***Black Water* by Barbara Henderson**

**Scene 1: By the shore**

*Finlay makes his way down the rocks to the shore, lights his lantern and looks out to sea. On the water, a boat nears the shore.*

**Ruffian1**: Gie’s that light again, Finlay. She’s low in the black water tonight. *Finlay waves his lantern*.

**Ruffian2**: Aye. Tha’s better!

*Ruffians throw Finlay a rope and start handing over barrels and boxes labelled rum, tea, sugar etc.*

*Henry Lewars and his father rise from their hiding place*.

**Father**: There! They’re bringing their wares to shore! (He raises his gun).

**Henry:** No, Father! Don’t shoot! *A shot rings into the sky. The smugglers panic, Finlay runs away, Father and Henry scramble down to the shore*.

**Father:** You are surrounded. Raise your hands!

**Ruffians** (sheepishly): Surrounded by you and … this boy?

**Father:** That’s what it looks like. Henry, tie them up! I, John Lewars, Exciseman, arrest you for smuggling goods to shore illegally!

**Henry:** Yes, sir. (ties them up)

**Father** (rubs eyes) and high time we got some sleep. Let’s head back. (exit, dragging ruffians with them)

**Scene 2:** **At home**

*Siblings toddle and play. Mother sits by candle and does needlework*

**Father:** Wet through and through. What a night! I’m so hungry!

**Henry:** Me too.

**Mother:** Here is bread and cheese John. And there is a note from Crawford, too.

**Father:** (begins to read) My colleague Crawford? … A large smuggling ship was sailing into the Solway Firth under cover of darkness, but lies stranded at low tide…

**Mother:** (about to hand bread and cheese to Henry) What does this mean?

**Father:** Henry: Fetch fresh horses at once! We need to make haste and join Crawford, otherwise the smugglers will get away!

**Henry:** (looks longingly at bread) Yes sir.

**Father** (pushes him out) At once!

**Henry** (downstage, addressing audience) I’ll fetch horses, I certainly shall. But not before paying a visit to Old Finlay. He may know things.

**Scene 3: Finlay’s hut**

**Henry**: Open up, Finlay! Finlay, it’s Henry Lewars. Open the door!

**Mary** (opens door a chink): Please go away. Granda’s nae well.

**Henry**: Let me through. I come on the order of Riding Officer Crawford. (He pushes past her)

**Finlay**: M-Master Henry, whit’s wrang? Whit’s happened?

**Henry**: Finlay, there is word of a schooner in the Firth. Not just a boat – *a schooner,* a big ship! Aren’t you surprised? (Finlay looks away) You knew? You knew! You guided us to that small boat and all the while a schooner was sailing in?

**Finlay**: Don’t tell your father, please…

**Mary**: I said, dinnae distress him!

**Henry**: This needs to be the end of your double-dealing, Finlay! You’ll tell me where this ship is headed and what it’s carrying.

**Finlay**: Oh, dinnae gae after ‘em; I know ye’ll come off worse!

**Henry**: Tell me all you know, and I won’t let on to my father that you were involved. And secrecy, from both of you! *Mary huffs and turns away, hands on hips.*

**Scene 4: By the shore**

*Henry and his father arrive. Crawford and soldiers are waiting.*

**Crawford**: Lewars! Finally. And you’ve brought your son?

**Henry**: I am an apprentice in the Excise, sir. I want to help catch smugglers, like my father.

**Crawford**: Good lad!

**Father**: We came as fast as we could. They point out to sea. Projection of ship in the distance.

**Crawford**: It’s an armed vessel. We’ll need reinforcements. I’ve sent for more soldiers, and for Mr Burns, the new Exciseman. Have you met him yet?

**Father**: The poet? Yes. Seems a useful sort of man.

**Quartermaster**: If he doesn’t have his head in a book (snorts)

**Crawford**: Poet or no poet, he’s a man of the Excise now. We need to stay out of sight. That way, the smugglers may land the ship and we can get them. We’ll stay the night at the inn in Gretna.

**Scene 5: The inn**

*Henry and his father get into their beds.*

**Henry**: No fire in the grate. You’d almost think the innkeeper didn’t want us to stay here. (Pause) The poet seemed nice, though, Father. A cheerful sort, don’t you think? He sang that song well, didn’t he? I think I prefer words and quill and ink to numbers, don’t you?

**Father**: Go to sleep, Henry. *They sleep. Father snores, Henry tosses and turns until he hears whispering. He peeks out of the window. Mary is talking to the innkeeper.*

**Mary**: Aye, I’m sure. Ma Granda’ says it’s the whole of the Dumfries Excise, and reinforcements. Light a signal lantern and then swing it roond three times. That’s the signal. It’ll tell the free-traders tae make fer open seas again.’ *Mary and the innkeeper disappear.*

**Henry:** She is warning them! She rode all night to warn the smugglers.

**Father**: Henry, it’s already daylight! Go and wake Burns and see to the horses! Make haste!

**Henry**: But Sir, I’ve just heard…

**Father**: GO! NOW! (Henry exits)

**Scene 6: Quicksand**

**Crawford**: The ship has drifted, and the sands here are dangerous.

**Burns:** What do we do?

**Father**: I’ll ride down anyway. How hard can it be, and we need to make a move.

*All crowd and look away from audience as if watching, turning round to speak. Sfx hoofbeats*.

**Soldier** **1**: He is riding out.

**Soldier** **2**: His horse is sinking. *Sharp intake of breath*

**Soldier** **3**: He is struggling (sfx whinnying)

**Soldier** **4**: His horse is terrified!

**Henry**: I’ll help! (runs off)

**Soldier** **5**: the boy is calming the horse. *Sigh of relief*

**Soldier** **6**: They are making their way back.

**Quartermaster**: Riding out won’t work. We just need to take whatever boats are nearby. (Sfx hammering). Go and get those boats over there! (Soldiers run off and then return)

**Soldier 7**: All the villagers have put holes into their own boats!

**All:** What?

**Burns:** They help the smugglers instead of us. They wish the Deil Awa’ with the Exciseman. Oh, that’s catchy! (writes the phrase into his notebook).

*Sfx cannon. All jump, slow motion*.

**Crawford:** The ship is shooting at us. If we wait much longer, the ship will be afloat and away. Then there remains only one way, gentlemen. Forward on foot, before the tide is too high. Pistols over our heads. (soldiers hang back, fearful)

**Henry**: I’m ready.

**Crawford**: Dragoons, are you so feared of the smugglers that this little lad is willing, and you are not? Lewars, you can take the aft, Quartermaster, and you Burns, as discussed, go for the broadside. Reserve your fire till within eight yards of the vessel, then fire a volley and board her with pistol and sword.

**Scene 7: The Schooner**

*Movement sequence to music: smugglers load cannon and shoot.*

**Smuggler1**: We can’t hit them!

**Smuggler2**: It’s the wrong angle!

**Smuggler3**: Try again (another shot)!

**Smuggler4**: Fire muskets at them! (sfx musket fire, movement)

**Smuggler5**: They’ve split into three and are coming from different directions!

**Smuggler6**: It’s no good. If we throw everything overboard and run, we might make it to England.

**Smuggler1**: Are you mad? That water is cold! It’s February!

**Smuggler2**: Those Excisemen are in the water! If they can do it, so can we!

**Smuggler1**: (scratches head) Oh. Yeah.

*Movement sequence as music up, throwing barrels and containers and jumping off/exit smugglers.*

*Excisemen reach the ship and board, pistol and sword in hand.*

**Crawford**: They’re gone!

**Quartermaster**: Looks like they are wading to the English shore. (pushes Crawford’s gun down) They are too far gone, sir.

**Burns**: I like the look of those cannons! Impressive.

**Father**: Henry, make an inventory of what’s left. The whole ship will be sold at auction.

*All the men make themselves busy, tidying, notetaking etc. Miming activity. Burns walks slowly over to Henry.*

**Burns**: You love words, don’t you?

**Henry**: I do, sir.

**Burns**: This is for you. I found it in the captain’s cabin. This ship is called *The Rosamund*, apparently.

**Henry**: A notebook? For me?

**Burns**: Yes. This is the life we have been given, and we must make the best of it. Anyone who loves quill and ink deserves something to use them on. That goes for men and boys. *Burns nods and taps Henry on the shoulder. All but Henry freeze.*

*Henry walks downstage to address the audience, holding notebook and candle.*

**Henry**: That night, by the in the soft light of the tallow candle, I composed my first verse. (*He writes, sfx sea, looks up again*) Down by the coast, black water swirls and hides its secrets.

But for now, I care not.

**Characters**

**23 speaking parts with potential for more:**

* Two **ruffians**, smugglers
* **Old Finlay**, an informer
* **Mary**, his granddaughter
* **Henry Lewars**, apprentice Exciseman
* **John Lewars**, his father, an Exciseman
* **Walter Crawford**, Riding Officer and Exciseman
* **Robert Burns**, poet and Exciseman
* **Quartermaster Manly**, leader of the Dragoons (soldiers)
* **7 soldiers**
* **6 smugglers** on the ship
* **Mother**
* **Siblings**