

Allen climbs the mast from [A Certain Latitude](#)

Allen had seen the sailors swarm up the mast and inch out onto the yardarms dozens of times, watched them diminish to the size of his hand, and marveled at their dexterity and courage. Now it was his turn and already he thought he must be insane. Around him the officers and crew placed bets.

“I’m putting a half crown on you, Mr. Pendale,” Clarissa said. Her nose was slightly pink from the sun. He wondered if she’d freckle, and then wondered whether he’d live to see it. The irony of surviving an Atlantic crossing to plummet to his death on a whim was not lost on him.

“Only a half crown?”

“It’s more than I can afford.” She touched his arm and whispered, “Be careful.”

The Captain escorted Allen and Blight to the mainmast. “You shall draw for which side you are to take, gentlemen. The longer of the two takes starboard.”

The port side would mean the climber could be dazzled by the sun. He’d not thought of that.

Captain Trent held out two pieces of straw in one hand.

Allen gestured to Blight—it was after all, the gentlemanly thing to do, to let the other draw first—and pulled out the shorter straw.

“Mr. Blight shall take the starboard side,” Captain Trent pronounced. “The best of luck, sirs.”

Allen swung himself into the shrouds, the ropes insubstantial beneath his hands and digging into his bare feet. For the first part of the climb, at least, he would not have the sun in his face. Opposite him, Blight climbed and Allen wondered if he too looked as ungainly, like a spider in a swinging net of ropes. So far, so good—and then he came to the first arm, above the belled canvas and the sun struck him like a blow, dazzling and producing orange and red blotches in his vision when he looked away. His headache intensified—he really had been a fool to drink so much last night.

He’d never been so high in his life—he’d climbed trees as a boy, of course, and on the Grand Tour clambered up Mount Aetna, breathing in sulphurous fumes, slipping on ashes and rubble—as he thought of it a rope broke beneath one foot. He froze for a moment, clinging to the ropes, sweating. Then onward, and the first truly frightening part—swinging from the shrouds to the lower yard, hauling himself up and jeering at himself. If you had to do so to get into Clarissa’s bed you wouldn’t hesitate. Opposite and slightly below him Blight labored up the last of the shrouds, breathing heavily.

Don’t look up. Don’t look at that mast stretching up, swaying against the blue sky. Don’t....get a move on, Blight may be better at this than you. The sea was calm but the higher he’d go, the more motion there would be. More swaying shrouds billowing into the sky. Now he was well ahead of Blight and his legs shook already with the strain of putting his weight on the balls of his feet. It was easier if he turned his feet out like a dancer, but slower, and then that hurt too, but in a different way. The sun blazed down on him.

Something appeared in his peripheral vision. A seabird, dazzling white, close enough for him to see its impassive yellow eye and orange beak, floating out of sight and

beyond as though tempting him to launch himself into the air. Instead he narrowed his eyes and saw the frigate where they'd dined last night, an elegant, painted model of a ship, sails white and full, on a turquoise and midnight blue sea. Further up, his legs and hands feeling the strain, his calf muscles, despite years of fencing and riding, tight with pain. Past the middle arm. His mouth was dry. He should have had a drink before starting.

He risked a glance down and saw the crew foreshortened on a frighteningly small deck, faces turned up. One more yardarm to pass, and then onto the crow's nest where he could stand normally and stretch his feet and legs out (something else he should have done first. He always did before fencing. What a fool he was). He couldn't even see Blight—God knew he didn't want to look down directly, and the sway of the mast made him dizzy as it was.

Past the top yardarm, and resisting the impulse to stop and rest he hauled himself up the next six, eight feet—don't think of the height— and into the crow's nest where he collapsed in an undignified heap. Glad that no one could see him at that particular moment, he rolled onto his back and stretched out his legs, wriggling his bare toes with a luxurious groan. Above him the top of the mast swayed in lazy wide arcs against a perfect blue sky.

The top of the mast. A few, very few tortuous pieces of wood to climb, roughly fastened to the mast. One dangled from a single nail, shifting slightly as the mast moved. He had another ten feet to go.

Where the devil was Blight? If he'd fallen, surely the watching crowd would have made some sort of noise. Up, get to the top. He stood and waved to the onlookers far below. The deck appeared too small to be real. If he fell now, where would he land? Bounce from the sails or burst through them? Splat onto the deck or disappear into the sea? Academic questions, since he would not fall—absolutely not—he grasped a support and shimmied up, using his knees as much as his hands now, and his feet and calves feeling the strain immediately, despite the brief rest.

And he was there, his hand groping and feeling the flat surface, smoother than he'd expected. Far higher than a man was meant to go, unless you counted such oddities as hot air balloons. Could they see him from the deck?

He grinned. He was there. He'd show them that a male laundress was a man nevertheless. He'd show Clarissa. He hoisted himself up and sat on top of the mast, gripping tightly with his thighs as the thing swayed and creaked, scribing vast circles in empty space. He raised his arms above his head and heard a cheer from below.

And now all he had to do was get down. He lowered his arms, gripped, and shuffled backward, letting himself drop, his feet finding purchase after one dreadful moment, and wondered how hideous the descent would be. There was still no sign of Blight. Slowly and with care he dropped into the crow's nest and stretched again. No hurry. But he didn't want them to think he was frightened of the descent—which he was, he wasn't that much of a fool—so he had best make haste, hoping that Blight didn't lurk further down, ready to tip him off. Lower your foot, find support, balance, then the other foot, one hand, the other hand...small, economical movements. Breathe. Don't think about the height, the pain. Think about Clarissa. What you'll do to her. What she'll do to you. Another step down.

Her mouth first. Yes. Then make her strip, slowly. With care. Like this. Step by step. Down to her stockings. Another step, sliding his foot down into nothingness, toes searching. And another. Then her arse. They hadn't tried that yet. Needed goose grease, something. Ask Lardy Jack. Lard? No, not for Clarissa's sweet arse. Only the best. Goose grease, olive oil if Lardy Jack had it, which he doubted. Balance, stretch, grip. Of course Lardy Jack would know what he wanted it for. He might even withhold any suitable grease, appalled at the thought of Mr. Pendale plotting to invade Miss Onslowe's refined backside. But time was running out. They had, what, a few days, a week at most before they landed. Probably she'd agree, impressed by Allen's bravery. He certainly wouldn't admit that he shook like a leaf the whole time.

Even if he had to delay that particular part of the plan, there were always the items he'd recently acquired from one of the crew, and which he'd been saving. Many possibilities there.

He stepped onto the yardarm, letting his feet stretch out, while the canvas roared and hummed below. From a distance the sails were pure and white, but here he could see how patched and weathered they were. Voices floated up from below.

"That's right, Mr. Blight. Take your time. No hurry, sir."

Peering down to the next yardarm he saw Blight, moving slowly, a sailor above and below him, guiding and encouraging. Poor bastard. Poor fool, rather. He followed them down, and then overtook them. He planned to make a victorious, dashing descent down the shrouds, into Clarissa's arms—not that she'd embrace him in public; she was very discreet—rather, into the promise of future pleasures.

He tried to find a compromise between unsafe speed and nonchalance. Not far to go, he had won fair and square; he had shown that poltroon Blight that challenging a gentleman was an exceedingly bad idea.

He jumped the last few feet, landing with a clumsy thump on the deck, every muscle in his body screaming with pain, while the sailors huzzah'd and tossed their hats into the air.

Mr. Johnson reached him first, and clapped him on the shoulder. "Well done, sir. Some brandy?"

Allen took a deep gulp, and another, the liquor burning its way pleasantly into his gut.

Captain Trent shook his hand. "Very well done, sir, for a landlubber. You did not need to sit on the mast, you know."

"Aye, the biggest thing I've had hang between my legs—since last night," Allen replied, looking around to see how Clarissa would react.

"In harbor, the first time I send a boy up, I tell him to stand on it," Captain Trent said with a smile.

"Stand on it?" Oh, dear God. Stand on the mast?

"Well, it will move around a little, but not enough to throw a man off; not like it moved when you were there."

Stand on the mast? The brandy, a moment ago so welcome, now seemed to roil inside him.

“If you’ll excuse me, sir.” On legs that threatened to give way at any moment, and with as much dignity as he could muster, Allen pushed his way through the crowd of sailors, and vomited over the side.

#

“They’re very disappointed,” Clarissa said. “Mr. Johnson is still trying to work out the bets on his abacus.” She stroked Allen’s head, lying on her knee as she sat cross-legged on the deck. The sailors had rigged up a canvas for shade, under which she and Allen sat. Their washing flapped and waved on a line nearby. The Blights, he still pale faced and shivery, with Mrs. Blight cooing and fussing over him, sat a little distance off.

“Everything hurts,” he groaned.

“Everything?” She dug her needle into the fabric of one of the dresses. She hadn’t realized how much Allen would interfere with her dressmaking plans. “I won the puking stakes, you won the race up the mast, so there are quite a number of possibilities. I wish I had bet on myself for the seasickness.”

“It’s not amusing.”

“Yes it is.” She drew her needle out, pulled the thread taut, and wondered if she could persuade Allen to go belowdecks. She didn’t have to look too hard to see his genitals through the thin fabric of the cotton drawers, and wondered whether she should torment him a little. But, no, she should finish this dress. A pity, though. She liked having him sprawl half-naked on her lap, and after his triumph on climbing the mast, she knew he would be insufferable; an inconvenient erection, with the Blights watching on, might serve to humble him.

Or possibly not. He might enjoy displaying himself even more to Mrs. Blight, and at the same time issue another challenge to Blight himself. She had a vision of the two of them strutting around like a pair of fighting cocks, erections aloft, and giggled.

He groaned again.

“Would you like some physic?” Clarissa asked.

“Oh, for God’s sake.” He turned his face into her knee. “A little sympathy, possibly even a little praise for my bravery, might suffice.”

“Bravery? Foolhardiness, more like.”

“I wouldn’t expect a woman to understand.”

“A woman would have more sense.”

“Indeed.” He shifted, lying more on his belly than his side, and dropped his hand beneath the fabric she sewed. Oh, so casual, as though she’d hardly notice.

“Allen?”

He grunted, his hand now lifting the folds of her skirt, skimming her thighs. His breath was warm on her leg. “I think I’ll make you come.”

“Oh no you won’t. Not here.”

“Well, if you get up and push me away with an outraged shriek, everyone will know what I’m about. Best to grit your teeth and bear it.” His fingers tickled at the top of her parted thighs. “Wouldn’t it be dreadful if people knew what was happening to you. Let’s see, there are the Blights, most of the crew—yes, they’re watching you. They’re a little restless after all these weeks at sea and with land so close. You’d be doing them a favor, so they know what a woman looks like when she comes; they’ve probably forgotten,

if they ever knew. And Elizabeth Blight knows certainly, though I'm sure not from bedding Blight—”

“Oh, you are so crude—”

“And Mr. Johnson, who nurses a hopeless passion for you—”

“He does not—”

“I know he'd like to see you come. Or they might all think you're giving an imitation of a cat yawning and think nothing of it. You may be able to get away with it.”

“I do not look like a yawning cat!”

“You do.” His finger tugged at the hair between her thighs. “Of course, you also make quite a lot of noise. I'm surprised you haven't learned to come quietly, given your five years of the solitary state. You're bound to betray yourself.”

I shall ignore him. And then his finger searched, parted, circled, and she was very much aware of him, fine-tuned to every small movement. She dropped the needle and fumbled with clumsy fingers to find it in the folds of fabric.

Oh, he knew how to please her, he found a rhythm to her liking, his touch gentle but persistent.

“Did you miss me last night, Clarissa? Did you do this to yourself?”

“Don't be indecent.” Good. Her voice was suitably stern while inside she fluttered and trembled. She kept her eyes on her sewing, and jabbed her needle into the seam. Her stitches were becoming very uneven.

“It's a pity I can't toy with your nipple while I do this. I know you like that. Maybe you could oblige.”

“Certainly not.” Her hand moved as of its own volition, her wrist brushing her hard nipple.

“I thought about you when I was climbing that big prick of a mast. Thought of what I'd do to you, particularly that lovely arse I've been too much of a gentleman to broach.”

“A gentleman?” Her voice was unsteady.

“Maybe I should get my head under your skirts and lick you.”

Oh God.

“I'd tell the Blights you had a splinter in your quim.”

She choked with laughter, dropped her sewing and dug her fingers into his hair as her orgasm ratcheted through her, horrifying, in front of everyone. Could they know? She couldn't help a strangled sound, a gasp of pleasure.

“That's better,” he murmured. He withdrew his hand, slick with her moisture, and licked his fingers.

“Did that make you hard, Allen?”

“What do you think?” He yawned. “I can't make up my mind whether to get you belowdecks or sleep.”

“Let me help.” She shook her sewing out so that the swathe of pale fabric billowed over them both, and reached beneath it to grasp his cock.

He grinned shamelessly.

“If I make you come, you'll have a big wet patch on your drawers, and everyone will see it.”

“Not if I’m wearing a shirt.”

“Oh, I don’t think that would be very likely.” She squeezed. “Your shirts are damp still. And, you know, you’re not particularly quiet at such times. I think everyone will know.”

His eyes narrowed as she stroked him. She untied the drawstring and slid her hand inside, cupping his balls and scratching them lightly with her nails.

“What should I do, Allen? Shall I make you come?”

“It would be a pity to stain your pretty dress before you’ve even finished making it,” he murmured.

“True. I am really having a hard time making up my mind what to do. You are in a shocking state.”

“A shockingly hard state,” he agreed. “Maybe we could strike a bargain.”

“Possibly.”

“I propose”—he moved, swift and eyes alight with mischief, grabbing her—“that I shall not tickle you”—she thrashed and shrieked, helpless with laughter—“any more than I must if you let me escape.”

She rolled on the deck in disarray and a tangle of fabric as Allen lunged for the hatch, one hand holding up his drawers.

“Tally ho, Miss Onslowe,” one of the seamen called out.

She folded her sewing up into a neat bundle, sauntered over to the hatch, smiling for the onlookers’ benefit, and lowered herself down. He must be hiding, waiting to jump out at her. It was very quiet. She pushed open the cabin door. His drawers lay on the floor; he was on his berth, head propped on one hand, his cock in the other.

“Oh, please, don’t let me disturb you.” She placed her sewing in her chest, and watched his hand slide, the tug and pull of his foreskin.

“Come here.”

“Whatever for? You seem to be managing quite well on your own.”

“So you might think.” He reached out with his other hand to stroke her hair. “Kiss me.”

His mouth was warm and familiar, the hand on the back of her head gentle. He sighed, whether from the play of their tongues, or from his own caress, she couldn’t tell. She moved her mouth to bite into his neck, tasting salt, sea spray and his own sweat as he pushed at her head, urging her to continue her traverse of his body.

She reached to take his hand from his cock, tangling her fingers in his—warm, slightly damp—and sucked them briefly. She remembered the first time she’d sucked his fingers, his groan of pleasure, her surprise; she understood now that he foresaw it as a prelude to greater delights.

She rested her elbows on the edge of the berth and licked him, slowly, tantalizingly, from root to tip. A drop of liquid swelled onto her tongue. His hair tickled her nose as she engulfed his cock, taking him in deep as he’d taught her, then moving to mouth his balls, lick hard beyond them where his scent was strong and earthy.

He shifted, hand tightening in her hair, tensing, and muttered something. She identified the words “cock” and “mouth”—well, it was quite obvious what he wanted. She let him slide slowly into her mouth, but not allowing him all the control. He might have

to strain and tense as she sucked and licked; it would be she who set the pace and rhythm. She moved her tongue over the rounded head of his penis, and the sensitive flesh that anchored his foreskin.

“Oh God, I’ve taught you too well,” he gasped. His hands grasped her head as he swelled and spurted warm and salty into her mouth.

She raised her head, out of breath, although not as badly as he, smiling at the sight of his depleted, slumped cock, his utter relaxation. He opened his eyes and ran a forefinger down her cheek to her mouth, swiping away a stray dribble of semen.

“It’s a good thing I’m not in love with you,” she said. “I’m afraid I’d find you quite irresistible at such a time.”

“You’ll find me even more irresistible quite soon. What would you like to do to arouse me again?”

“What would you like?”

“Undress for me.”

Well, that was easy enough. “Very well.”

As she bent to take off her stockings, he said, “No. The stockings last.”

“Why?”

“Because men like it. And don’t ask me why, Clarissa. I don’t know. Men in only their stockings look ridiculous; women in only their stockings look arousing. Slowly, girl. Don’t pull your gown off over your head. Let it drop.”

The cotton belled, slid, fluttered to her ankles. She understood what he wanted, now—a slow ritual of undressing like the one he’d performed for her; as though she were alone and oblivious of his presence. She pulled at the strings of her stays—usually she liked to give her ribs a gentle scratch as the canvas and whalebone slid away but instead, for his benefit, cupped her breasts through the thin fabric of her shift. “I wish I had a prettier shift.”

“So do I. But you’re pretty whatever you wear.” He tugged at the drawstring of her shift.

She let the cotton slide down one shoulder and the other, her nipples still hidden.

He looked interested now—his cock firming against his thigh. Still holding her shift against her breast, she reached out to palm him, give him a gentle slap and a firmer squeeze. Her nipples poked against the shift, the linen catching briefly on them before falling—made of a coarser fabric than her gown, well-dried in the sun (on land she would have ironed it), her shift descended in stiff folds.

She stood before him in stockings and garters.

“Part your legs. One foot on your berth.” His hand reached between her thighs. “Wet already.”

He leaned to kiss one nipple, then the other, while she shivered with delight.

There was the usual frantic scramble for the sponge and the vial of tansy oil, while he muttered in exasperation.

“This time, we have something new to play with.”

He produced a couple of thin braided strips of leather that he must have kept hidden in his berth. “Rat leather, made by one of the crew,” he announced, and then, probably in response to her grimace, “Feel how fine it is.”

He drew them over her breasts.

“And you intend to—” she yelped as he snapped one against her arse.

“That’s one possibility. Hold out your wrists. Trust me.”

“Trust you? You’re a lawyer.” But she presented her wrists to him anyway.

He chuckled and bound her wrists together with intricate knots. Of course, there was no better place than a ship to learn how to tie a good knot and find all sorts of places—a hook in the ceiling in this case—to secure her wrists above her head, stretching her torso up so she balanced on her toes, legs outspread.

“I know it’s not particularly comfortable,” he said. “But you won’t care.”

And she didn’t, as he began a careful exploration of her body with tongue and teeth—her mouth first, deep, wet kisses while his erect cock brushed against her belly, both of them moaning, making the sounds they’d denied themselves earlier on deck. She wanted him inside her, now—now—but he continued, inching his mouth to her neck, her shoulders, pausing to bite and suck. Slowly. Very slowly.

“You bastard. I’ll do this back to you,” she gasped.

“I look forward to it.” He resumed his careful exploration on the taut skin of her breast, his stubbled face teasing her nipples.

She moaned in frustration and lifted one leg to his waist, attempting to capture his cock.

He slapped her bottom. “No, that’s not allowed.”

“Please.”

“When I say so.” Having transformed her nipples into hard, aching points, he knelt before her, parting her sex with tongue and teeth, his tongue a hard lash driving her while her legs quivered and shook.

“Not yet.” He withdrew, his face glistening with her moisture. “When I’m inside you.”

He spun her around, held her hips, and oh yes, he was inside her—she hung, pinioned on his cock, toes scraping for purchase on the floor—and then came, as he predicted, damn him, oh yes.

Damn him again, he laughed. “Feel better?”

He reached above her head and released her, catching her weight, and, her wrists still bound, positioned her so that she knelt on the floor against the lower berth.

Long, slow thrusts, their bodies slick together, his breath harsh in her ear, his hands tight on her hips. “Like this,” he muttered. “Like this...”

And then stopped.

“What’s wrong?” Well pleased, a little drowsy, lulled by the pleasurable rhythm he set, she turned her head to face him.

“I wanted to tell you...I was so frightened on that damned mast I almost pissed myself.”

She was torn between laughter and an odd sort of admiration at his candor. “But you weren’t too frightened to do it—or to wash your own laundry, although that was done quite badly.”

“Nonsense. My laundering was excellent.”

“For a man.”

He laughed, kissed her, and proved that there were other things, as a man, that he did very well indeed.

©Janet Mullany 2013

Buy the book on [amazon](#).