matter what evil deeds he's committed.

LEEDS

Captain, the Bible says, "A life for a life, an eye for an eye," Deuteronomy 19:21.

FAIRFAX

If you believe that, you may one day find yourself half-blind or worse.

LEEDS

But sir, it's the law. Captured pirates are hung near the docks as a warning to all those who seek such a criminal life.

FAIRFAX

Do not lecture me on the law Lieutenant!

LEEDS

My apologies Captain.

FAIRFAX

The system of Justice we live by is far from perfect, so we must strive to improve it. We must understand the murderer's mind and clarify what separates him from us. If we could discover what makes a man kill we could find a long-term solution. Sending a pirate to the gallows without a word is revenge... nothing more. His victims will still be dead, no matter what the punishment.

LEEDS

Yes Captain.

FAIRFAX

There is more than one way to skin a cat Leeds. I've heard of a particular surgery that removes the evil from the mind. (*Noticing the eavesdropping Eric.*) You there, citizen! Getting an earful?

ERIC
No sir.

LEEDS
What are you called sir?

ERIC
Cobham. Eric Cobham.

FAIRFAX
A young man loitering around the docks of Plymouth can get into a world of mischief. I hope you were listening closely Eric, there's no future in piracy.

LEEDS
What's your purpose here Cobham?

ERIC
I'm waiting to meet someone about a job. I am... I was a fisherman. I've just returned from the island of Newfoundland.

FAIRFAX
A fellow sailor! Well then, I should be glad you're not wasting your wages in the tavern. You should consider the Navy Eric. His Majesty needs strong young sailors to defend our foreign interests.

LEEDS
Sailors we need, not suspicious looking fishermen. (*He looks at Eric's sword.*)
What kind of fisherman carries a cutlass that sharp?

FAIRFAX
For gutting cod I suppose.

ERIC
I only just purchased it

LEEDS
(*Inspecting the blade.*) The blade is clean, never tasted blood.

FAIRFAX

These are dangerous times Lieutenant, even honest men need a sword. Off we go Leeds, we've bothered this citizen enough. Consider the Navy Eric, it's honest work.

Fairfax exits SL with Leeds following but eyeing Eric suspiciously. Eric takes a few steps SL and stops. Lights dim except the light on Eric. He turns to face the audience.

ERIC

If someone offered me a King's ransom for honest work, I'd have taken it. But that wasn't going to happen. A man had to make a living and if you weren't born into wealth, then you were a peasant. Not me. I would not end up like that! A poor man who can't afford his own dreams. It didn't matter how much "honest work" a man did, he would never rise above his station... unless the man was righteous.

Noir silently enters from SR, staying in the shadows. He moves behind Eric.

The laws of a corrupt society are no longer valid in the eyes of the righteous. I could rationalize breaking the law... I even craved it.

Lights return to normal. Noir quickly places the dagger at Eric's throat and speaks over his shoulder. Eric is startled but remains still.

NOIR

Beautiful morning, isn't Cobham?

ERIC

(Stealthily moving his hand to his cutlass.) Not if you have a dagger to your throat.

NOIR

If you want to breathe through this neck, I suggest you leave your sword where it is.

ERIC

I expect you're Monsieur Noir.

NOIR

Oui.

ERIC

And judging by the fashion with which you introduce yourself, you're wondering what the two Naval Officers wanted with me.

NOIR

Oui.

ERIC

You needn't worry. They caught me eavesdropping and wanted to shake me up a little. I told them I was a fisherman.

NOIR

What else did you tell them?

ERIC

Nothing.

NOIR

(Noir presses the knife.) Did you mention me?

ERIC

(Rationally) Absolutely not. I rather enjoy breathing. Please remove the dagger, you obviously believe me otherwise I'd be dead.

Noir sheathes the dagger and moves SR of Eric.

NOIR

You show grace under pressure Cobham.

ERIC

Thank you Monsieur. Now, I was told you might have some work for me.

NOIR

What do you know about smuggling?

ERIC

Smuggling? *(Beat.)* I've never, but it sounds like a lark.

NOIR

A lark? Hmmm... *(trying to scare him.)* Oui, if your idea of enjoyment is skulking around in the cold night with some cutthroat bandits trying to move illegal goods through the country. I suppose you would enjoy yourself if you

didn't mind the penalty for getting caught, which could be as severe as death,
depending on the judge.

ERIC

I fear neither imprisonment nor death. What will you have me do?

NOIR

Have you been drinking?

ERIC

No Monsieur, it's a little early for that.

NOIR

Do you have a death wish?

ERIC

No.

NOIR

(Confused but pleased.) You're not a normal criminal are you Cobham?

ERIC

This country would call me a criminal but it's the country committing the crime.
Look around... people are starving and dying in the streets. If there were a just
law, perhaps I would respect it.

NOIR

It's the same in France, the whole world. Citizen... criminal... I think it's not so
black and white. We all do what we must and when we meet the Lord in heaven
he will judge us.

ERIC

Yes.

NOIR

Oui. *(They agree.)* Very well Cobham. I think we are on the same page. *(Noir
steps closer.)* There is a boat coming from Le Havre, it's carrying stolen Brandy.

ERIC

Brandy?

NOIR

Oui. In a few days some ah... associates of mine will land the boat a few miles down the coast. I'd like you to pick it up and bring it to me here in Plymouth. Mind... there are Naval patrols in the area. It's risky.

ERIC

How much?

NOIR

More than you'd make from two seasons of fishing Cobham. Ten thousand gallons will fetch a grand sum, a fine start for you. If successful there will be more work for you. You'll be very wealthy.

ERIC

Monsieur, to be wealthy... I'll smuggle anything you like. Perhaps I'll purchase some finery like yours. (*Admiring Noir's clothes.*)

NOIR

I have my own tailor. Play this right and you will have your own tailor along with many other things. Can you handle that cutlass? (*Eric nods.*) Good. If anyone tries to get in the way or stop you... you know what to do.

ERIC

Dead cats don't meow.

NOIR

(*Pleasantly amused.*) You know the phrase. Leave no one alive and survive. It's so simple a rule... I'm surprised more don't follow it.

ERIC

I do.

Lights down on DSR.