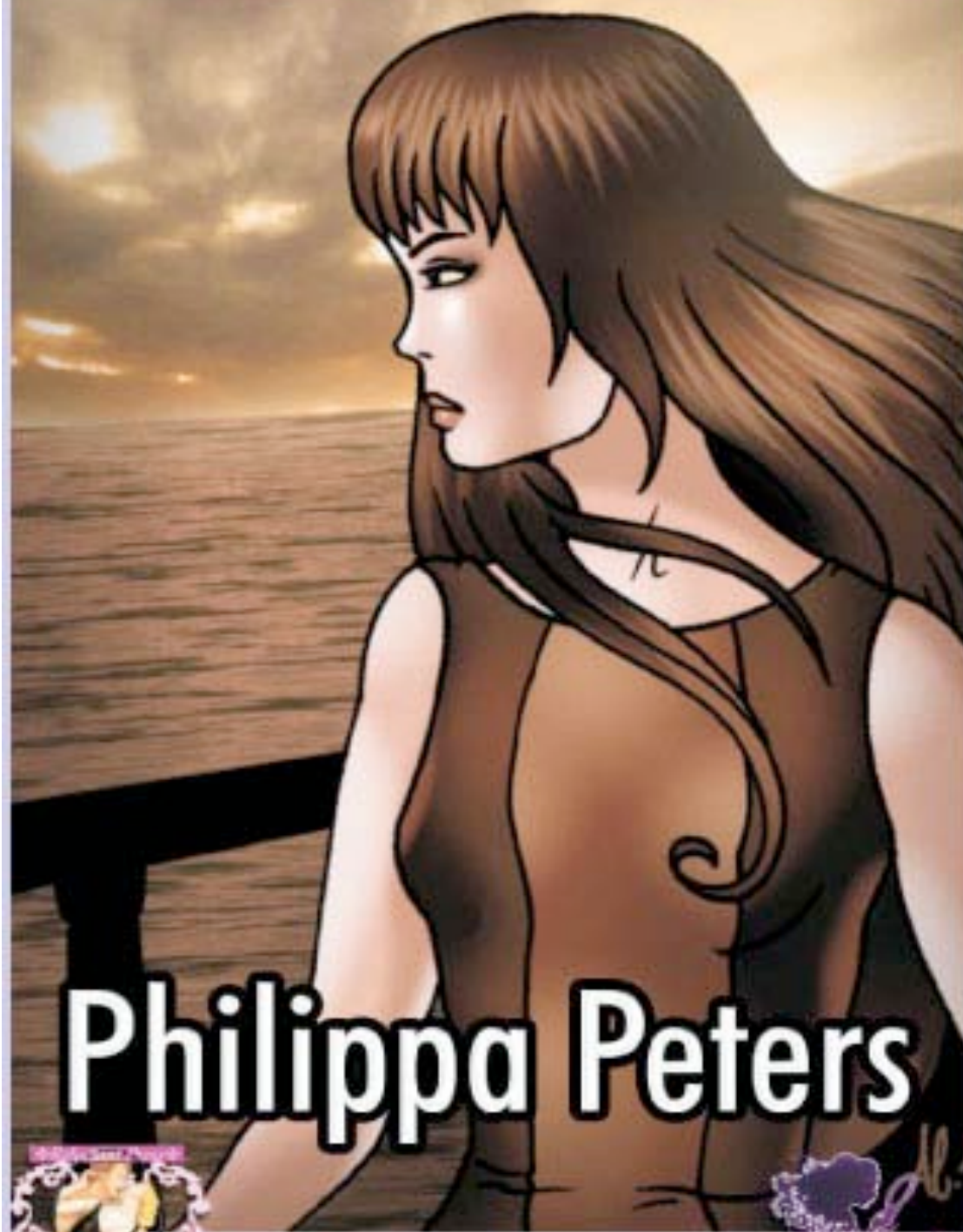


# A Plague Of Men



# Philippa Peters



An "Adult Tv" Novel



## **A PLAGUE OF MEN**

**By Philippa Peters**

A continuation of *'Another Fine Witch'...*

I'd no idea why I was thrown into the brig. The bluebands said nothing. They'd hauled a sailor, smelling of drink, out of the bed in a cell, I suppose it was, and thrown him in with another man, in the brig next to mine. The second had yelled and objected to having Rasson put in with him.

"Give me the other one, the cutie," the older man bellowed at the bluebands but they ignored him.

The drunk, Rasson, plunged his head into a bucket of water as I tried to shrink back into the walls and not have them look across the bars at me, in my girlish skirt and finery. I couldn't guess why I was there. What had I done wrong? Then, thoughts of the theft I'd made in Mogen's workroom came to my mind.

I shouldn't have taken so much of the sleeping powder, merenthe. Mogen must have realized what I'd done. He wouldn't have discovered the theft as I would by sniffing the powder. He was no kind of apothecary at all, I thought with a shiver. And I doubted Mogen could tell the difference between salt and merenthe, not as the Seafarers used salt. It was barely crystalline and not as effective as a preserver as proper distillation would have produced.

"Hey, cutie," whispered the man who'd been alone in his cell before the drunk, was put in with him. He'd edged right up to the bars that separated us. "Come up to the bars. I've something to give you."

"My, my name's not Cutie," I muttered to myself. His hearing must have been really good.

"Of course, it isn't," said the man, leaning back to the

passageway and checking if anyone was coming.

“What’s your name, cutie? That’s what the Fish-eaters do to a Baract captive, isn’t it? Make you act as a cabin boy.”

“I act anyway I please,” I said, almost screaming in my attempt at a touch of bravado. Gods, being in the brig meant lashes for sure. Lashes before you were even questioned. That had been the practice on *King Tatheren’s Sword*.

“Scared of a lashing!” taunted Rasson, the drunk, shaking his hair free of water. “Wait till you’ve been here three times as I have.”

“Or until they open your back as they did mine four times over,” said the man with a rotten-toothed smile. “Only twice more. Come on over, cutie. We kingsmen should look out for one another; come over closer and let me give you what you need to survive a lashing.”

There was a vial waving at me. It was capped with metal. I couldn’t smell anything at all but the smell of sweat and unwashed clothing. Like a fool, I edged over to the bars and he grabbed me. I squealed as he kissed my lips while the drunk behind him stood up and staggered towards us.

“I want some o’ that!” the drunk yelled, grabbing at the man’s arm. The first man had to fight him off and that enabled me to pry his fingers off my pants and fall back into the cell I’d been allotted.

“Lippy stuff,” groaned the man who’d kissed me.

“Lovely. Come back, Baract, and let’s do it again. Look at my pecker!” The front of his pants was tenting as if a pole was being thrust outward in them. “I’m in love with you, cutie! I’m your friend in here. The only one you got!”

Both of them lined the cell divider then, begging me to come over to them and to make love, that's the way I understood it, to them.

A blueband came by, after a while, a whole shift later it seemed to me, and smiled at the way they were begging me to back up to the dividing bars and let them do the rest.

"I haven't had a woman in half a year," the first man to talk moaned.

"And you won't have another if we find you bonking another prisoner, Sollo," the blueband said. "That's another twenty lashes, administered on top of other punishments, and you got eighty coming on your next visit with the bosun's mate. You get twenty as well," he added to me. "Maybe thirty, if you entice him into having you."

"I don't want them at all," I gasped.

The blueband smirked at me. "Good," said the blueband. "As you got a show to put on, Arrathee ..."

"Arrathee," moaned the guy in the next cell. "Such a lovely name for such a cutie ... Ow!" He screamed as the cosh in the blueband's hand extended and smashed into the side of his face.

"... for the captain," said the blueband, handing me my purse, and miming me putting on my makeup. That chilled me through and through. "But first, Arrathee, you make yourself as pretty as you were last night. Yes, we saw the riggers trying to tryst with you at Celebration. Heard you gave in to three of 'em. The mothers are going to have a really hard time," he laughed at his pun and made a suggestive gesture towards me, "keeping Sollo and scum like him off you between shifts."

“I’ll tell you where I hid it!” yelled Sollo as the blueband opened the cell and gestured to me with his thick baton to go ahead of him. “Just put her in here with me for a half shift and I’ll make you rich!”

“You’d make me dead if I did anything like that, Foreshore crud,” laughed the blueband, taking me by the arm and marching me out of the brig. By the noise behind us, the men in the other cell were fighting, each screaming ‘She’s mine!’ as I, deathly afraid, the cringing object of their affection, emerged from blackness to a high sun.

The blueband held a mirror for me as I shivered and redid my lips and powdered my face as a girl does. He held my arm all the way to the topmost deck.

Undercaptain Peveret was outside a private cabin, watching a cutter, a longboat with a strange, purple-hemmed flag, taking lines from the great ship. It was being pulled alongside *Silvery Seas*, our speed becoming theirs.

“You recognize that?” asked Undercaptain Peveret, his clothing loose as if he’d just thrown it on. “That flag?”

I gulped. “A plague flag?” I whispered, suddenly recalling lessons from Robady to us cadets on flag recognition. I recalled him saying that this was one we’d never want to see, ever. I thought I must have got it wrong by the look Peveret gave me. Well, Seafarer flags wouldn’t be the same as Baract message flags, would they?

“You look pretty this morning, Arrathee,” said Peveret suddenly, abruptly changing subjects. A smile I didn’t understand played about his lips. “The Celebration went well for you. Three trysts have put some color in your cheeks.”

I wanted to die when the undercaptain said that to me.

Did everyone on this ship know all about me, all the time? Did they think I liked men touching me as if I was a woman? Did they think I was dressed as I was because I wanted to be? Goddesses, when would I ever get a chance to be like Garrin and become an ex-cabin boy?

“I like the touches of makeup on your face,” the undercaptain went on. “Let’s go in and see if Panella is awake.”

The one called my ‘mother’ by everyone else on the ship had changed from the dress she’d worn at the celebratory dance the night before, into short, female, outer clothing like me. Panella wore a dress with puffed sleeves, however, and a tiny waist. How could she fit into such a dress, I asked myself. She looked so slim, so womanly. She was female-shaped, her gestures feminine, as she sat with her bare legs crossed, her petticoats at mid-calf. She accepted a kiss from Peveret on her lips, glossed a much darker, deeper red than mine.

“It’s true,” said Peveret to her, leaving me standing in the hatchway, the blueband closing the hatch behind me. I stood very still in the dark and tried to learn why I’d been summoned to the rooms of one of the most powerful men on the great ship. “It’s from *Zephyr*, and it’s a plague flag. Didn’t look like more than three actives on deck to take the lines.”

Panella made a dramatic shudder. “Just get rid of them, Pev!” she exclaimed. “You can’t let plague spread to our ship!”

“No, my darling,” growled Undercaptain Peveret, kissing Panella again, kneeling beside her, his hand bringing her lovely hair within his reach as he savaged her mouth, she encouraging him to go on and hold her

more tightly. They acted like my father and stepmother when he'd brought her first into our home, as if they were a man and woman in love, I thought with a shudder. The undercaptain and Panella kissed just as tenderly, making me think of them as husband and wife.

I flushed in revulsion as I stood there, not knowing what to say or do as the two moaned a little as they kept on caressing one another, she as bad as he in stroking his private parts as he stroked hers.

"I have to deal with this," said the undercaptain, finally breaking off his affectionate, sensuous caressing. Panella seemed to be encouraging him to continue even further with her.

"Doesn't Arrathee look pretty this morning?" the undercaptain asked. Panella turned in her chair, looking around, finding me in the shadows where the undercaptain had delivered me.

"What's she doing here?" asked Panella in astonishment. Her lip curved in a flirty sort of smile. "A threesome, Pev, at your age? She's pretty enough to make that heart of yours explode, you know!"

"What a way to go!" said Peveret gruffly with a sly grin. "No, it's a captain's council, Panella. First item, aid to other ships from the Many Isles in distress, unless we're at war with them, of course. Plague is a big distress, Pansy! *Zephyr's* sent us a message; the poor men on that cutter fired a line by arbalest into the captain's deck to get the request handed over."

"But it's a plague ship," protested Panella in a lovely, woman's voice I knew I could never imitate. How does she do it, I asked myself, shuddering as something began to stir in my thoughts, something, I think, Polwer had once said. What was it?

“The second item is this lovely person in front of you, your responsibility,” said Undercaptain Peveret grimly. “*Zephyr* is easy to deal with compared to her.”

“Send Mogen to *Zephyr*!” sneered Panella without a second thought. “It would be a good way to be rid of that charlatan!”

I’d thought the same when I was with him but hadn’t thought someone as feminine as Panella, a man like me, oh, shivers ran through me at such an idea, would ever express such a notion forcefully.

“Brisard will never let anyone go who supports his every command slavishly,” muttered Peveret, frowning at me. I knew he was thinking of something ill that he was going to make befall me. Oh gods and goddesses, they’re going to dump me as a nurse onto a plague ship, I thought wildly.

“That must have finally brought Mirrie’s Celebration to an end, mustn’t it?” asked Panella waspishly, ignoring me completely. “Did our good captain get out of bed to take the message himself?”

“With a plague flag flying?” asked Peveret, caressing her legs more, as if he was touching a woman’s legs, ignoring me as he returned to her pleasuring of him. I remained as still as I could be, goggle-eyed, as I watched a man and a woman, well, a man and another man dressed gorgeously as a woman, being so loving to one another.

“A blueband, who’s finding out what isolation in the brig is like, relayed the message to his superior, also isolated now, and thus, by degrees, to Elder Brisard,” said Peveret between loving kisses of Panella’s glossy mouth. “I’m ordered to assist t *Zephyr of Serenity* by our illustrious captain ‘in any way you can that does not endanger *Silvery Seas*.’ In any way!” The



undercaptain appeared to be imitating someone with a really haughty way of speaking. "He's as cruel as you are, my love; he wants *Zephyr* abandoned but he wants me to be the one to do it, someone to blame when talk reaches the Clanhouses on Cunya!"

"And Arrathee?" asked Panella languidly, caressing Peveret's arm. "I'm to prepare her for you, is that it, as a reward for doing Brisard's dirty work?"

I gasped audibly at that one, chills flowing over me. Both turned to look at me, laughing at whatever they saw in my face. Like an old married couple, they seemed to know when each other was joking. I think I saw that they were joking with one another. I hoped that it was as I felt the tug of stockings I wore beneath my tight skirt.

The undercaptain laughed more heartily than his 'wife'. "No, my darling," he laughed. "Now stop teasing, Panella. You know you're the only woman in my life. I tell you and you still tease me, my darling seawife. Ah," there was a rap on the hatch, "Robady is here, and my counterpart on mid-shift."

The thin-faced undercaptain, Layward, frowned at Panella in the other undercaptain's cabin. Layward had been the one to assign cabin boy duty to me as if he'd been rewarding me. Some reward, I thought miserably, as he disdainfully looked me over, particularly staring at my dark hair.

"I should be asleep now," Layward began huffily.

"Captain's orders," said Peveret blandly. "Sailing Officer Robady!" he shouted. "Get in here!"

Robady was grimfaced as he stepped through the hatch. I gasped when I saw that his hands were tied behind his back. He didn't change his expression when

he saw me, such a girlish me, my face so madeup, looking at him.

“Don’t have anything to say to your girl friend, Rob?” asked Peveret in amusement. Rob glowered at him, not looking at me. “When she’s done all she could for you and cured you of bites and knife slashings?”

I couldn’t help the loud gasp that erupted from me. That was what was wrong with Rob. He looked like his old self, not the slashed up, rat-bitten Robady whom I’d attended to just the previous day.

“Quite a remarkable recovery from affliction, wouldn’t you say, Lady Arrathee?” taunted the undercaptain, his seawife smiling as he stroked Panella’s hand. Yes, I thought shakily. She’d known all along what was going to happen to me. She’d just been playacting before, supporting her ‘husband’, in everything he’d said.

“We’ve never seen scars and bites disappear in less than a full day,” Panella murmured. “It’s several tenders, usually, which must mean, darling Arrathee, that you used some witch’s craft on our poor officer here.”

“Oh, but boys can’t be witches,” rumbled Peveret in his serious, deep voice. “So she can’t be a witch. Now, if she’s a warlock ...”

“Please,” I managed to whisper. “I don’t know why it’s worked so well, the potion I made! I just used a recipe I’d learned. The ingredients you use on this ship must be changed by sea air or something. They must be stronger than those I used on Rob’s face in Terraire or on *Sword!*”

Peveret glanced at Panella and smiled. “I owe you a new ball dress,” he said.

“And pearl earrings and a necklace,” cooed Panella,

standing and swishing against her 'husband', wiggling into his lap and kissing his cheek. He responded with a passionate kissing of her lips while the rest of us waited. I contemplated what they were going to do to me, the least being lashes, with cuts worse than Rob had suffered. The worst was mutilation and hanging from the spars that still held Jerit and shipmates from *Sword*.

"Panella," Peveret finally went on with a smile at me, ignoring his counterpart's aghast expression, "correctly told me, sweet Lady Arrathee," why did he keep adding the title to my name? "the exact excuse you'd use for what you did for the man you love."

"It was nothing like that ..." began Rob angrily.

Peveret shushed him. "Please, Robady," said the undercaptain. "You're going to tell me Lady Arrathee is not a woman, aren't you? She couldn't possibly have done anything witchy upon you?"

"Arrat's not a she," blurted out Robady. "I keep telling you that!"

"But you, and Hirdy, no," he glanced at the seawife in his arms.

"Deedee," said Panella, shifting, her skirt splitting to reveal lovely, dark stockinged, womanly legs. "And then there's Mollee, Kadee, and Ellie, she really loves her pretty name, and Mazee, so cute as well. Isn't that name ..."

"Who've all told us what wonders you're always able to conjure up, Lady Arrathee," Peveret rumbled seriously at me. "Deny being a witch and we must suppose you a warlock. And we all know what to do with a warlock in our midst."

"Kill him," the other undercaptain said, pulling a

dagger from his belt. "Kill him before he kills all of us."  
"Now, now, gentle Layward," said Peveret. "Let's hear from another witness, shall we?"

Gennee was shivering even worse than me as she was ushered into the cabin to find herself being confronted by two undercaptains and a mother. She glanced unhappily at me and at Robady, tall, Baract, stern-faced and unmoving.

I couldn't deny every word Gennee said about me drugging the men who were supposed to have loved me. I couldn't, even if the stories were only half true.

"So, our cabbie," said Peveret with a smile at me, releasing Panella who sauntered, in womanly fashion, away from him, "has deceived every man she's been with. She hasn't trysted with them, though four crewmen think they've trysted with her, made glorious love to her and none have at all. She used merenthe, did she?" Peveret opened a register Panella brought to him from where it had lain on a side table. "But that's only a sleep potion. What made them think they'd lain with a cabbie?"

"She, Arrathee," drawled a shaking Gennee, her eyes so feminine. The makeup she'd worn earlier had not disappeared from her thick lashes. "She'd tell them what they'd done, when the men awoke. They'd say it back to her as if they'd done it like that to her." Thank goodness, she hadn't known Garrin had really fucked me, I thought to myself in shame. "It even worked when I told Darris what he'd done to her and she'd done to him. He told everyone every detail just as I'd told it to him when he, he was bespelled as the sleep potion wears off."

"What is this controlling potion you used?" Peveret asked me, looking into his register again. "How d'you

make men like Darris and Garrin believe they've made love to you all night long? Darris swore to Panella and me he'd had you, describing the way you wrapped your legs around him and bounced on his manhood, squealing like a sand griffin speared through her nether parts!"

"Garrin was more descriptive," Panella went on. I shuddered, waiting for her to tell them he'd really had me as a woman. But, to my shock and relief, she didn't. Panella did describe what the blueband had seen in the back room where Garrin had been going to have me again. She mentioned how lovely my legs were in the stockings I still wore and in the panties the bluebands had admired. I wanted to die in shame as I saw the look on Robady's face as he stared at me.

"Good job the bluebands saved Lady Arrathee," growled Peveret, his laughter like a clap of thunder. "Otherwise, they'd have revealed to everyone on this boat that we have a witch on board, one who can convince everyone around her she's nothing but a lowly cabin boy."

Gennee and Robady stared at me. They could have, should have, contradicted the undercaptain. I should have. But I was frightened out of my wits, waiting for some order he was going to give to have me exposed, tortured and executed horribly in front of the captain and crew. There was nothing I could do to stop him.

For an hour, with a tongue-tied Gennee, a doubting Panella and a persuasive Peveret, I was prepared as a pretty girl. "No-one will hang a daughter," were Peveret's words, as I learned I'd be in dresses and girlie clothing for however long I had yet to live, if I lived, on this infernal great ship.