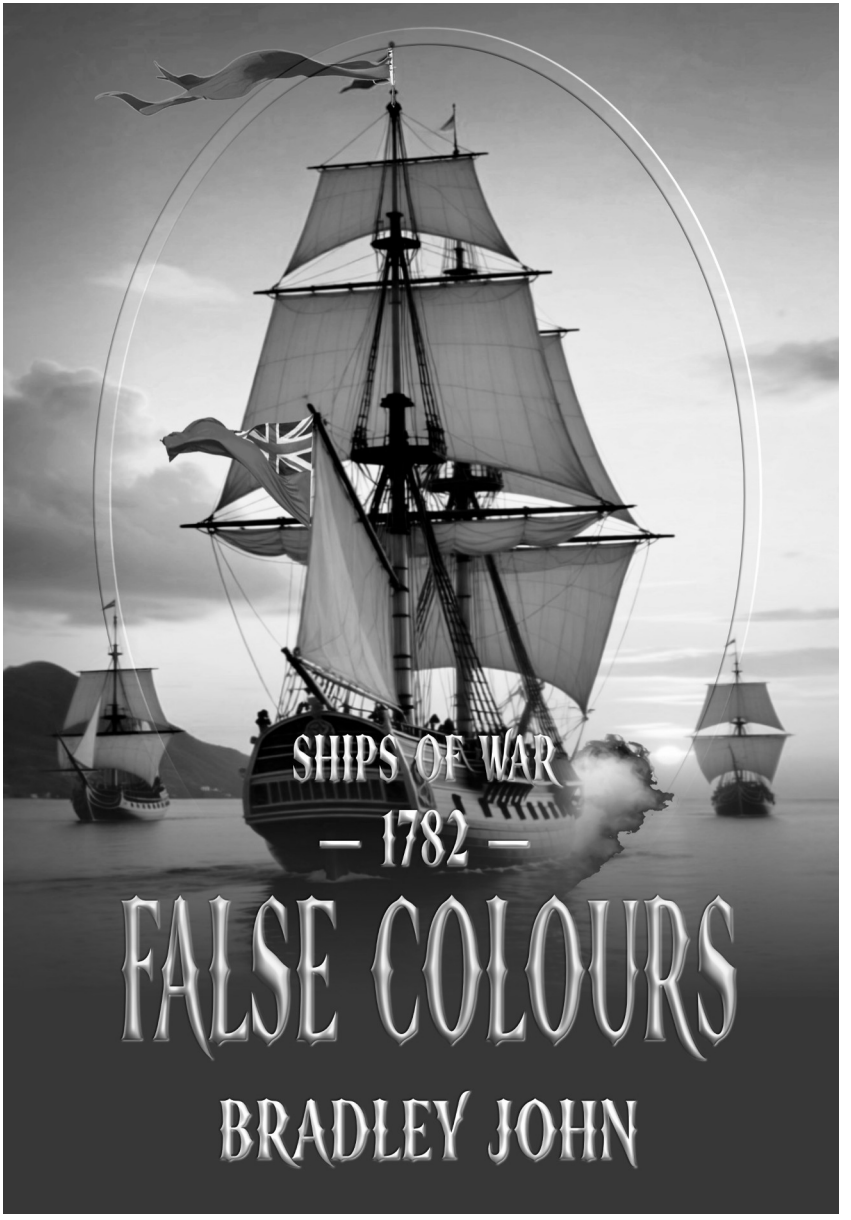
SHIPS OF WAR
— 1782 —
FALSE COLOURS
BRADLEY JOHN

First Edition

Ships of War—1782—False Colours

By

Bradley John*

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the Ships of War series

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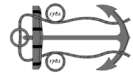
1782 — The American Revolutionary War rages in the Caribbean. With designs upon the island of Jamaica, the French plan their invasion. England's lucrative trade is at risk, her lifeblood, the entire war hanging in the balance…

Admiral de Grasse readies the French fleet upon Martinique, soon to depart with over sixty ships and forty thousand troops. To the south the British fleet hovers, Admiral Rodney eagerly waiting upon news from his lookout squadrons.

His Britannic Majesty's Ship Hinchinbrook, twenty-eight gun, is hurriedly recalled from the repair docks to join the scouting efforts. Their duty to spy the French fleet is clear, to be prosecuted at all costs. Headed about Martinique, the seas of the Windward Islands swarm with enemy shipping, shipping which is hunting day and night. Tensions are high.

A young up-and-coming officer, Midshipman Hayden Reginald Cooper, eagerly awaits news of his examination for lieutenant. The spoils of promotion, prizes and glory await, all amidst the threat of hurricane, destruction and worst of all, abject failure. Should the French slip away unnoticed, Jamaica would be lost, the sugar trade would be lost, the Leeward Islands would be lost and the war would be lost. Hinchinbrook may only be one ship and yet upon her decks the fate of the entire West Indies is poised. Much is at stake and never have so many relied upon those so few…

***"False Colours"** marks the beginning of Hayden Reginald Cooper's journey and his adventures in the Royal Navy…*



This book is dedicated to
Arthur John
(my dear father)

"The book lingers long after its final page,
like the aftertaste of salt on the lips
or the memory of a lantern's glow in the dark belly of a ship.

A story to be read. A story to be felt.
A story that returns, again and again,
like the sea itself—unyielding, haunting, and magnificently alive."

2025 HFC Annual Book Awards

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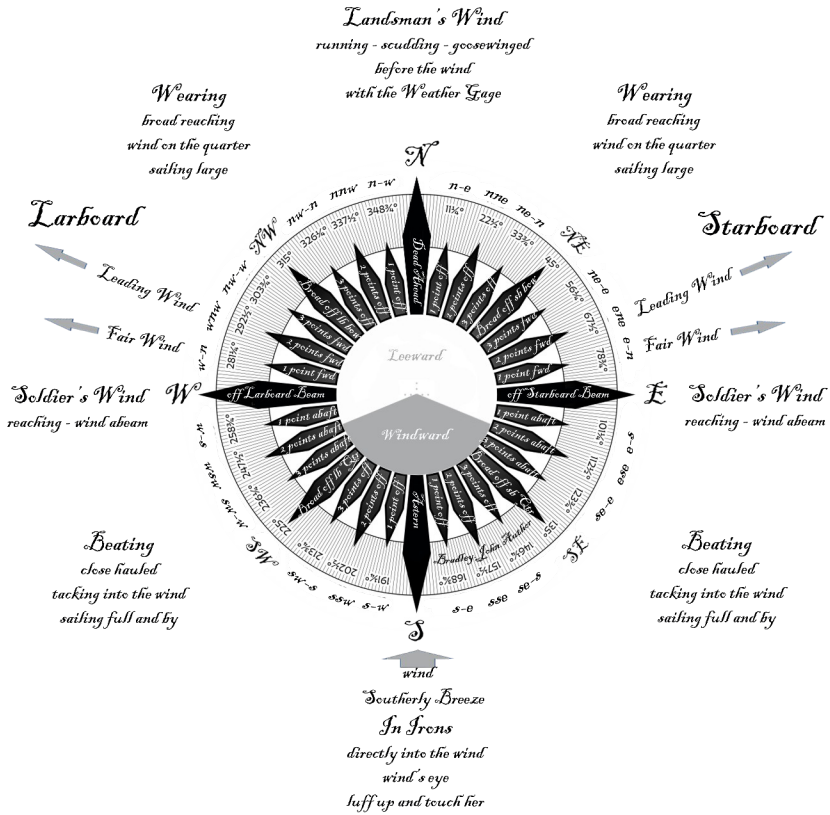
Terms

God forbid you should ever be lost at sea. Following are some basic seafaring terms from the era, may they steer you well through stormy nights. For those interested in navigating the terms of the era in detail, a Glossary has been included after the Epilogue.

***Barque:** a barky, barc, or bark, a class of sailing vessel with three or more masts with the mainmasts rigged square. Hinchinbrook is in the class of a frigate, but the jacks refer to her as the "barque".*
***Bulwark:** the sides of a ship extended above the decks, usually a solid barrier preventing sailors from falling overboard. The "Gunwale" or "Gunnel" is the top edge of the hull where it meets the deck, edging which reinforces the hull.*
***Gage (weather):** a ship to windward (or upwind) of another is said to have the weather gage, meaning she has the wind in assistance to be able to approach.*
***Jack:** is a sailor, but also refers to the union flag which is hoisted in a number of positions upon Hinchinbrook, the main being at the stern.*
***Larboard:** left side of a ship, upon looking forward towards the head. Also known as port. The opposite side is starboard. Also, the name of the ship's cat.*
***Leeward:** the side downwind or away from the wind. Opposite is windward. For example, the wind blows from windward to leeward.*
***Lieutenant:** the British Royal Navy traditionally pronounced the word as "luhtenant," whilst the British Army pronounced it as "leftenant" and the American pronunciation is "lootenant".*
***Masthead:** the highest part of a ship's mast. However, a ship's mast was often made from a number of smaller masts or spars. As such, "Masthead" also refers to the top of each connecting spar. Platforms ("tops") were built at the lower mastheads, allowing a base for lookouts, sharpshooters and workers. Not to be confused with a lookout barrel higher up known as a "crow's nest" (officially introduced in 1807).*
***Sheets:** are ropes, not sails.*
***Tops:** are platforms built at the upper end of a mast, bearing in mind that the entire length a ship's mast was made from a number of smaller masts, or spars. Hence the tops were often situated midway to the entire length of a mast. The tops were used as a base to allow work to be performed and also for lookouts to stand watch as well as fight the ship. These platforms were also referred to as the "masthead".*
***Windward:** towards the direction from which the wind blows. Opposite is leeward. For example, the wind blows from windward to leeward.*

A Landsman's Quick Reference (though already well explained in the narrative): *to the left is Larboard (Port), to the right is Starboard, to the rear (Abaft) is the Stern, to the front (Afore) is the Bow, Head or Stem. Below the Main Deck (in order of descent): Upper Gun Deck, Lower Gun Deck, Orlop and Hold. The Main Deck or Upper Deck is split into: the Forecastle (pronounced "fohk-sil") (elevated at the front), the Weather Deck (amidships or beam) and the Quarterdeck (elevated at the rear). There is also a small deck directly under the Quarterdeck, the Captain's Cabin. There are three masts from Stem to Stern (front to back): the Foremast, the Mainmast and the Mizzenmast. Upon each mast, eighty feet high (Hinchinbrook) there is a small flat platform, or Masthead, for the lookout, also known as the Top.*

Points of Sail — Compass Rose



Prologue

American Revolutionary War...

It is 1782, the month of March. The Kingdom of Great Britain has long been at war. The Thirteen Colonies of British North America are in revolt, having since declared their independence some six years past. No longer are they willing to suffer unfair taxes and the abrogation of their rights. No longer are they willing to be bludgeoned by a lack of representation, governed from afar. After the forced removal of their arms, they established the Continental Congress. Patriot militias were formalised into the Continental Army, though they had no real navy of which to speak.

The French, still licking their wounds from the Seven Years' War, ally with the Thirteen Colonies, militarily and commercially. The alliance brings with it the mighty French navy, over thirty line of battle ships commanded by Admiral François Joseph Paul, Comte de Grasse. Eventually the Spaniards and the Dutch enter the fray, the smell of British blood fresh in the water.

Admiral Sir George Brydges Rodney, British Commander-in-Chief of the Leeward Islands Station, is charged with keeping in check the French fleet. At all costs must he protect the sugar trade. Wars may be fought with the will of men, but more often are they decided by the weight of gold hoarding the coffers. This distant theatre of war was no different. For long had it proven problematic, funding on all sides waning.

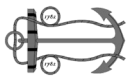
The French and Spanish were determined to take Jamaica. They knew the island was more valuable to the British economy than all thirteen British colonies combined. His Britannic Majesty King George III declared he would protect the Caribbean Islands even at the risk of Britain herself. Sugar tallied more than one-fifth of all imports and stood five times more profitable than tobacco. Should Jamaica fall, so too would the British economy. It would sound the death knell, culminating in the British expulsion from the West Indies. With the siege of Yorktown and the disastrous surrender of General Cornwallis only one year past, much now weighed upon Admiral Rodney.

The invasion of Jamaica was a plan concocted of Admiral de Grasse's cunning, a sharp mind. It was simple, but presently lacked the necessary ground troops. For long had he patiently waited, the reinforcement of some ten thousand men dispatched from Brest, should they arrive at all. It was a perilous voyage, only five frigates in escort. Upon their landfall would he set

out from Fort Royal Bay, Martinique, with thirty-six ships of the line and a host of over one hundred cargo vessels, including two fifty gun frigates. Standing in to Cap-Français, Saint Domingue, they would find in their Spanish ally a considerable force of over twenty-four thousand troops and thirteen line of battle ships. Jamaica would be attacked with over sixty ships and some forty thousand troops. Success was all but assured, the only failing the long vulnerable voyage to the Jamaican shores.

At Gros Islet Bay, on the northern tip of Saint Lucia, Admiral Rodney's armada remained poised. Upon his flagship, Formidable, he waited for news of the French fleet and its movements. He had management of thirty-six line of battle ships, though few troops. Outmatched, he split his fleet into three able squadrons under Admiral Hood, Admiral Drake and himself. Their only chance to stop de Grasse would be at sea.

The British knew the French fleet were undertaking repairs and were soon readying to depart. Timing was crucial. Admiral Rodney had only to wait for the word, should it come at all. His scouts scoured the surrounding seas, sniffing for the slightest hint of movement. Upon these frigates the future of Britain weighed, a monumental task entrusted to so very few. One of these frigates was His Majesty's Ship, Hinchinbrook, recently salvaged from the repair dock. Hurriedly she took to sea, a new captain and a fresh crew, eager to do her duty…



"Si vis pacem, para bellum"
If you wish for peace, prepare for war…

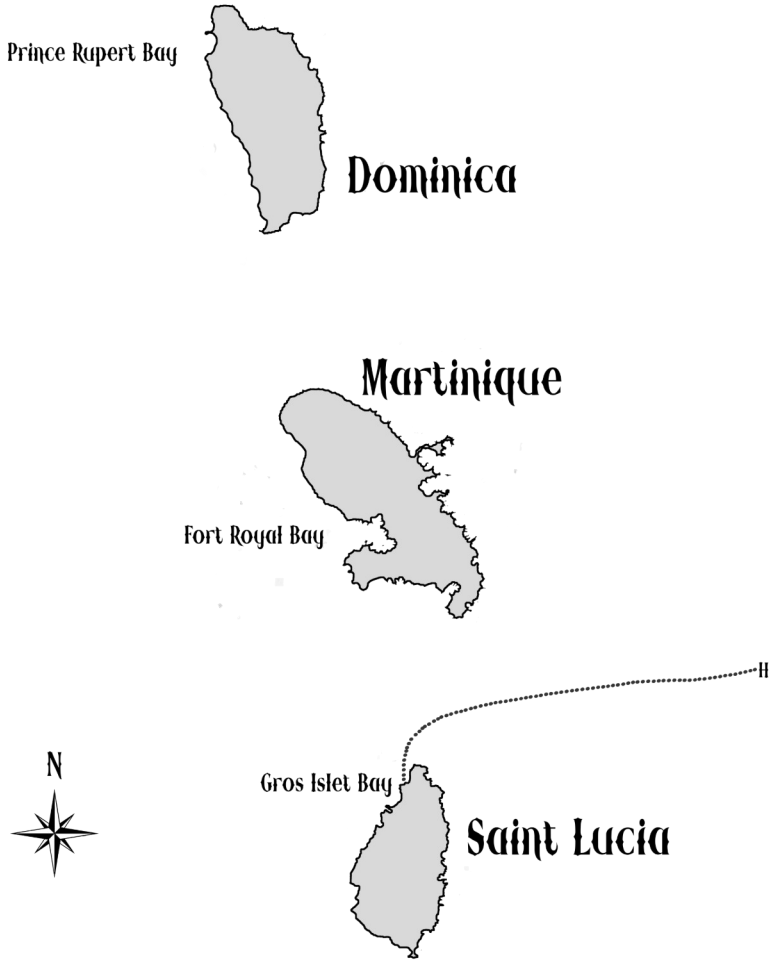
Royal Navy

Ode to Hiro

Even a three-legged hound can still hop…

Hiro

Windward Islands



Captain's Log — 19 Mar 1782

March 19, 1782, Tuesday: *departed Gros Islet Bay, presently off Saint Lucia. Our orders received this day from our commander-in-chief, Admiral Rodney, are precise and clear. We are to scout the surrounding islands and, where necessary, protect our trade. In absolute obedience we ready ourselves to spy the far reaches past Saint Lucia and, by way, continue on to the far reaches of Martinique where our enemies are thought to be.*

My commission received this day, Hinchinbrook, a sixth-rate man-o'-war, sails with one hundred and ninety souls and twenty-eight gun. In prudence have I taken the liberty to review past logs. In particular, I note the regrettable incident recently off Jamaica under the flag of her previous commander. Though only a hermit deranged of mind could have failed not to know of it. It beggars belief that she would suddenly and most strangely take on water and in furtherance to that indignation, eventually run aground. It is early in our run to sea, but thus far the timbers show no ill signs. Throughout the harbour and into the offing has she performed well enough, though a little sluggish. So it seems, for now, her hurried restoration has proven somewhat adequate. Time will tell.

In preparing for our intended cruise, which will no doubt accompany the usual inherent perils hazarding war, I have taken measures to prepare our new crew. Upon finding the openness of sea, our cannon prowess was put to the test, a dismal display so unfortunate that words could hardly beg to properly express my utter dismay. I have ordered our gunner to exert more rigor and to continue the exercises, bleed if they must, until reloading and accuracy improves.

After fully reviewing the logs of past captains, it has become apparent the history of our ship is somewhat unfortunate, almost plagued, to be frank. Built in seventy-eight, she affords a modern draught, perhaps the only good news on offer. At least she is a not some old barque. However, I take exception that she was, in point of fact, built in France. Without evidence to the contrary, it appears she is yet to distinguish herself in service, in either navy. Notably within only months of her launch was she taken a prize and bought into our service. The number of commanders thereafter, all in such a short period, should make one wonder. Of significance, in eighty, under the command of one Captain Nelson was she assigned to assist the expeditionary force of General Dalling. Dalling is of course well known, but I have not had the

pleasure nor even heard of Nelson. Yet that is not uncommon considering this was his first post-command, a young commander at that. Their mission, even though it lay seventy miles inland, was to attack the fort of San Juan utilising the tributary. And even though the fort was taken, the expeditionary force was decimated. Hinchinbrook suffered the loss of one hundred and forty of her crew, barely able to sail home. She also lost her captain, falling ill, his command thereafter relinquished. Succeeding captains were quickly replaced or they too fell ill, until the appointment of her last commander. And it was he who notoriously ran her aground off Jamaica. It is a foreboding chain of events, a worrying unfortunate history, one which can hardly be believed, yet there it is inked within the logs. I am heartened of course to put an end to such devilishness and wholly distinguish myself and the ship. With battle looming I am quietly confident fortune is in our favour.

Of immediate concern is the purported number of French and Spanish line of battle ships swarming these seas. With only twenty-eight gun, our future success and survival must rely heavily upon the swiftness of our sail. Hinchinbrook is purported to be a swift ship, not a runner by any means, but able enough. Upon finding a landsman's wind late afternoon I ordered all sail to let fly. With our lives on the line, eager was I to assess the craftsmanship buried within our hull. Regrettably, she was only able to manage eight miserable knots. God preserve us should we be required to sail into the wind. With French first-rates making twelve knots and frigates making fourteen, far from bloody-well impressed were the kindest words immediately springing to mind. We cannot point our blame at the yard bracing either, as the wind was directly abaft the ship, the breeze chasing directly into the canvas. And the canvas was new, even recently waxed. Of concern, she was noticeably sluggish in her draught, sitting somewhat deep. Her head was also diving unusually, abnormal in depth. But in overall fairness, she was not so well-handled, too many landsmen, the trimming and the tautness of her canvas questionable. We will see what the morrow might bring.

Your obedient servant
Captain Francis Eugene Ryan
Commissioned Hinchinbrook this 19th day in March, 1782

Command Officers:
First Lieutenant Joseph William Adams
Second Lieutenant Harvey Roderick Davidson
Midshipman William Francis FitzRyan (acting third lieutenant)
Midshipman Hayden Reginald Cooper (acting fourth lieutenant)
Midshipman Charles Prescot Spencer
Midshipman Harold John Jenkins

Chapter 1
—
Windward Islands—1782

A man-o'-war thundering upon the open sea was nothing short of a wondrous sight, a magnificent creature, a wild romping beast. Upon her wings the might of untold force piled, great gusts howling, the oaks within her back aching, groaning. In full flight she gracefully spread, the yards stretched wide, the thumping rumple of canvas belching. Within every pitch she perched high upon the crests, onward and ever forth, straining within the tempest brewing. Scything the ocean blue oh how her head charged, ducking and weaving, up and down, never relenting, ever cutting and shaping her way. Bounding, lunging, haplessly she rode the cavity of endless rollers free and wild, only to suddenly surge forth, no less a wild stallion springing wilfully to life. Swooning within her wake the displacement of her labour wearily trailed, swirling froth tangled beyond an eddying wash, muddied waters curdling in collaboration. Amidst the wild charge the jacks atop clung to dear life, holding tight, their keen eyes fixed, the windstorm of the gale drawing long their dangling locks. Writhing within their glee the crisp scent of a freshening sea surrounded them, stiffening, their every labour enveloped, their hearts stirred. With teeth bared, grinning as wild monkeys awaiting the feast they applied their trade, the muffled crash of breakers echoing deep within their lobes. On deck, the tumultuous sting of salted spray ever assailed, a deluge never-ending, leaping skyward, hovering, plummeting, searing the boards. Loosed no less as cannon from the deep, violently spewing, the suds of wild water bespattered foul upon the planking, so thunderous all acuity within hopelessly drowned.

If only His Britannic Majesty's Ship Hinchinbrook was sailing like that, oh it would have been a happy ship. It also would have been a warring ship, a hunter, the American Revolutionary War raging about the Windward Islands in the early months of 1782. To a jack, a professional sailor, nothing compared to the joy of the sea, the grace, the majesty, the freedom, the lustful gallop of the hull bucking underfoot. By this their lives were measured, often shaped within bitter rivalries, man to man, ship to ship. They respected a well-handled vessel, a fast barque, one that could turn on her heel. Oh how they

yearned to find that elusive beast and in turn would they forever love her. And they would love her captain too, pride weathering their souls upon being shown a thing or two about sailing or a juicy prize delivered.

Presently upon Hinchinbrook there was no such pride and definitely no such love. The jacks were somewhat grumpy, many already sulking. Hardly was the ship making way, let alone sailing majestically. And a slow ship was a ship bereft of prizes, an eternally hopeless ship. With the wind at her back she could only manage to dribble along, so horridly that even the landsmen hardly needed to hold fast. The canvas was full, billowing, the sheets curling. The winds were fair, the seas calm and the tides even assisting. Yet it seemed the seagulls floating nearby were even outpacing them. Her nose was oddly quiet, foul of the expectant thumps or bumps occasioned from the haphazard crashing of the sea. The usual spray of salt barely flirted the lengths of the bow, let alone the weather deck, the quarterdeck drier than a masthead on a sun-bleached becalmed day.

'Good god...' whispered the Captain, lamenting to himself, his gaze passing subtly over the extremities of his ship.

Hinchinbrook was a three-masted, full-rigged, sixth-rate frigate of the Royal Navy, a ship of war with twenty-eight gun. Hoisting square sails, each mast was cleverly stepped or divided into three distinct sections. Each segment could be furled and stowed should the wind prove too much. Naturally there were other sails fore and aft, smaller and inventive, positioned to corral the wind and steer lost gusts into the larger canvas. Their presence was especially felt when sailing or beating into the wind, tacking side to side.

There were a grand number of decks, three stacked below, plus the *"hold"* or stowage area, a large compartment at the lowest part of the hull. Even the *"main deck"*, exposed to sun and weather, was split in three, a raised *"quarterdeck"* at the stern, a slightly raised *"forecastle"* at the bow and the *"weather deck"* in between. The quarterdeck, so named because it often formed one-quarter the length of the ship, was situated behind the mainmast. Traditionally this raised area was the sacred privy for officers, where a captain commanded. It was also where the ship's colours were flown, the area often used for ceremonial or receptive gatherings.

Directly below the main deck sat the *"gun deck"*, housing the bulk of Hinchinbrook's cannon, all long-nosed nine pounders, twelve per side. This was the uppermost lower deck, a continuous unimpeded space with the least amount of headroom. It was from here the ship would be fought. Gunports were fashioned on the sides, small openings allowing the muzzle of each cannon to be *"run out"* and fired. Even though this deck was above the waterline, each gunport housed a hinged lid which could be quickly closed, shut tight, two chains apiece set to haul the weight.

The only other cannon upon Hinchinbrook were situated upon the quarterdeck, four smaller six pounders nestled for tactical convenience. Obviously each cannon was heavier than nine or six pounds, considerably in fact, *"pounder"* referring only to the weight of its shot. In fact, each cannon was so heavy, an overloaded ship was a doomed ship. To fire all cannon simultaneously would test the timbers, often prone to cracking and splitting. It was a recipe for disaster to house too many cannon, or imbalance the ship with poor positioning, especially mixed with the stress of recoil. It was prudent to house the cannon upon the lowest deck possible, lowering the centre of gravity. However, often in battle the ship would careen, caught by strong breezes, the tilt causing the cannon to submerge under the waterline. Many a ship had suffered to capsize, usually with few survivors. Every captain knew the subtle balance as to the number of gun, where to position them, their prudence often proving the difference between life and death.

Hinchinbrook's cannon could throw a total of one hundred and twenty pounds from one side of the ship. In comparison to larger ships, some even boasting a broadside of over a thousand pounds, it was actually quite diminutive. The ship had its purpose nonetheless. She was not a line of battle ship which acted more or less as a floating castle, hammering its weight, encounters won by attrition. No, she was a hunter, preying on ships of similar or smaller size. As far as a sixth-rate was concerned, she was one of the larger, though her width from beam to beam spanned only thirty-three feet, stem to stern barely just over one hundred feet.

To sail the ocean free and clear was one thing, but to fight her was an entirely different matter. To prosecute any ship of war, a large number of sailors were required, not just to tend sheets and canvas, but to man each and every cannon. Four to five men would see a gun fired and reloaded in three to five minutes. This feat in itself was a matter of life and death, ship actions mostly fought with weight rather than accuracy. A typical ship of war could have anywhere from one hundred to one thousand souls depending on her size and rating, such were her needs. Yet Hinchinbrook was not some behemoth, only a small frigate.

A small frigate indeed, though directly beneath the gun deck sat the *"berth deck"*, serving as the living and sleeping quarters for the crew. It was above the waterline, barely, poorly lit and hardly ventilated. And even though she only lodged one hundred and ninety souls, it was always tight living.

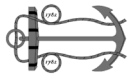
'For the love of Mary…' he swore, again under his breath.

It was a pleasant romantic thought, a thundering frigate cutting her way, sniffing for prey, glory and fortune in the offing. Unfortunately for Hinchinbrook, it seemed the only prey would be them. And the only apparent thundering was a faraway storm brewing over the horizon. Naturally there

was belching and aching and moaning, but not from the ship's timbers or canvas. As the seas roughened and the winds shifted, in course had Hinchinbrook slowed considerably. She barely had enough momentum to plunge forward, if you could even call it that. Rather than riding upon the crests, the crests were now riding upon her. Often was she near submerged as the rollers loomed, her head disappearing, uncommonly deep. With each diving drop she strained to resurface, the situation worsening, so much the jacks had now fled the bow in fear. It was a detestable state of affairs, most despicable, one which had not entirely escaped the attention of her newest commander.

Captain Francis Eugene Ryan stood as stone upon the quarterdeck, grim, his hands fixed behind his back. He held to his half of the sacred deck, a forbidden zone, nary a soul daring to cross the imaginary line separating a captain from his officers. Though an aged portly figure, his uniform was immaculate, a magnificent blue frock with white facings, unbuttoned, overlaying a cream silken shirt and a cream waistcoat. His hat also seemed somewhat an extravagance, not a hole in sight. It was a *"cocked"* hat, a black triangular three-cornered tricorne made from beaver pelt, the sides and rear turned up and pinned together. Supporting a rather broad brim, he wore it with the point facing forward. And an unscathed hat was always telling, almost as if the officer had never seen battle.

Ryan was still and rigid, aptly riding the sway. It was no mean feat, of course, barely a slow subtle pitch underfoot. He had not moved now for some considerable time, an act which had the nearby officers nervously glancing sideways. With a heavy sigh, glum and despondent, his gaze finally fell upon the offing, the faraway horizon. There his weathered eyes remained, fixed, or perhaps he was in prayer, no one entirely sure. The officers on watch waited for orders, for surely the ship was in dire need. Yet they were orders which would never come. Whisperings had begun, even the senior jacks nervously glancing back and forth.



Chapter II

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A Lame Duck

Captain Ryan's promotion was fresh, his first command. A commission to command, any vessel in fact, was the pinnacle of one's career. It was the promotion of all promotions, a happy occasion, usually. To be plucked from the fleet ranks and thrust into command was a fortune perhaps only rivalling the discovery of a leprechaun dozing upon his gold. He should have been exuberant, his maiden voyage, especially for someone of such advanced years. Such a deed, such a promotion, inherently proved an improbable feat, lest one had the *"interest"* of a person of influence, usually a lord, an admiral, or perhaps a royal. To the common man, the regular sailor, they would have more luck finding a unicorn napping and the chances of that were none, or so the officers quipped.

It was no secret Ryan had been continually passed over for promotion, all hope perhaps abandoned long ago. From time to time he had, of course, been charged with commanding a ship, ferrying them here and there, but never was it a permanent post. Permanent commands were reserved for younger officers, distinguished officers, or officers who had the necessary *"interest"*. Ryan was definitely none of those. Had Hinchinbrook not run aground off Jamaica he would still be serving as a failing *"career"* lieutenant, lost in the bowels of the scouting fleet under Captain George Anson Byron. All in all, he was still trying to fathom how he had been selected, upon a frigate to boot. Yet now he had been *"made"*, a post-captain. It would not matter if his command was to master a rowing boat. He would want for nothing for the rest of his life. Even after the war he would live comfortably on guaranteed pay. Should he take a prize, so would he enjoy a lion's share. Fame, wealth and glory awaited. His voyage in seniority to admiral was assured, just a matter of time. Indeed, it boggled the mind.

Yet glum and despondent Ryan remained, naturally the predicament of suddenly drowning at any moment hovering darkly. Hinchinbrook's timbers were holding, no reports of leakages. But for the love of god, barely was she able to make way. Moreover was she bobbing around worse than a discharged cork. Charged with scouting the French fleet, a fleet brimming with first-rates and fast frigates, he was of the unhappy opinion his mission was doomed. And if his mission was doomed, then he and every man jack were also

doomed. It was a pragmatic appraisal, one any old salt would conclude. Naturally the whole commission made little sense. What kind of scouting ship can only barely make way? Indeed, the whole absurdity reeked of failure, a complete and utter loss from the very outset. Perhaps in time it might possibly be remedied, but should a French squadron suddenly show themselves, all would be lost. He was thinking it need not even be a squadron, just a fast sloop-o'-war more than enough to clip their wings.

'Captain Ryan, sir?' begged a nearby voice.

Ryan turned to find his first officer standing humbly before him, Lieutenant Joseph William Adams, an experienced officer in his late twenties. At a glance Adams appeared to be an apt seaman, dashing, strong, but not overly burly. He had served under Admiral Rodney and had transferred directly from Flag of the Fleet, Formidable. As a lieutenant, his frock was somewhat plain, lacking embroidery. His tricorne hat had suffered over time as had most of his uniform. He was likely quite poor, obviously unable to afford certain luxuries. Like all officers aboard, Adams had received a promotion, to a lesser ship but a step in seniority nonetheless. These were the necessary stepping stones of the Royal Navy, work hard, do your duty and distinguish yourself.

Ninety-eight gun Formidable was a ship for which to yearn, a feeding ground for promotion. Adams had been chomping at the bit upon being assigned to such a glorious ship, biding his time. Ultimately his goal was to serve as a first lieutenant, on any ship. Jubilantly had he rejoiced in the receipt of such happy news. Upon Hinchinbrook there was a real chance to finally elevate in status, advancement a matter of standard course for any competent first lieutenant. Indeed, the post of master and commander stood only one sweet successful action away. Needless to say, he was cognisant of the ship's present failings. In course, he was naturally part of the remedy. Self-preservation may have been a strong motivator, but for him it was the juicy thought of his own command. The ship would need to fly and there was not a man aboard more determined.

'What now, Mister Adams!' blurted Ryan, hardly masking his obvious disdain for their present difficulties. He looked up and down, more than once, his bottom lip hinged, perhaps not sure what to think of his first lieutenant. Perhaps this was just his way, an old salt stuck in his methods. In the Royal Navy it was natural to be wary of aging lieutenants. It was a good guess Adams too had been passed over for command, especially considering his obvious maturity into manhood. Sometimes it was for good reason, yet more often was it just for lack of *"interest"*.

'Sir, good morning,' he formally greeted, setting aside the initial hostility, deducing it was perhaps just bad timing. 'Ready to report, if it pleases.'

'No, sir, it does not please. Now go away.'

'Ah,' he sheepishly stuttered, rather taken aback. 'Ah, but sir, you did order me to report. May I enquire as to when would be the proper time, so I may return?'

'What's that you say?' Ryan sneered, somewhat dumbfounded, rummaging his thoughts. 'I ordered you to report, you say? When?'

'Aye, sir, I received word, four bells past.'

'Four bells? Damn your impertinence, sir, that is two bloody hours ago! The ship is only a hundred feet long you know. Where the devil have you been?'

'Sir, the order stated I was to report at the start of my watch, which is now.'

'What?' he gurgled, somewhat discomfited, searching for a response. 'You are to put that messenger on report then!'

'Sir?'

'If he cannot get a simple order relayed properly and accurately, we have little use for him. As if I would order that! Mister Adams, your crew will learn their trade or we shall see the other side of them, understood? I will have his name now, if you please!'

'Aye, sir,' he acknowledged, dark thoughts swirling. He noted the use of *"your crew"* and not *"our crew"*, a subtle hint as to where the man's style of command sat. Adams well knew there were two types of commander, the least preferred being the *"us and them"*, a captain who would separate himself from the crew physically and mentally, ruling with an iron fist, often a harsh unfair monster bereft of reason. The other was a captain who worked side by side with his officers, in unison, in harmony with purpose and zest. This was a captain who got his hands dirty, active and pragmatic. He was usually a fighter, one the ship would grow to love. Adams was leaning towards the former, just an educated guess. He would need to tread lightly. He was also guessing this business with the messenger, the allegation of misconduct, was likely a poor fabrication at best. He well knew the young lad in question. He would wager heavily the order had most likely been relayed word for word. It was obvious Ryan had not only misremembered giving the order, but hardly knew what it even was. Now for the want of this captain's pride a name had to be given. Good grief, he silently vexed. It was one thing for a captain to be insensible, so many things on his mind, but quite another to lay blame elsewhere and falsely accuse a young innocent man. 'Aye, it is young Mister Jenkins.'

'The orphan boy, the midshipman?' he mulled.

'Aye, sir, not to be confused with Mister Spencer, also an orphan. And sir, my report?'

'Oh come now, really! Do you not know how to discern a man deep in thought!' he snapped, now waving wildly at different parts of the ship. It was proving quite the performance, one even the far end of the weather deck had noticed. Seafaring fellows were a unique breed, easily spooked. To witness the captain berating his first officer in such fashion, so publicly, was always a scene frowned upon. Right or wrong the jacks would swiftly come to their own conclusions, their judgement absolute. Budging them afterward was akin to a hungered dog locked onto a mangy bone. Adams knew all too well and could only stand quietly in dismay that this captain knew not. 'Hardly can I be expected to think if every officer aboard deems it pertinent to interrupt me!'

'Very sorry, sir,' he paused, softly spoken, masking his disdain. It seemed Ryan was one of those *"damned if you do and damned if you don't"* captains. The man was also in a mood. Nothing would likely bring satisfaction. Had Adams not reported, he would have been held to account and punished. And now that he had reported, he was promptly reprimanded and publicly scolded, crucified either way. One cannot choose their captain, of course, part of life at sea. It was ugly, a wholly unnecessary scene, one which should've been avoided. Nonetheless, Adams was a professional. Never would he offer even a hint of disgust, strong as it was. A captain was the law at sea, the ultimate magistrate—judge, jury and even executioner. A prudent officer always stood firm with any new captain, in harmony and agreeance, otherwise to their immediate peril. It was only the second day, but worrying nonetheless. Life aboard could quickly transform into a living hell should he land on the wrong side of this encounter. The situation had to be resolved before all was lost. Should he fall short, the only other remedy was to depart by way of promotion, a successful ship action the necessary ingredient. If he wasn't yet suitably motivated, he was now. However, his pride had been injured, not to mention his standing with the men. He could feel the wandering eye of each and every jack washing over him. With each breath deepening, his contemplation festered. His blood burned to a boil. His eyes raged. His back was up. He looked his captain directly in the eye, mutinous thoughts invading. Upon the utterance of his next few chosen words, the path of his life would be decided. In wrath, an overwhelming surge arose. 'Very good, sir, as such I will take my leave then.'

'Stand firm,' Ryan barked. 'No one gave you leave, sir. Since you say it was ordered and since you have now bothered me, I shall hear your report.'

'Ah?' Adams acknowledged, sensing a chance, a forced smile and a pleasant nod offered. To sway his captain would see the entire situation remedied. 'Very good, sir, very good. If it pleases, it needs no pointing out the predicament of our present state of sailing.'

‘To which you just pointed out?’

‘Of course, sir. Sorry, sir,’ he evenly responded, though inwardly he was groaning, the thought of teeth pulled more alluring. ‘It was just a figure of speech, a headline if you will. Naturally it is my duty as your first to point out all matters of importance. Your problem is my problem. Sir, I would hazard a guess the ship’s performance is detestably far from my captain’s satisfaction?’

‘Well, finally we are in agreement. Very well, carry on with your report. If it is of worth, I shall thank you and duly forget the entire incident.’

Good god, he thought, did the man just say *“incident”*? He calls an officer to report and the carrying out of said duty is somehow now an incident? What kind of captain is he? Indeed, what kind of man? Perhaps he had been a career lieutenant for good reason? It did not sit well. Adams was readying to puke. How dare the man, such a disgraceful self-serving abhorrent act. He felt the will of the devil swooning within.

‘Oh thank you, sir,’ he beamed. ‘Allow me to be direct then. As you already know, we were making eight knots out from port into the offing, well below par. That was yesterday though. With the breaking of day her spirits have somewhat worsened. Presently we are decidedly bobbing about, our way stifled. The ship cannot go on, not as is. As such, I have made a full investigation. I have spoken with our master and many of the mates. Sir, they are working below more furious than ants in the heat. Our master is of the solid opinion that if left unchecked, the welfare of the ship cannot be guaranteed.’

‘Not guaranteed?’

‘Sir, we could very well founder.’

‘Sink? Sink!’

‘Aye, sir.’

‘Outrageous, what poppy-cock!’

‘He is adamant.’

‘But, it cannot be?’

‘It would be no fault of yours, of course, sir,’ he offered sympathetically, his tone attempting to garner his captain’s support. ‘Especially this being only your second day of command and the ship recently rolled off the repair docks.’

‘Quite,’ Ryan nodded, somewhat shocked, only now grasping the severity of his peril. ‘Yet hardly would the kindness of the Admiralty ever see it that way. Since the reading of my commission, yesterday, I am now wholly responsible for this vessel. Have you not heard the expression, *“a captain goes down with his ship…”*?’

'Sir, I have not. I assume it alludes to purport that the alternative of indignantly surviving is perhaps a fate far worse than death? It makes perfect sense, of course, the likely wrath of the Admiralty springing to mind.'

'And their wrath can extend endlessly, to be sure, starting with one's command, loss of pay, honours and titles stripped, hopelessly beached in an insufferable state of penury.'

'Actually, sir, my thoughts immediately harken back to poor Admiral Byng.'

'Byng?'

'Aye, back in fifty-seven. After his tribunal, he was immediately shot on his own quarterdeck. And sir, his ship didn't even sink!'

'Didn't even sink? Good god, really? I had not heard, shot an admiral!'

'Quite, sir. Should we return to port having failed our mission, what chance would a mere captain have? To the heart of it though, we may not actually have a choice very soon.'

'But we are not taking on water?'

'No, sir, not yet. But there is no land in sight presently. Should we founder, there will be no one left for the Admiralty to shoot. Our master has assured me it is a real possibility should we come into some weather. Sir, have you noted yet the storm clouds gathering on the near horizon. It can only get worse.'

'Good god,' he vexed, absorbing the ill news, his head spinning from north to south and back again. 'Ah, now I see,' he suddenly announced, condescension ringing his tone, nodding as if he had just found the long-lost mice who had fleeced his beloved cheese. 'I see it all too clearly now, indeed. It being much worse than we all thought, it being precariously moments from our foundering, you being first officer and next in line for command, have you now only finally come, 'ey? Aye, come all too late in course, as is your design, 'ey?'

'What? But sir, we are barely twenty-four hours into our cruise?' Adams protested, somewhat in surprise, never expecting such a wild rash response, out loud too. 'Oh no, never sir, never would I presume. I am your loyal obedient servant. I have come at the earliest, my only delay being my duty to thoroughly investigate our woes. I assure you, sir, there are no other designs, apart from offering my input.'

'Input?' he scoffed. 'But it seems clear. We must turn about and head back to port, lest we sink!' Right or wrong any other officer would have instantly agreed, anything to see the back of this captain, one who seemed a might paranoid and a touch inept. The crew would in course be reprimanded, though hardly a punishment comparable to the violent thought of months, if not years, at sea together. Adams mulled it over. This latest accusation was

the final straw. It crossed the line and even a respectable loyal officer had their limits. The man had ignored him, insulted him, berated him and now he had bullied him, finally to such a level rarely suffered in any genteel society. Almost point-blank had he been accused of plotting a takeover of command, a mutinous act punishable by hanging. Indeed, to see the back of this captain was to see his own life humbly preserved. Ryan was almost gobbling now. 'And twenty-four hours be damned! Another of your failings, sir! We should have turned back in the first hours before we even made it to open sea!'

'To which, sir, you would be subjected to court martial, just as Admiral Byng, a detestable state of affairs. And sir, that is only if we are lucky enough to make it back. Presently we are a day's sailing out of port, but that was with the wind. It is likely two or three days to stand back to Gros Islet Bay.'

'Good grief,' he vexed.

'Sir, I believe we are not too lost at sea, not just yet. If I may, this is how I see it. Firstly, in order to avoid disciplinary action, we must have done our duty.'

'Naturally.'

'Said duty is to scout the enemy, protect our trade and report back enemy movements. Hardly can this be achieved without a swift vessel. Should we push on, we would most certainly fail in said duty.'

'Quite.'

'Without remedying the ship, we will founder after likely capsizing. Failing that, likely would we be captured or destroyed by our enemies. Should the weather soften there is a faint chance we might make port, but only after failing our mission. That is when the shootings might take place, so I hazard to guess.'

'Shootings?'

'Regrettably, all these events lead to our untimely demise.'

'For the love of god, is there no remedy? I note you have had some twenty-four hours to formulate a plan!'

'Sir?'

'So will it be written into the log!'

So will it be written into the log? Would the man ever cease, driven by an incorrigible incessant penchant to lay blame upon anyone but himself. Adams strained to rein in his train of thought, continually interrupted by the ridiculous need to defend himself upon each and every utterance from this captain. To be written into the log meant only one thing, to impeach with impunity the acts of his first officer. To lose a ship, even docked, even in absence, would immediately result in court-martial proceedings. Survivors would be compelled to testify, the penalty of immediate death not an unlikely sentence.

'Well, sir, I believe there is. We must make repairs. For that we would need the protection of a tidy inlet, a hidden one, a place where we could assign work, a safe harbour.'

'A safe harbour, out here?' he scoffed. 'Do we even know what works are required, materials, manpower?'

'Well, sir,' he nodded, now feeling somewhat more confident. Adams had been a lieutenant a long time and knew his way around difficult captains. To dangle the scrumptious delight of irrepressible fear was to easily sway them. And oh, what an effect it had on Ryan. This captain was no different, his eyes widened, fearfully contemplating the sudden loss of his ship and all the dire consequences. 'We will need to scour the hull for starters. One of the jacks assisted the restoration crew at Gros Islet Bay. Her bottom was definitely plagued with barnacles and debris. It was a matter left untended unfortunately.'

'Oh, I see,' he mulled. 'And…?'

'Do not worry, sir, there definitely is an *"and"*,' Adams grinned, now thinking he had his captain becalmed and suitably under control. 'Additionally, sir, we need to lighten our load. I propose to inventory all items in stowage. We will part with anything unnecessary. The remainder must be redistributed, to better balance the weight of our hull, to make her glide.'

'And our master can do that?'

'Indeed and our gunner has also remarked upon the unacceptable situation with our cannon. He said it was as if a mob of truant children running amok had scattered them. I have checked and he is right, utterly contemptible. Sir, this long list of failings, wholly attributable to the repair dock if I may, perhaps is something worthy of note in your log?'

'Indeed, for they have made a mess for us out here.'

'I concur, sir. I will do likewise in my log,' he cleverly shaped, confident his name will now not be portrayed negatively for the Admiralty to later see. 'Our gunner will see to the repositioning of our cannon. And lastly, there is the matter that we simply have too many landsmen.'

'Are we repositioning them too or simply throwing them overboard?'

'No, sir,' he snuffled, acknowledging the quip, filling full his captain's pride. He was now confident the relationship was on the mend. It seemed Adams was an astute and inventive officer. By making himself indispensable, it had given Ryan pause. 'But they must apply their trade. They must be schooled. Time is of the essence, so just the basics. If all goes well, we should have Hinchinbrook shipshape and Bristol fashion in no time.'

'Will it do the trick though, that is the question?'

'Our master promises to squeeze twelve, even fourteen knots.'

‘But are we not just dribbling along at less than five? Would it not be some miracle?’

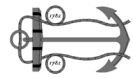
‘Actually, it is closer to three, sir. We had eight knots out of port yesterday into the offing. It has deteriorated since, I concede. But I trust our master. He knows his business. At the very least he will ensure we do not founder and the log will happily record you have done your duty.’

‘Ah, I see, welcome news then,’ he nodded in satisfaction. ‘To where must we sail? I assume it is hidden deep within the bowels of our enemies?’

‘Oh sir, how well you are getting to know me. There is no hiding, standing before you,’ he again complimented, feeding the dish of false modesty hungrily to his captain, dessert ready and waiting. ‘We have many an old salt aboard, ones who know the islands well. They have three suggestions, all of them good and proper. Sir, we simply await your pleasure. Please give the order and I will make it so.’

‘So let me get this straight. You propose to take us to an inlet, a hidden one, likely upon the island of our enemies. Once moored, we will see our hull scoured, the cannon repositioned and our stowage in like manner sorted. For our labours our master promises at least twelve knots, maybe fourteen. And all of this is to transpire after we perilously stand in to said enemy island, ensuring we are not seen, whilst battling an ever-increasing swell, a storm approaching. All this, with barely three or four knots on our back? Once there, should they get even a tiny whiff of our scent, we will be boxed in with nowhere to go and sent to oblivion. Does that just about sum it up?’

Ryan was near ready to turn back to port, damn the consequences. Yet the footnotes within Adams’s report rang true. The plan, unorthodox and desperate, proved a godsend if truth be told. Deliberation was hardly needed. The order was given and Hinchinbrook turned to the west. Well, eventually she turned.



Captain's Log — 20 Mar 1782

March 20, 1782, Wednesday, Morning Watch: *Our predicament worsens, making at best three knots. Subsequently have I ordered the Master together with the First Lieutenant to handle this matter. They are to check the weight of all items in the hold and orlop and discard anything unnecessary. A lighter ship is a swifter ship, if only we could throw overboard our landsmen. They are to reorganise the spread of cargo and reposition our cannon. Hopefully they can see to it that our hull is properly weighted. Their industry will also incorporate the proper instruction in the art of what should be considered proper sailing, naturally to our landsmen, such poor specimens. Mayhap the bottom needs some scouring as well, for we have not the luxury of copper-sheathing, unlike our great fleet. Upon first chance shall we make safe harbour and so shall we endeavour to remedy our situation. It was with great thought I had eventually come to these remedies, may they necessarily with God's grace see us back safely to sea in search of the enemy fleet.*

Your obedient servant
Captain Ryan

Chapter III

Race to the Tops

Acting fourth lieutenant, Midshipman Hayden Reginald Cooper, stood patiently by the mainmast, biding his time. His duty was clear. Always be prompt, be properly dressed, never forget your hat and overall be enthusiastic, even when off duty. On this occasion he awaited his fellow midshipmen, yet not so patiently. A midshipman was basically a petty officer, not quite a commissioned officer like a lieutenant, though the final step before that ascension. They were expected to be prompt. If they arrived at the correct time, they were already late. Overall were they considered young gentlemen, officers in training, often from prominent families and they outranked most other petty officers and lesser warrant officers. To distinguish their higher social standing, they always messed and berthed separately from ordinary sailors. Today Cooper had arranged a race to the tops, to the masthead, a small wager on offer naturally. It may have been a lark, but physical activities such as these were wholly encouraged, serving to build the indomitable character of future young lieutenants, the backbone of the Royal Navy.

The ship's course had been shaped to the north-east, past Martinique, an island held by the French and Spanish. With repairs in mind she had now turned, heading directly west. Cooper sympathetically grinned as the jacks hurried by, still in an obvious state of shock, their faces worn. They had now sought to work in pairs, in fear to suddenly be washed overboard. Cooper was inwardly jesting that should a man fall, he might actually overtake the ship on his swim back. The jacks were not as jovial, dread haunting their every footstep. It did not take long. The usual rumblings had begun, whisperings, sideways glances, low voices suddenly halted as officers strolled past.

The congregation of young lads had now grown to three. Together their necks stretched skyward, peering upon the masthead, their final destination. Cooper laid down the rules. It was fairly simple. A handkerchief would be dropped to signify the commencement of the race. First to be hauled into the masthead by Bull would be the winner. Bull was the ship's senior lookout, an experienced jack who had even fought in the Seven Years' War. His adjudication would be final, lest one risked being catapulted from his masthead.

‘Okay Spence, it is you, me and Jenkins,’ Cooper announced, a sly grin accompanied. Keenly he eyed his newest friend, Midshipman Charles Prescot Spencer. Spencer was about the same age, but of a stronger, stouter build. Unlike Cooper, he had not yet been promoted to the acting role of lieutenant, hence the inherent unending insistence of a friendly rivalry at every gate. ‘Were there any others coming?’

‘Mister FitzRyan expressed an interest in our little race,’ Jenkins answered for him. Jenkins was the youngest midshipman aboard, his squeaky voice somewhat giving it away. It was his first year at sea, a young hopeful chomping at the bit, warily wading the shoals of his new environment. He was perhaps smaller than most lads, his age and his inexperience already showing. Unlike Cooper and Spencer, hardly had he acclimatised to the searing elements of the Caribbean. Already his ginger features had caused an unending voracity of freckles to assail his nose, seemingly spilling onto his cheeks with each passing hour. He wasn’t exactly shy but knew his place. ‘For myself, sir, I must make my apologies. I cannot race today. I have been summoned to see our captain, not sure why? But I will happily assume the position of starter.’

‘So, Mister FitzRyan is coming, ’ey? For the love of Mary, where could he be?’ lamented Cooper, somewhat hesitant to leave this particular officer behind. A deep breath accompanied a telling sigh.

‘Who would know? If truth be told we must have been early, or that is how the tribunal will recant it, he being our captain’s son. Never mind the ship’s bell chiming just now. How nice to be the son of a captain, ’ey?’

‘On this matter and upon this captain, I believe opinions vary,’ he cautiously whispered.

‘Oh, do tell?’ insisted Spencer, his interest piqued.

‘Not here, Spence,’ Cooper warned, throwing a knowing look over Jenkins. ‘And definitely not in front of Mister FitzRyan.’

‘And why the devil is he a *“FitzRyan”*, when his father is a *“Ryan”*? Is it some tradition with captains and their sons?’

‘No.’

‘No?’

‘Good grief,’ he further whispered leaning in, cupping Spencer’s ear. ‘In polite genteel circles, it is more kindly referred to as a *“defect of marriage”*. He is the bastard son of our captain, hence the *“Fitz”*. It is quite common, even in royal circles. If it must be explained, it is derived from an old French noun *“fils”* meaning *“son of”* and ultimately from the Latin word *“filius”*.’

‘Good god, Coops! You had better keep that kind of talk to yourself! You don’t want the jacks to think you a know-it-all, or they will take a disliking to you.’

‘Which is why I whispered it,’ he smartly recapped. ‘Also, we don’t want it getting back to our captain, or we might be kissing the gunner’s daughter.’

‘Flogged? I didn’t know they flogged midshipmen? Are we not officers?’

‘I assure you, Spence, they will most happily flog a mid, so mind yourself.’

‘And how is it you know all that, ’ey? Do you speak French or Latin, or something?’

‘Aye.’

‘What? Really? Which, ’ey?’ he grilled. ‘C’mon, not both?’

‘All three,’ he teased. ‘But keep it to yourself. Ah, I see Mister FitzRyan! It is well we waited, Spence, he being acting third lieutenant and our immediate senior.’

‘Not to mention our captain’s son! But it is indeed well, Coops, for I will need a witness since poor Jenkins here is missing out on the fun. Aye, a witness is required if I am to claim my prize at the top!’

Jacks nearby began to grin, an obvious race to the tops being formed. Oh how they loved the thrill of competition, any contest really. Subtle wagers were silently traded, the older salts adamant they had it right. These were their young masters, future officers, commanders and captains, maybe even admirals. As was their nature the nearby jacks gathered until there was a small mob. Even some landsmen had congregated. They laboured in pretence, nearby, eyes on their latest wager. Given leave, they would bet on anything, even two flies on a wall. A race to the tops was an exciting event, one not to be missed. Yet importantly, it was also an indication of the young masters’ prowess as sailors, a necessary ingredient to earn the preciousness of a jack’s respect.

With the drop of the handkerchief, the three midshipmen propelled themselves up the rigging, seemingly bereft of all sanity, their eye on the prize. As the first arrived at the masthead, Bull dragged him in as if a fisherman hauling a netted catch.

‘Well done!’ Bull congratulated. The lookout was a grim man, but roughly pleasant, a leathery worn face. He had the grip of a titan and had served aboard more ships than he could remember. The next arrived puffing and clawing and so was he similarly hauled in. Bull nodded in approval as they lashed themselves safely to the masthead. With one eye on his visitors, his good eye remained upon the horizon, ever probing. ‘Now, young sirs, there will be no falling whilst I am on watch. Keep a steady grip and be aware of the swell. And may I express my sympathies to you, Mister Cooper.’

‘What’s that, Bull? I believe I won, fairly!’

‘Perhaps you were first to arrive, but your margin of success fell short, just a tad. Mister Spencer here was right on your tail.’

‘Margin of success?’ he wondered, finally understanding. ‘Oh, but that only applies to lieutenants,’ he complained, his face twisting. ‘It may have escaped you, but I am only an acting lieutenant presently. With respect, I am the same rank as Spence, a midshipman.’

‘But did you not just sit your examination for lieutenant? And are you not just waiting on the word to come? And is Bull here not someone who just knows all there is to know?’

‘What? You know something don’t you? Do not tease me, sir,’ Cooper warned, now grinning uncontrollably. ‘Is it, is it true, really?’

‘Aye, sir,’ he beamed. ‘I expect they will announce it in course. But the silent word direct from the captain’s cuddy is that you have passed. The whole ship rightly knows, of course.’

‘Oh, I could hug you, Bull!’

‘Anyway, that means Mister Spencer has won.’

‘Oh joy, is it true?’ questioned Spencer.

‘Aye, you have won, Spence.’

‘No, no!’ he dismissed. ‘Is it true, you are Lieutenant Cooper now?’

‘It seems so.’

‘Oh, may I give you joy of your promotion!’ he rejoiced, making his knuckle. ‘Sir! Ha!’

‘Wait a moment, Bull,’ he grieved, holding his hand up. ‘But Spence here also sat his examination, albeit two days after mine. Is there no word on his result? If you know, you should be upfront now.’

‘Well, maybe?’ he poorly feigned, scratching his head.

‘What?’

‘Well, yesterday you had given Mister Spencer such a licking in the race up the rigging, I thought today maybe he could win,’ he winked. ‘If truth be told, there are papers for him too. You have two day’s seniority though, so I was going to tell you in two days, ha!’

‘Oh, Bull! What a fellow you are, what a fellow! I honour you, sir. Oh how I honour you and your sense of fair play!’

‘So, I did not win?’ mused Spencer.

‘Definitely not, ha! A fellow lieutenant cannot expect any leeway in any race to the top. As such, you have my commiserations and I have your pot. I will expect delivery at the usual time in the usual manner, naturally.’

‘Goodness me, is that Mister FitzRyan coming up the rigging?’ cried Bull.

‘Aye, Bull,’ confirmed Cooper glumly, sighing once again.

‘Good grief, I don’t think he’s going to make it! Was he really racing you two? I might have to venture down and bring him up. If he falls, our captain will skin us alive. And just so you know, you both outrank him now. His

papers came through with yours. Best we say nothing in this case, 'ey?' he grieved, a sad shake of the head confirming the worst.

'He really is slow,' groaned Spencer.

'Aye, it is hard to believe he is some years older than us.'

'It is no wonder he failed, again.'

'Not everyone is cut out for the Royal Navy, Spence. He has his issues, being perhaps the kindest way to put it. He is actually a decent sailor, given the chance. He was aboard Formidable with me. I had been schooling him every available moment, fruitlessly, though without hard results. He is a kind soul, not senseless either, but something thwarts his every effort each time he is tested. He really falls apart. With that, may I give you joy of your promotion, sir! You will now sit as fourth lieutenant of His Majesty's Ship Hinchinbrook!'

'What a magnificent view the masthead affords. We must be eighty feet above the deck? Look, is that the island of Martinique?'

'Aye, very good, Spence. Just coming into view.'

'Well, the word is we are for it now. The entire French and Spanish fleet are there. Not much chance of doing anything except littering the bottom with our bones.'

'I think there is a good chance we can make it unscathed. The French fleet are stationed at Fort Royal Bay. That's the other side of the island, the western side. As you may or may not know, we are happily on the eastern side.'

'Ah, but I think they have this new invention called a *"ship"*, no?' he sarcastically pointed out. 'I believe it travels upon the water and can go most anywhere? And here we are in plain sight, heading right to them, barely scraping a few knots!'

'Ah,' Cooper grinned, hardly able to argue the point, especially its eloquence. It seemed he and Spencer were birds of the same feather. He had a good feeling about this new friendship. In good spirits Cooper graciously weathered the sarcastic brunt, almost as if he deserved it. 'But Spence, it is late in the day. Soon it will be night and with it comes this thing called *"darkness"*. That is when we cannot see anything after that big yellow ball in the sky disappears.'

'Ah,' he grinned, his turn to receive a blunt quip. 'But that could be many hours from now?'

'Let us see then, 'ey?' returned Cooper smugly. He stretched out his arm, holding the back of his hand to the horizon, fingers horizontally extended as if he was reading his palm.

'What are you doing now? Are you a fortune teller too?'

'Measuring the time we have until sunset.'

'No you're not.'

‘Try it,’ Cooper reassured. ‘How many of your fingers can fit between the sun and the horizon? You might have to use both hands.’

‘I get eight! So it’s eight hours then? Wait, that cannot be!’

‘No,’ he grinned. ‘Each finger is worth half a bell, fifteen minutes.’

‘So eight fingers equals two hours then?’

‘Exactly! We either have two hours or less to live, or we will find safe harbour. I will wager on finding safe harbour.’

‘And if you are wrong, you won’t be around to pay me out!’

‘Nothing escapes you, Spence! Ha, must be the orphan in you. Anyway, it is all part of Mister Adams’s plan. He is a cunning officer.’

‘Good god, all the jacks are talking about it. What was that ruckus on the sovereign’s parade? The captain was almost clucking he was so livid.’

‘Aye, ’twas an ugly detestable encounter, most regrettable.’

‘I heard tell our captain is a coin shy of a purse, not all there?’

‘Even worse, he was ready to strike our colours and head back to port, right then and there, no waiting for the French!’

‘What? Well, I am not sure I can blame him. Even if the French don’t see us in the next two hours, we might end up swimming to Martinique.’

‘At least we know the way now,’ he smiled.

‘What an eternal comfort you are, Coops, err, sir!’

‘Here comes Bull with Mister FitzRyan. Be careful what you say. And do not mention his examination!’

Bull dragged FitzRyan onto the masthead and strapped him in. If he fell, they may as well follow him, such would be his father’s wrath. FitzRyan was not a young lad, most assuredly in his early twenties. It was true he was presently the ship’s acting third lieutenant, but it was a post assigned verily on the seniority of years served, rather than skills. Following that tradition though, soon would he be reduced to just Midshipman FitzRyan. With only two dedicated positions for lieutenants aboard a sixth-rate, there would be no room for him. He was happily oblivious, of course. Perhaps it was a family trait. Lazily he sat milking every effort to take in his next breath, wheezing in and out worse than a toss pot fallen to the gutter.

‘Thank ye lads for looking after my masthead,’ Bull acknowledged, the man’s cheerful disposition seemingly endless. Yet his attention drew at once to the far horizon, his eyes bulging. ‘Do you see that, Mister Cooper?’ he sternly pointed.

‘Oh, aye, we spotted the mountains of Martinique only just a moment ago.’

‘No, young sir,’ he pointed. ‘Cast your eyes below the tip, to the south.’

‘Good grief, what eyes you possess. Is that a sail?’

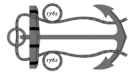
‘Two sails there be, young sir!’

‘Two ships! Good god!’ grieved Spencer.

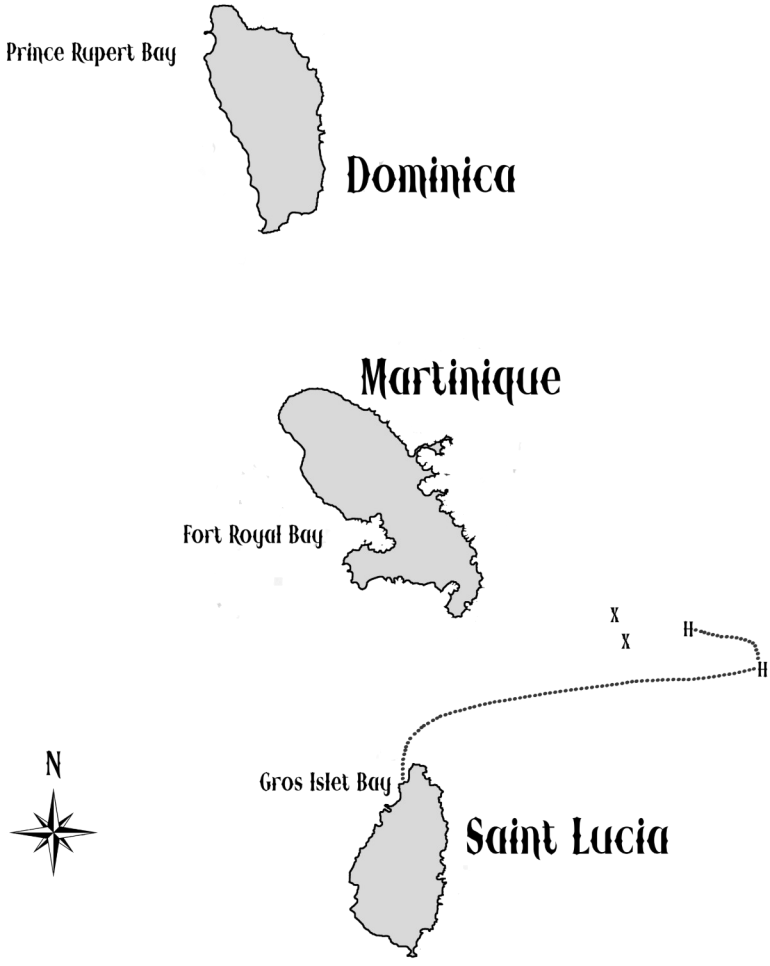
‘It could be Captain Byron’s squadron. Let us not fret just yet.’

‘Aye, could be,’ Bull thoughtfully mulled. ‘We will keep a watch on them. Soon we will know. Would you like to do the honours, Mister Cooper?’

‘On deck, sails ho!’ Cooper bellowed, cupping his mouth to amplify the call. He beamed with the thrill of duty, his voice loud and distinct, hollering with all his might. The day remained calm, the youthfulness of his adolescence easily rattling the deck below. The officers on watch instantly rustled, all eyes peering upon the western horizon. ‘Two sail, dead ahead!’



Windward Islands



Chapter IV

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Lessons Learnt

The sighting had sent shivers through the ship. The instant realisation of two vessels bearing down brought with it the salient thought of a battle soon to be lost. They could, of course, strike their colours after the first shot passed the bow, their existence thereafter a slow hungering demise within some French prison hulk. The war could go on for years too, a sobering thought. In fairness, the older jacks were not overly concerned with prison. No, it was much more likely the barque would be totally destroyed, all hands lost. It would only take one well-aimed cannon. The first shot to hit the rigging would be enough, the ship presently ready to capsize upon even the slightest breath of sudden wind. To their doom would every man, jack and officer be left to tread the warm waters of the Caribbean. No one would drown and nor to death would they freeze. The seas were quite warm, almost a hot bath. No, the sharks, to which there were known to be many, would feast well before any of that came to pass.

Adams briskly arrived on the quarterdeck, a procession of officers trailing his wake. Not unlike every man aboard, he had heard the call from the masthead. Upon receipt of his captain's orders, no less was he expecting a council of war. Time was aplenty though, the unknown ships expected just before sundown.

The first officer was chomping at the bit. Finally their present situation might be discussed in detail. The defence of the ship was paramount, be it foundering in a rising tempest or repelling the advance of their enemy. Nothing should be left to chance, officers assigned to their stations and tasks allocated. One wrong move could spell the end. Adams had the loose makings of a plan, though obviously a desperate time. He was most interested to hear his captain's ideas, if any. The battle would be two against one. And that would be two ships in fine working condition, perhaps even battle-hardened, against one winged dud.

One by one the officers fell into ranks, ducklings straddling the drake. Yet the parade was one midshipman shy of a full complement. Failing to locate Mister Jenkins, Adams was stewing. He would need to apologise, his teeth already grinding, verily expecting the worst. Perhaps he could explain it away. After all, Jenkins was the youngest midshipman, just a boy really, only

thirteen. The lad had come to much grief in life, an orphan, bouncing from one boarding house to the next. This was not his first ship, but his naval career was only just blossoming, still much to learn. Adams knew there was definitely some sympathy in the cards yet to be played. It was a small ship and hopefully the lad would turn up soon enough.

The first officer's hopes proved through. Jenkins would turn up soon enough, for there he verily was. Adams immediately halted, astonishment weathering his good eye. He gazed across the quarterdeck. He simply could not believe it. The poor lad was indignantly sprawled upon a cannon, virtually hugging it, his arms fixed by ropes, his pants removed. Hushed gasps haunted the breaths of the attending officers. Yet Ryan busied himself with the horizon, unperturbed, nonchalant, his gaze fixed dead ahead, an obscenely expensive peeper magnifying his view. It seemed a curious whim, Adams noticeably annoyed, their pending survival little less than just the toss of a coin. If there was any sanity brewing within this captain, it was well hidden.

'Sir, reporting, as ordered,' announced Adams softly, his words ever so carefully chosen, his gaze wandering back and forth over poor Jenkins.

'Ah, there, English colours perhaps, I think!' Ryan suddenly blurted, still holding the peeper to his good eye. 'Must be part of Captain Byron's lookout squadron!'

'Oh, I cannot make that out yet,' the Master returned. 'But it looks like two sloops, sir, both two-masted, maybe fourteen gun.'

'No doubt, 'ey,' he rejoiced. 'No doubt, the lead eyes of Captain Bryon's main taskforce. I will wager his squadron is just over the horizon, such favourable news,' he pleasantly mumbled, turning to find the full complement of officers ceremoniously lined. 'Ah, very good, Mister Adams. Now prepare your officers to witness punishment. Please to arrange the Lieutenant of the Marines to summon his drummer.'

'Sir?'

'For our Mister Jenkins here, of course!' he insisted. 'Are you not blind, the lad presently arse-up kissing the gunner's daughter only ten feet away?'

'But sir, a flogging? He is just a boy.'

'Mister Adams, he is a midshipman and a sailor. There are no *"boys"* on a ship of war. We shall use a cane, not the cat. You will see to it he is rightly punished, this moment if you please, unless you wish to replace him!'

The whole scene stank of brutality, more than the regular sniff of unfairness. Adams could also not fathom his exclusion from the judicial process, the second lieutenant instead being favoured. Though what was he to expect? As first officer, he himself had been perpetually treading water. The second was also Ryan's nephew, easily manipulated. Nonetheless, regulations were administered by the Articles of War. In all cases at sea the ship's captain

was the only authority. To invite the opinion of a senior officer was a courtesy at best. He could not complain, not legally in any case.

The first crack of the cane bludgeoned what was once a peaceful scene, loose lips seared shut. Jenkins whimpered uncontrollably. It was a glum reminder to all present. Not only must you do your duty, but you must have proof as well, otherwise to your absolute peril.

'That is six, please to take him down, now!' ordered Adams. The boy had ceased whimpering after the first three, his body now wholly subsided, limp and incoherent. Slumped lifelessly, his head drooped over the cannon, his bare butt swimming in fresh darkened welts.

'Belay that!' Ryan countered. 'Mister Jenkins will stay a little longer, until I am satisfied his impudence has fully departed.'

'Sir, his impudence?' protested Adams.

'To which you might have witnessed had you been privy to his insistent objections, aye, upon each and every allegation!'

'Each and every? Surely there was only one allegation, sir?'

'Perhaps the next time you are called, you had better report quicksmart.'

'With respect, sir, I was not called.'

'So, you deny it!'

'Sir, perhaps if you might summon your messenger?'

'Never you mind, sir, never you mind,' he angrily bade. 'To the matter at hand, there is no denying Mister Jenkins here had the impudence to refute the charges, the scoundrel.'

'Perhaps, sir, had I been present, some light might have been shed?' offered Adams judiciously, ready to throw out all proprietary, the justice served seemingly cold and tasteless.

'Damn your eyes, sir! Did you not just hear that you were summoned!'

'Naturally, sir, but I only allude to the fact that I know Mister Jenkins quite well, whereas our second lieutenant does not. The second lieutenant, I have not yet had the pleasure to meet him. I believe he is your nephew? It behoves me to find him absent from these proceedings, especially when it was he who seconded the sentence?'

'Not that it is any business of yours, Mister Adams, but I have sent our second lieutenant below. It appears he is not well, a sickly look forming. Considering we are in the Caribbean, yellow jack rife, I have ordered no one to bother him.'

'I see, sir,' he blankly returned, wondering how a senior officer's medical status was apparently not any of the first lieutenant's business. 'We can only pray it is not serious. As to Mister Jenkins, is it not fair to offer mitigating circumstances when defending the performance of said duty? I might have

offered that in no way would I have suspected Mister Jenkins to be wilful in any negligence. Perhaps he was just mistaken, if at all?'

'If at all?' Ryan barked. 'You go too far, sir. That is mutinous talk!'

'Sir, with respect, it is not,' he evenly protested, finally sighing, tired of the endless game. 'If there is any doubt within the allegations, the punishment should reflect it as such. It is my duty to point this out, something our second lieutenant should have done. As you know, sir, to flog someone, especially a young gentleman, would only be examined in the logs later by the Admiralty. And sir, they would examine not only your log, but mine,' he added with a knowing glare.

It seemed Adams had turned. In no uncertain terms had he just declared war, succinctly putting his captain on notice. It was an Admiralty requirement that every first lieutenant keep his own log. It was always trouble when that log did not match the captain's log. The likelihood to officially reprimand a captain was usually unheard of though. However, should the Admiralty be convinced, said captain might conveniently be beached. Experienced captains knew to keep their first lieutenant onside, a prudence which seemed to have escaped Ryan.

'We shall discuss this at length later, Mister Adams, at length sir!' he forebodingly foreshadowed. 'For now, Mister Jenkins may kiss the gunner's daughter a while longer. It is ordered as such and no one shall remove him without my explicit permission. He will serve as a warning to all, may he personally reflect and contemplate his recent failings. It is an order, do you understand?'

'Aye, perfectly, sir,' he glumly accepted, biting his tongue. 'Perhaps then our doctor should be called?'

'There will be no doctor! Really, what is all this fuss, sir, over just a minor disciplinary action? Now, let us move on. I have summoned all officers to the quarterdeck for other reasons. We have more important matters at hand,' he insisted, now switching his tone. This was it, Adams thought, finally a council to discuss their failing predicament, not to mention the two ships bearing down. It could not have come at a better time. Finally the captain was acting as if Hinchinbrook was a ship of war. Yet Adams was soon to be disappointed. 'I have here before me a letter from the Admiralty, which I will now read. The first is addressed to Mister FitzRyan, midshipman. Sir, you have failed to pass your examination for lieutenant,' he coldly relayed, hardly raising an eyebrow. It was somewhat expected, not only by FitzRyan, but the entire crew. 'The next is addressed to Mister Cooper, midshipman, of whom I have not yet had the chance to meet. Sir, are you present?'

'Acting Fourth Lieutenant Cooper, midshipman, here, sir!'

'No you're not!' refuted Ryan angrily, the nearby officers wide-eyed and

bereft of breath. Their captain may have been perceived as inept in many areas, but instilling fear in his crew was not one.

'Sir?' gulped Cooper, his eye catching the twitching body of Jenkins, wondering how he might come to prove he was in fact Hayden Reginald Cooper, a midshipman. It was a curious thought.

'You have it wrong, young sir,' he gurgled. 'Having recently passed your examination, you are now Lieutenant Cooper. Your commission stands, officially, as of yesterday. As such you will stand as the third lieutenant. Mister Adams, perhaps a huzzah for Mister Cooper, should it please?'

'Oh indeed, sir! Huzzah for Mister Cooper!' prompted Adams eagerly, the entire deck filling the tops with their bellowing cries of *"huzzah"* thrice.

'Alright, Mister Adams, that is all.'

That is all? Adams was vexed. Were they to ignore the ships dead ahead, pressing down with full sail? And was Ryan really not going to inform the officers about their plans to repair the ship? Inaction would ultimately lead to their demise and secrecy would only inflame the crew. But more than anyone it was Cooper who stood vexed, dumbfounded, passing a knowing look to Spencer. For him, it definitely did not make sense. What did he mean *"that is all"*? Surely he was about to announce his friend's promotion as well. Cooper knew of it, Spencer knew of it and the entire ship bar perhaps Adams knew of it. It suddenly dawned upon Cooper, the man's son would be relegated in rank. No longer would FitzRyan stand as an acting lieutenant. The ship was a frigate, a sixth-rate. The usual complement of lieutenants was only two and now they would have four. There was no room for an acting fifth lieutenant.

'Ah, sir,' Adams politely enquired, stumbling in good faith, unaware. 'May we ask about Mister Spencer, who also sat?'

'Oh? No word as yet. Typical though, 'ey? In the meantime, see to it Mister Cooper is written into the books, duly promoted to third lieutenant. Naturally, Mister FitzRyan will therefore assume the rank of acting fourth lieutenant. Actually, perhaps now is a good time to meet with our newest lieutenant? I say there, ask Mister Cooper to step forward.'

'Naturally, sir,' Adams replied, proudly ushering Cooper forth, though the matter of the unknown ships remained a niggling itch in his side. 'May I present Mister Cooper, our newest lieutenant. If you recall, sir, he is the one who has been assisting your son in furtherance of his studies. They have been shipmates upon the flag, Formidable, under Admiral Rodney.'

'Damn you, sir! I know the flag and who commands her! You need not lecture me!'

'Apologies, sir,' Adams returned, somewhat flabbergasted, now treading ever so lightly, begging to choose his next words oh so carefully. It was a trivial gripe, but the outburst had definitely hit amidships. It was not such an

unexpected scolding though, Adams already verbally beaten more times than a piñata surrounded by a rabble of hungry children. He looked upon the bright side, such was his irrepressible nature. Ever was he learning about this captain. It was the first port of call for any competent first lieutenant, wisely measuring the temper of their commander. Yet it seemed the thermometer in this case was precariously close to erupting, already well past boiling. 'Sir, truly was it just an overzealous moment. Of course, I know you know, sir.'

'Ah, Mister Cooper!' Ryan boomed, noting the customary knuckle upon the lad's forehead, the salute a subordinate was cautioned to always make. Cooper had been taught early on, if in doubt, just salute. He was obviously a very young officer, slender, a boyish charm still lingering. With hat in hand he eyed his captain directly. It was a prudent practice. He stood upright, portraying an air of confidence. For once Ryan looked somewhat pleased. 'We do not know each other so well yet, but I am sure time will afford a natural remedy. Was that you who made the call in the masthead for our recent sightings?'

'Aye, sir.'

'I see. And if I was not mistaken, you were first to the masthead in your little race? Ah, don't be modest now man, a *"well done"* is in order! And I understand this was your first attempt, your examination for lieutenant?'

'Aye, sir,' returned Cooper, in obvious exuberance.

'I see, I see,' he thoughtfully paused. 'But then how old are you, sir? You do not look like you have served your six years?'

'Nineteen and a bit, sir.'

'Ah, joined the service right on the mark then 'ey? What is that, six years of service, or did you sneak in a tad early, 'ey? C'mon, do not be shy, you can tell me.'

He would never. To sneak in early was an unwritten privilege only afforded an elite family, otherwise it was a heinous offence. For example, Admirals would see their sons aboard at age eleven, rather than submit their childhood education to landlubber teachers who knew little about life at sea. Only after serving six years would a young gentleman be eligible for lieutenant, the minimum age nineteen. It was curious though how a panel of captains still managed to pass the son of an admiral, conveniently ignoring the question of age. If Cooper were to suddenly admit he had started ship life prior to age thirteen, he might see his promotion relegated, dismissed out of hand for dishonesty. He was the son of a preacher, not an Admiral.

'Firstly, sir, I would never lie to my captain. And you are correct, it being six years from my very first day to my date with the examination board. As you know it was held one week prior, however yesterday is the more important date, now confirmed by you. I shall never forget it, sir.'

‘Aye, nor shall I, young sir! Indeed, we are to be congratulated together, my commission to post also falling on the same wondrous day. Well then, ever will you be welcomed on my quarterdeck, a great day for you and our ship. If I am to hazard a guess, I believe you are off duty presently?’

‘Sir, that is correct. My watch finished half a bell ago. I was planning on attending to our midshipman and their studies, just a small informal gathering, including your son, Mister FitzRyan.’

‘My son?’ he vexed, looking about, FitzRyan’s face oddly absent.

‘Aye, sir, we had the pleasure of each other’s company in service aboard Formidable. Jointly had we been studying for our examination for lieutenant, ever since we weighed anchor in Portsmouth.’ Suddenly appearing behind Cooper wobbled a tiresome figure. FitzRyan averted his eyes somewhat, knowing full well the wrath of his father. He made his knuckle and managed a forced half-smile. ‘Alright, Mister FitzRyan. Stand up straight, sir, when in front of your captain. Make yourself known, be confident, there’s a good fellow.’

‘If he was confident, he would not have failed the last five examinations, would he? And his race to the masthead was such a dismal attempt, lucky to have even made it. We can only hope and pray. Good god, how many years now since he was of age and eligible?’

‘In years, I am twenty-three now, sir.’

‘Oh, sixth time will be a charm, sir,’ added Cooper confidently, knowing full well it was a hopeless case. FitzRyan should be put off the ship. He wasn’t exactly useless though. He excelled in some areas, only to dismally fail in others. The Royal Navy was not the lifelong vocation for him, not with lives at risk under his command. Most candidates would realise this and retreat to land to find their feet in life elsewhere. Yet most candidates did not have a father standing in their way.

‘The sixth time would need a lucky charm!’ Ryan retorted, grabbing the cane and retiring to a chair next to Jenkins. Jenkins was still hugging the cannon but had woken now, too frightened to utter a word. ‘Mister Cooper, please act as a presiding captain and test Mister FitzRyan, as if this is his next examination.’

‘Sorry, sir, did you say test him, now, today?’ gulped Cooper, knowing full well this was trouble. He noted the cane gripped tightly in his captain’s palm, an unusual glint gracing the man’s eye. Fearful thoughts surfaced as he glanced upon FitzRyan, perhaps now in jeopardy, his father’s wrath pressing.

‘Aye, I have a theory that perhaps he just simply lacks the proper motivation. We will test it, ’ey?’ he grinned, a soulless sparkle emanating the wince of a hungered gaze.

‘Sir, may I report that Mister FitzRyan has been making solid progress in many areas, areas which often prove most difficult. Perhaps his recent failure was merely due to some rigorous obscure question, just bad luck? With some good luck, the next attempt should produce some happy news.’

‘Happy news, really?’ he softly doubted, his brow rising. Ryan had been waiting for the day his son might finally be of age and thus qualify for promotion. When it came had it passed without success. The following years had proven an embarrassment to the entire family. Today was no different, another junior midshipman jumping him in rank. ‘We can only hope. Schooled him you say, ’ey? It was a long voyage from Portsmouth. Surely he must have learnt something? Aye, we can only hope.’

Ryan shifted in his place, the chair an uncommon exuberance for any captain upon the sacred quarterdeck. Yet, he was old. He also called for a drink, his steward tearing away better than any March Hare. Ryan continued to fumble the cane, fidgeting with its quality. This was probably the last scenario Cooper might ever have imagined, for once his thoughts somewhat blank.

‘Sir?’ Adams sternly interrupted, failing to understand why this captain had not long ago been secured into a strait waistcoat and shipped to some long-lost asylum. ‘I must point out that we have two unknown ships bearing down. That is two, sir. In addition, as you know, ours is a ship whose seaworthiness is failing with every passing moment. We cannot run, should the need arise. I had thought your call to report was for a council of war?’

‘To what avail?’ he dryly responded. ‘Oh, what a fellow you are, sir! There is little else we can do with our *“failing”* ship. Are we not already following your plan to repair her? Why would we need a council for that?’

‘Sir, to apprise the officers of our plans,’ he urged, almost as if reasoning with a child. ‘To which they will in turn inform the men. I would expect there can only be strong murmurings at present, scuttlebutt rife. It will ever comfort the men to know their officers are competent and have it at hand.’

‘Well, I disagree. The men should simply know their place and trust their captain and do their duty irrespective. And as far as the ships *“bearing down”*, they are ours, British. Did you not hear me announce it as such?’

‘I believe you mentioned it, but only as a possibility? But are we sure, sir? With respect, we are yet to hear from the masthead and presently the ships are too far away to accurately discern anything. In any case, should they indeed be British ships, are we to ask for their assistance, or let them slide by?’

‘They are British ships, sir! I have seen their ensigns. And aye, we will be letting them slide by. Be damned if we need our name in their logs, detailing the glory of our ineptness!’

‘But sir, a storm hounds with night soon to fall. Surely we must seek assistance?’

‘Enough of this!’

‘Perhaps, sir?’ Cooper softly interrupted, hoping to lead his captain’s rage away from Adams. ‘We could start with Mister FitzRyan showing you his expertise with rope, with some tricky knots?’

‘I think *not*,’ he bluntly decided, forming a wry grin.

‘Oh, very good, sir!’ sniggered Cooper, immediately recognising the play on words. The quip may have been accidental, but it gave Cooper the opportunity to present a much-needed distraction, publicly applauding the ingenuity. Adams would only find trouble should he continue to cross swords with this captain. Cooper esteemed Adams more than any officer he had ever known. Hardly was he about to see such an exemplary officer caught in some ridiculous disciplinary muddle, especially when sharp minds were presently needed. Ryan smirked, his affection for Cooper obviously growing.

‘Alright, Mister Cooper, let us come back to the *“not”* tying later. Please choose anything else, just not boxing the compass. I aim to be entertained and that one is so mind-numbingly tedious, ’ey? A lesson learnt should be a lesson well learnt.’

‘Very well,’ he nodded noting Adams had retreated for now, the man noticeably cringing within. ‘Mister FitzRyan, upon the sighting of the ships earlier, at what distance would you say they were?’

‘Oh sir,’ he started, immediately recognising Cooper as his superior, seemingly without any malice, jealously or difficulty. It did not go unnoticed either, an irrefutable testament of the man’s character. ‘Sixty thousand feet, as a guess.’

‘But a bloody good guess!’ rejoiced Ryan, happily surprised.

‘Very good, how did you come to this?’

‘Oh, because they were hull-down over the horizon, only the sails showing. From the masthead of a frigate, the horizon is about eleven miles.’

‘And from the quarterdeck?’

‘Oh, it is much less, about five miles.’

‘Good god!’ exclaimed Ryan, nodding in exuberance, sipping his rum a little quicker.

‘And how long, perhaps as a guess, until we meet with said ships?’

‘My guess is just under a bell, maybe twenty-five minutes.’

‘I see and how did you arrive at your estimation?’

‘Well, sir, it’s been about a bell since they were sighted by the masthead. Only now can we just see them from the quarterdeck. That means they are about half-way to us. It has taken them thirty minutes to achieve that.’

‘And how long until the sun descends, soon to leave us in darkness?’

‘Perhaps fifty-five minutes, sir,’ he confirmed, holding out his palm, counting the number of fingers between the horizon and the sun. This had Spencer raising an eyebrow, the technique only just taught to him this day.

‘Good show!’ Ryan applauded, astounded. ‘You seem to be an exceptional tutor, Mister Cooper!’

‘Aye, sir, your son is sound in his assumptions and solid in his methods. He has not utilised any higher mathematics, of course, just common sense and some rote learning, plus a few tricks picked up along the way. This is definitely the thought process of a competent officer.’

‘I stand amazed. Well, Mister Cooper, more if you please.’

‘Next, Mister FitzRyan will regale the esteemed officers present with the particulars of our new ship.’

‘Oh sir, aye, Hinchinbrook, twenty-four long nines, four six pounders, thirty-three feet at the beam by over one hundred feet...’

‘Exactly, sir, if you please,’ demanded Cooper.

‘Sorry, sir, one hundred and fifteen feet in length with a depth of fifteen feet. She was launched in seventy-eight by the French, originally Astrée, a privateer, a corvette in fact, built in Nantes. She was captured by the Royal Navy in October and subsequently commissioned in December of the same year, her purchase cost nearly six thousand pounds.’

‘Astonishing!’ remarked Ryan, his tone sliding, his lip hovering without a quiver now for the last minute.

‘He can tell you about most of the ships in our fleet. Given time, he will know them all.’

‘Impressive, but of little use is it not?’

‘A matter for you to decide, sir,’ Cooper lightly touched. ‘But to know our own ships and that of our enemy can never put us at any disadvantage. Now, Mister FitzRyan, might you tell us about the weather gage?’

‘Oh sir, aye, the weather gage, or gage for short, refers to the situation where the wind is coming from the back of the ship.’

‘Back of the ship?’ questioned Ryan softly, one eyebrow twitching.

‘Aye, correct, *“abaft”* the ship. Continue,’ insisted Cooper.

‘When attacking with the wind, I mean with the gage, it affords us the chance to aim our…’

‘Cannon?’ answered Cooper for him, now detecting the emergence of the befuddled FitzRyan everyone had come to expect. He was becoming nervous, starting to struggle with his thoughts, agitation setting in.

‘Aye, aim our cannon as we see fit, since the wheel can make small turns to the left and right without having to change our sails. When sailing into the wind, this is not possible. Thus, the wind, I mean the gage, affords a tactical advantage.’

‘Wheel? Small turns? Left and right? Change our sails?’ mumbled Ryan.

‘Aye, correct. The *“helm”*, or wheel, indeed can make *“minor adjustments”*, small turns to *“larboard”* or *“starboard”*, left and right as you say. When *“wearing”* the ship, as you have described, we can choose the preferred angle of attack, aiming our cannon as we see fit, a tactical advantage. In addition, there is no need to *“tack”* or to *“go about”*, which would require the crew to *“swing the yard”* and *“brace the sails”*. There would be no changing of the sails, as you say. Very good, Mister FitzRyan!’

‘Oh, I have a question for you, just a small one,’ Ryan insisted, having picked up on his son’s linguistic deficiencies. Cooper knew this was trouble. He knew FitzRyan often failed in this arena. It was the one area to which his mind had regularly come unstuck. He was not lacking, of course. He knew the content, but just couldn’t verbalise the seafaring phrases. It was the same with his writing skills, often mixing his words, sometimes writing them backwards. Under pressure, it would only exacerbate, much like a young boy stuttering. ‘Mister FitzRyan, please to tell us which side of the ship a captain enters with full honours and fanfare, to be *“piped”* aboard as such?’

‘Oh sir, aye, the side the dock is on, the left side, always.’

Ryan immediately lifted his cane. With wildness he struck Jenkins on the thigh, the lad suddenly yelping. Ryan’s wrath had re-emerged, all satisfaction now lost. He turned to face his son, veins pulsing the sides of his head.

‘The *“left”,* you say? But a ship does not have a left or a right side, does it now?’ he berated. He held the cane high and hit the youngster again. ‘If you cannot tell me, I will continue to hit Mister Jenkins. I will hit him again and again, until you can properly tell me. It seems he is now coherent and wholly awake? What is your answer, sir?’ he demanded. FitzRyan could only mumble, lost in the deepening shadow of some private world, dribbling to hopelessly find the right phrase. He knew it was the left side of the ship. To him it was quite clear which was left and which was right, the ship only able to travel in one direction. What other side could it be? His gaze fell upon young Jenkins, wholly awake, eyes running red, pleading for the answer. Another strike fell sharply and then another. Ryan continued, vehemently. ‘Alright, Mister Jenkins. Young sir, perhaps you will answer the question for him, quickly now! Should your reply be correct, you will be saved from the next strike.’

‘Sir!’ he whimpered, forcing out the response. ‘Naval etiquette demands that any captain received to larboard should, in honour of their rank, be piped aboard.’

‘Larboard, ’ey, correct! That is how an officer answers. Well done, Mister Jenkins. Now, Mister FitzRyan, how is it a wet-nose like Jenkins

already knows more than you? Have you not served at sea some ten years in seniority, really?'

'Father, if you must, I beg you to hit me!'

'Don't you *"Father"* me! I am your captain, sir. You must motivate yourself, aye, be properly motivated! If you cannot, then I must do it for you!'

'Sir, Captain!' Adams strenuously objected. 'Mister Jenkins has since received his punishment, in full. What is your reasoning for this? You have now hit him more times than a jack caught stealing a biscuit. I must protest!'

'Mister Adams, I cannot very well flog a lieutenant, even an acting lieutenant, can I? So it must be Jenkins. Aye, he will assume the punishment for Mister FitzRyan from now on.'

From now on? Adams could not comprehend the statement. Surely he did not mean to continually flog young Jenkins? A captain may have been the judiciary upon the sea, a power unrivalled, holier than thou, but they still had to operate within the Articles of War. It was clear the sun was rapidly descending. The two ships were noticeably closer. Even Martinique was looming high into the horizon.

'Sir, we simply do not have time for this!'

'Perhaps, in this, you are correct. Alright, enough, but for the love of god, one last simple question. If you are correct, I will even release Mister Jenkins. Mister FitzRyan, how would you designate the two ships afore us? What class of ship might they be? The lookout reports they are two-masted. Your answer, sir?'

'Sloops, sir, sloops-o'-war,' he finally gasped, his attention narrowly focused upon Cooper who had quite stealthily mouthed the answer.

True to his word, the captain dismissed FitzRyan and released Jenkins. Poor Jenkins had to be assisted from the quarterdeck, unable to walk. Adams knew there was very little their doctor could prescribe, time the only real healing agent available. The brutality had been fierce, bereft of all common sense. This was not just an inept captain, but a very dangerous one. Adams weighed his options. Short of mutiny or the captain falling over dead in the next available moment, there was very little he could do. He would bide his time, see to the repair of the ship and wait. It could only get worse and he knew it.

'An urgent word, sir,' Cooper begged, catching his first lieutenant's eye. 'Sorry to interrupt.'

'Quickly, Mister Cooper, I have a mess here to clean.'

'Sir,' he whispered. 'But was Mister FitzRyan right, about the sloops?'

'What, don't you know? C'mon, what do you mean, sir? I clearly saw you mouthing the answer to him!'

‘Ah, what keen eyes you possess, sir,’ he innocently feigned. ‘Yet what else could a two-masted vessel be? But are the ships afore us really both sloops-o’-war?’

‘Aye, both, so we have been told, confirmed now even by Bull. It seems in my overzealousness to protect the ship I have been made the fool.’

‘And they are flying the jack, confirmed British?’

‘Aye, confirmed.’

‘But sir, this is ill!’

‘What?’ he paused, not quite comprehending. He knew Cooper was intelligent, a quick-witted officer, their days together upon Formidable most illuminating. In fact, it was Adams who had recommended Cooper’s reassignment to Hinchinbrook. Adams was definitely open-minded, ready to listen, albeit the officer before him a lieutenant for barely just one day. ‘Quickly now, Mister Cooper, out with it. You shall not be scolded by me for performing your duty, sir. You know I have your back!’

‘Well, it’s just that Captain Byron’s squadron doesn’t have any sloops.’

‘What?’

‘As you are aware, sir, I am a keen study of each and every ship in our fleet. I know them all off by heart. I know mostly where they are stationed, especially our lookout squadron. In fact, bar Magnificent, seventy-four, they are all frigates except for the lead scout. Sir, the lead scout is a real runner, Agamemnon, a sixty-four.’

‘What!’ he vexed. ‘There’s no sixty-four gun in the two ships afore us.’

‘No, sir. Being that they are sloops it is likely they are French.’

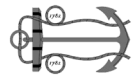
‘Flying the jack?’

‘It has been done before. Not an uncommon trick, especially when dealing with a larger foe such as a frigate. After all, sir, how else would two sloops manage to get close enough, hoping to board and take her a prize? What would you do?’

‘Good god!’

‘And sir, because they are flying the jack, it is a mathematical certainty they are the enemy. They would have been better to fly nothing at all and kept us guessing. Since we have no sloops out here, logic determines that they must be French. I would need to get a look at the ships themselves. But if they get in close and we remain unaware, I think we will fall on the wrong side of such an engagement.’

‘For the love of god!’



Captain's Log — 20 Mar 1782

March 20, 1782, Wednesday, First Dog Watch: *There has been nothing remarkable to report. For long the horizons have been clear, the weather fair with tide and wind assisting. There has been no contact with any enemy shipping this day, which perhaps in itself might be considered remarkable. We are told there purports to be an enormity of enemy shipping, so much that collisions are commonplace. Short of standing watch in the masthead myself, I can only gather that perhaps we have not properly availed ourselves. I have ordered an extra watch assigned, in diligence to fulfil our duty and orders. To that end, finally have we spotted two sloops to our west, identified as part of Captain Byron's lookout squadron, still nothing of consequence*

It has become apparent that the senior officer does not know his business. Cannon accuracy and reloading time are poor, to say the least. Our best speed has also not improved. Discipline is lax. I am certain there are now murmurings amongst the crew, nothing a few floggings won't fix.

Your obedient servant
Captain Ryan

Chapter V

Council of War

The sloops gingerly approached, the setting sun abaft sinking low in the sky. Their silhouettes ripened, deepening within the tinge of a crimson haze intensifying. Their shadows ran long, relentlessly marching, ever chasing the gloom. Wisps of cloud playfully swirled, the horizon muddled, a translucent iridescent murk gathering. It promised to be a most wondrous twilight, or so Adams had commented, a trained eye studiously immersed within his peeper. Should battle be joined and should they suddenly be destroyed, it would be in grand style. Within the magnified view the sloops were now surrendering every little detail. Trailing their sterns, streaming wildly the naval ensigns of the British Empire fluttered. The *"jacks"*, as they were called, were of curious interest, enormous wads of red cloth, the flag of Great Britain distinctly filling their upper left corners. Yet with twilight waning and dusk beckoning, a change of wind and tide loomed. The first lieutenant grinned, the sloops noticeably labouring. It had become something of a slog, close-hauled beating hard into the breeze, tacking from one side to the other. And it was something for which Adams was now thanking the heavens, the extra time a godsend.

The knock upon the captain's cabin was distinct, rapping hard three times. In no way was Adams willing to accept anything but a forthright discussion. He would not be bullied. He would not be sent away. He would wager his entire naval career upon Cooper's assessment, perhaps even his life. He was convinced. They were about to be attacked, most sneakily. If he could not convince Ryan, right here and right now, the war for them would be over, one way or the other. Adams ushered Cooper into the cabin, a necessity naturally, but perhaps also a ploy. To soften their captain, to make him see sense, would likely save their very lives. There was not a moment to lose.

'Captain Ryan, sir, an urgent word if you please, pertaining to the sloops afore us. We have very good reason to believe they are French.'

'Oh no, please, not this again!'

'Sir, it was Mister Cooper who brought this to my attention. I believe you should hear him out?'

'Mister Cooper, 'ey?' he mulled, reconsidering. 'Alright, out with it, but I am readying for supper, so please be to the point.'

‘Sir, I have had a closer look at the sloops,’ Cooper started, quite evenly and quite professionally. ‘Their design and make, even the distinguishable shape of each bow, clearly indicates they were laid down in a French yard.’

‘Ah, as was Hinchinbrook, no? It is a common thing to capture an enemy’s ship and bring them into service, is it not?’

‘Except, sir,’ he paused, ensuring to emphasise his point. ‘There are no sloops in Captain Byron’s lookout squadron.’

‘What did you just say?’

‘No, sir, not a one, they all being mostly frigates. If need be, I can recite every ship in the Leeward Islands Station to attest.’

‘Alright, alright, let us suppose that is true,’ he conceded, hardly doubting Cooper’s young intellect. ‘Maybe these sloops are not part of Byron’s squadron? There are many ships presently in the Windward Islands. And these sloops are flying the jack.’

‘The wrong one, sir,’ he promptly confirmed.

‘What’s that?’ gasped Ryan.

‘They are flying the red, not the white.’

‘No, young sir, surely you have it wrong. Admiral Rodney has since separated our fleet into three squadrons under himself, Drake and Hood.’

‘Aye, sir. The white, the blue and the red, respectively,’ he attentively nodded, making sure his captain understood he was not dealing with some simpleton just trying to impress. ‘I am aware, sir. However, those designations are for the upcoming battle. Prior to Admiral Rodney’s recent arrival, all ships in the Caribbean were under the command of Admiral Hood, under the red, as are we. I am certain the French know this. And sir, Captain Byron is most definitely attached to Admiral Rodney’s squadron.’

‘And as such, should be flying the white,’ Ryan mumbled, now drenched in woe, his world ready to sink. ‘Is there any further corroborating evidence?’

‘Well, sir, there is,’ Adams softly added, enjoying how the cub had subtly tamed the lion, his esteem for this young lieutenant a notch elevated. No doubt Cooper was destined to be a great officer, that is, should he somehow live through the night. ‘These sloops did appear suddenly from the southern tip of Martinique…’

‘Which is perilously close to where the French fleet is thought to be, at Fort Royal Bay,’ stressed Cooper, finishing the sentence for his superior, almost as if they were performing a new play at the Theatre Royal.

‘You are certain?’ probed Ryan, somehow wishing the whole situation would just simply disappear.

‘Aye, sir. It is a solid wager, given the facts,’ Adams sullenly confirmed. ‘We should prepare ourselves, before it is too late. Should they later turn out to be friendlies, we have lost nothing. But if we sit on our hands and are taken

by surprise, two sloops with a sum total of two hundred men would be more than enough to take us.'

Ryan continued to sit quietly. In fact, Adams had never seen him more sedate and all it took was the sudden realisation of certain death or imminent destruction. Ryan's romantic idea of command thrived in a differing world to the reality of his current service, a commission only two days old. It was a chilling thought. By the day's end he verily could be lying dead, or wounded, or drifting aimlessly in a moonless deadened sea full of sharks. For once he seemed amenable to hear his officers out.

'Alternatives?'

'The least desirable first, sir, surrender,' Cooper started, the presentation already prearranged with Adams. 'And sorry to point it out, naturally, but it must be stated. If the sloops decide to shoot it out with us, they would only need one good shot into the rigging. Once we are turned about, we would likely capsize. Sir, with a darkened horizon, this would see every man aboard drowned, no survivors.'

'No survivors?' mumbled Ryan.

'Or we could fight it out, of course,' encouraged Adams.

'But it has just been said they would only need one good shot!'

'Ah, into the rigging, sir,' reminded Cooper.

'To which the French are known to favour!'

'Aye, but they cannot hit our rigging if they cannot aim at it,' smirked Cooper.

'Aye, sir,' Adams furthered. 'We will bring them in nice and close, so close their gun will not be able to bear upon our rigging. They are smaller ships, naturally, so our weather deck will tower above theirs.'

'You mean to go board and board, the sloops up against our sides?'

'Exactly, sir,' Cooper confirmed. 'There are two possible outcomes at the outset of the engagement. The French will either shoot at us from range...'

'Upon which we would be dished, sir,' Adams followed. 'Even if they did not chance a good shot, we cannot manoeuvre the ship, not even with the gage. And even if we could, you saw the cannon exercise yesterday, totally abysmal.'

'Aye, the French will either shoot at us from range or they will try to take us a prize by boarding. They need to get in close without being fired upon. Once the sloops are positioned larboard and starboard, they would swarm upon our decks as ants to a feast.'

'An English feast, sir,' added Adams.

'English feast?' gulped Ryan.

'With all the accompaniments,' finished Cooper.

'But then, sir, 'twould be an even fight,' stressed Adams.

‘Perhaps even better odds I would wager. Should they choose to board us we will retain the element of surprise. We must act as if they are British sloops, let them think we are napping. They won’t be expecting the entire ship’s complement to suddenly spring out of every nook and cranny armed to the teeth. Ours are wild men, sir, most worthy in the department of brawling. So much, should we not offer them a fight soon, I fear they will just start fighting each other.’

‘A blood-thirsty band ’ey?’ grinned Ryan.

‘More than a fair share of Scots,’ nodded Adams.

‘In addition, we can throw one hundred and twenty pounds in a single broadside, whereas they can only manage thirty, maybe forty. I give us one in three odds, better than any gentlemen’s table, sir.’

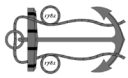
‘So, let me get this straight,’ Ryan pondered, his two lieutenants eagerly eyeing him as if waiting on a juicy ham steak to finally sear. ‘We have two sloops bearing down, likely French. They might decide to shoot at us from range. We simply don’t know? But that would see us strike or founder. Alternatively, they might try to lie alongside and board us, a fight hand-to-hand, dirty business. We have one hundred and ninety souls to their approximate two hundred, an even match, albeit the element of surprise lies with us. Once alongside, our cannon would dominate, though we would need all our gun crews topside to repel boarders and take the fight to them. From what I can see, the only tricky part is to somehow lure them in without spooking the cat? Does that just about sum it up?’

‘Aye, sir. And as far as *“spooking the cat”*, please not to worry,’ reassured Adams.

‘Oh?’

‘Aye, young Cooper has a plan.’

‘Of course he does, of course he does.’



Chapter VI

Duck on the Water

Hinchinbrook had hove-to. Almost coming to a full stop, her canvas continued to spill wind, a polite gesture when offering ships at sea a cordial meeting. The gunports were shut, a minimal crew meandering the weather deck. Ryan, Adams and Cooper stood officiously on the quarterdeck, their best dress uniforms adorned, ready to receive guests.

'Alright, Mister Cooper, what are they doing?' urged Ryan.

'As expected, they have chosen not to attack us at range. It makes logical sense, of course.'

'Oh, but of course, never in doubt,' mocked Adams.

'They don't know we are a winged duck, unable to even turn properly. Normally at range a frigate would outgun two sloops such as these. They are probably rejoicing right now, thinking they have us fooled. It seems we are in for a brawl, sir.'

'Ah, provided they are in fact French.'

'About that, sir, they most definitely are not French.'

'What?'

'They are most definitely Colonials, rebels. I have been watching them carefully through my peeper. My compliments to their captains, they have disguised the sloops perfectly. But one cannot hide mannerisms. Indeed, they have given themselves away.'

'I am not sure I can believe you, young sir,' challenged Ryan.

'Indeed, Mister Cooper?' questioned Adams.

'You said they were sloops from a French yard?'

'Oh sir, of that there is no doubt.'

'Maybe the rebels purchased them from the French?' played Adams.

'Privateers? Oh, very well, proceed with our plan.'

Cooper went about the ship swifter than an admiral late for supper. Within moments the fresh wafting of English stew emanated onto the weather deck, a pungent aroma. It was all part of the ruse, of course, the Colonials bound to sniff it. A crew sitting down to supper was an easy target. Suddenly the harmonising of an overture broke the silence. The band opened with *"Heart of Oak"*, the newly adopted melody for the march of the Royal Navy. Again, all part of the ruse, a welcoming gesture to placate the visitors. Cooper strolled

the sides of the ship whispering orders under his breath. Landsmen and jacks huddled low under the cover of loose canvas. Most were armed with pistols and blades. Not every landsman had a blade though, clubs the preferred alternative. Cooper comforted them as he slid by. Slyly were the jacks updated, urged to hold fast, to stay strong. They were to remain hidden. Not a soul was to itch, scratch, or fidget, silence paramount. Not even a whisper would be entertained—under pain of being shot, skinned and hung and not in that order either. To be uncovered at this vital stage would negate the element of surprise. Their plans to defend the ship would unravel, perhaps to the demise of every soul aboard. Thankfully the number of enemy eyes would be very few. The sloops sat much lower. The danger lay in the lookouts atop, keenly surveying the deck of Hinchinbrook, sniffing for anything out of place.

Cooper arrived upon the forecastle, the raised deck situated at the bow. A number of sailors milled about, their hands full of rope busying themselves, another ploy. It was here he had hidden in plain sight the deadliest of the ship's fighters, the jollies. Normally they wore bright red cloaks, professional soldiers sometimes known as *"lobsters"*. Cooper had every jolly dressed in any old cloak, anything except bright red. Marines were always assigned to any ship of war, their number usually matching the number of cannon. Hinchinbrook followed this tradition and presently had twenty-eight jollies plus a lieutenant. They all had long muskets, fixed with bayonets. They would ply their trade at range, though if challenged were more than ready.

Cooper turned, a last look, casting his eye upon the poop, the rear of the quarterdeck. Even though they were at the other end of the ship, he could just make out the second squad of jollies. They would protect the officers. He thought of each squad much like a pincer, long muskets positioned on elevated flanks able to penetrate the onslaught from a safe distance. It was a prudent strategy, each squad unable to be flanked, firing in volleys, safely reloading. They would bolster the jacks and landsmen, thinning out the charge through the centre. There was bound to be a clutter of Colonials in the middle, a bottleneck as they dared to board. It would be no different to archers on a battlefield, picking off the enemy at leisure. Cooper's gaze drew upon the tops, the mastheads rife with experienced sharpshooters, pretending to be lookouts. They would wreak havoc on the sloops, especially the enemy sharpshooters.

With a skip in his step, Cooper made his way to the gun deck, the home of the ship's long-nosed nine pound cannon. It was the only deck where he could see from one end of the ship to the other. What a grand sight, he thought —two long rows of cannon, a solitary jack stationed at each. He grinned as he noted the taller jacks ducking somewhat in the limited headroom, determined nonetheless. It was a deck of war, no place for shy men or men

lacking in wits. Mister FitzRyan immediately greeted him, a wry grin, quickly making his knuckle.

‘Mister Cooper, we are ready. Each gun has been loaded and primed, ready to be fired. As ordered, every second gun has been loaded with grapeshot. Please note the white cloth upon each to avoid confusion.’

‘Outstanding, Mister FitzRyan,’ Cooper complimented. The white cloth was not a surprising addition, FitzRyan prone to a befuddled state of confusion at the best of times. It made sense he would employ such necessities. ‘Grapeshot is a formidable defence against a wild charge. The spread of shrapnel, if used correctly, could mean the difference between victory and utter destruction. Apply your aim carefully,’ he urged, now noting the existence of a large red cloth to larboard and a large blue cloth to starboard. ‘And pray tell, what do these larger clothes signify?’

‘Red for the left side of the ship and blue for the right side.’

‘Very well,’ Cooper nodded. He held back a swelling grin. Good god, he thought, the man was simply unable to verbalise even the simplest seafaring phrase, so much it was perhaps something worthy of scientific study. At least FitzRyan was doing his best with what he had. At least he had the good sense to make suitable accommodations. God forbid should he give the order to fire the wrong side of the ship at the wrong time, or even the wrong cannon. The jacks did not seem to mind either, perhaps even considering his affliction an endearing trait, much like the affection for a three-legged hound. ‘Upon the signal will you fire the grapeshot. That is the grapeshot only now, the cannon with white cloth. Please do not misunderstand which is which. We aim to clear their decks of men, not destroy her. The heavy shots will likely not be needed. Our aim is to take those sloops a prize! If our fight falls foul though, be ready. You will only have one broadside, no chance to reload, not with only one man per gun.’

‘Goodness, half a broadside would be more than enough!’

‘Correct, even half a broadside at close range would see any sloop sunk, no doubt. More than anything, be sure to repel boarders. We cannot allow them to come at us through the lower decks. If you feel at any moment you might be overwhelmed, send a powder monkey to the quarterdeck waving a red handkerchief. Make sure your men are prepared.’

‘We have a goodly number of jacks here, sir, twenty-four! Please do not worry. They will be sorry sods to try it on this bunch!’

‘I have faith in you, Mister FitzRyan, never doubt it.’

‘Aye, sir. And sir, thank you for all you have done,’ he sincerely expressed, his face softening, perhaps wary they may never see each other again. ‘No one has ever helped me as much as you. I have learnt so much. I honour you.’

‘Don’t be like that now. You and I will be here at the end of this fight!’

Cooper finally arrived back at the quarterdeck, a loyal hound returning with the pheasant. The music was flowing, the sweet scent of fresh stew wafting, the weather deck bereft of all and any sailors bar a small sailing crew. The officers lined the quarterdeck, now taking their hats in hand to happily wave at the sloops.

‘Good grief,’ Ryan complained. ‘I feel stupid!’

‘Keep smiling, sir,’ urged Cooper.

‘Aye, sir,’ Adams comforted, grinning worse than a wildcat as he grit his teeth. ‘Our lads are throwing them ropes now.’

‘Perhaps a keen eye to their ensigns, sirs,’ Cooper suggested. ‘They will have to strike the jack and raise their flag before they can begin. And if it pleases, I have ordered all cannon on this deck, our six pounders, to be loaded with grapeshot. I have also taken the liberty to point them directly at our gangway, aimed down the mouth of the quarterdeck’s entrance, it being the only way up here. Ah, may I suggest, good sirs, that on commencement of battle you might prefer to reposition and stand somewhat behind them?’

‘You may, Mister Cooper.’

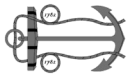
‘Well, that is very gentlemanly,’ mocked Ryan, his bottom lip dragging as he studied the four cannon at the far end the deck, pointed ominously at their backs.

‘We must endeavour to thank you later, sir, for remembering to tell us!’

‘Please not to worry, Mister Adams, they cannot be fired just yet.’

‘I see. How comforting,’ he returned, though his gaze suddenly drew upon the sloops. They had now tied themselves to Hinchinbrook. Two officers apiece grappled the rope to climb aboard. ‘Mister Cooper, it seems both captains and their first lieutenants are preparing to come aboard? Was that part of the plan?’

‘Indeed, Mister Cooper, I thought you said they were Colonials?’ huffed Ryan.



Chapter VII

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Supper Time

The officers clambered up the side, *"piped"* aboard by the ship's bosun. As was the tradition, a handful of the crew stood in formation nearby, *"manning the side"*. The pipe itself was quite small, a glorified whistle of sorts, yet more than enough to release a shrill call. There were many *"calls"* it could muster, usually mixed combinations of low and high pitches, short and long. Within the Royal Navy, even ever since the Crusades, had it proven crucial, an irrefutable means with which commands were passed to the crew. With a crew of hundreds, especially when the sea was pounding or an ocean breeze was howling, it was the only way which wholly ensured the clarity of each and every order. The current call was easily distinguishable, pitching low to a long high and suddenly back to low.

Spencer officially greeted the guests. Without delay he ushered them to the nearby gangway, the external stairs leading to the quarterdeck. They spoke the King's English, happily smiling as they passed comments back and forth. They were not adorned in the frocks of British officers, in itself not such a surprise, not for privateers. Spencer managed them well, ensuring they were visually entertained as they made the short trek, hoping to avert their gaze from the scores of blood-thirsty sailors hiding barely a few feet away. With the shadows deepening, even he was having a hard time discerning anything except a tidy weather deck, just a handful of jacks milling about. He noted one officer taking in the sweet scent of stew, knowing looks subtly passed.

'It seems we are just in time for supper?'

'Aye, sir, the crew currently messing below,' led Spencer cleverly, one eye always upon them.

Upon the quarterdeck, somewhat in a state of absolute angst, Captain Ryan was lividly berating his lieutenants. Adams was by now quite used to it, a practised hand. Cooper could only weather the umbrage in silence, to his mind the jury still out. He was adamant the sloops were not British. However, exhibit *"a"*, not to mention exhibit *"b"*, sat only some twenty feet away. Both sloops had politely moored upon the sides of Hinchinbrook, the naval ensign of the Admiral of the Red fluttering indignantly as evidence to the contrary. They had also taken care not to scratch the sides. Even Adams, who most definitely had wagered his entire existence upon the sloops being their enemy,

was expecting a barrage of musket and a storming of cutlasses well before this. He simply could not fathom why any enemy would dare board without a flag of truce, without legal protection. Yet here they were, an afternoon stroll, a polite chat and perhaps even dinner on offer. It certainly appeared as if he and Cooper had been mistaken. Yet the ships were not part of Byron's lookout squadron and they definitely were not part of the Royal Navy. The conclusion begged that they had to be British privateers, the only other logical reasoning.

'Mister Adams, I have been made the fool, sir!' Ryan huffed, his puffy face turning a deep shade of crimson, a sullen gloom even Adams had yet before seen. 'I should have known these sloops were not our enemy!'

'Very sorry, sir.'

'Sir, if I may, some leeway on this, if for just a moment?' Cooper begged. 'Let us hear them out at the very least before we show our hand? I cannot say too much now, but I have very good reason.'

To date had Cooper's striking young intellect impressed, hints of a blossoming young officer emerging. In short time had his captain come to respect, perhaps even like him. Cooper's latest request had indeed been heard. It had given Ryan pause, the man gaping as he pondered his next words. There was very little time. Led by Spencer their visitors were now before them. They made their salute, four officers abreast, all armed to the teeth, a curiosity which had not escaped the meticulous attention of the third lieutenant. Introductions were made, pleasantries exchanged, the visitors immediately confirming their operation in the Windward Islands as privateers.

'You are welcome, Captain Willis. To what do we owe this pleasure? Do you have some news for us?' probed Ryan.

'Perhaps we were lured by the aroma of your wonderful stew, Captain,' he returned jovially. 'But it seems we have arrived at an inconvenient time, your crew currently messing?'

'Indeed they are, sir,' Cooper answered, noting the immaculate state of dress adorning each officer. They all had beaver pelt tricorne hats, their coats tucked tightly, double-breasted style and even though the darkness deepened, the midst of twilight ever softening, each boot shone brightly. 'It is why Captain Ryan could only afford to meet you, our esteemed guests, with little more than our sailing crew. Sir, please accept our apologies.'

'Oh, but it is I who must apologise. I insist, because we have a little request to make, the reason for our little visit.'

'Of course, Captain Willis, how may we assist?'

'Captain Ryan, we humbly request you strike your flag, immediately, sir.'

'What did you just say?' gobbled Ryan.

'We are privateers, but unfortunately for you, we are Colonial privateers, your enemy, sir. We have you surrounded, our cannon trained at your hull.

We have some two hundred men waiting, ready to storm aboard from both sides. Your men are napping, of course. By the time anyone realises, it will be too late. Your gunports are closed and even so, never will you be able to load and fire in time. Genuinely I make this offer, as one esteemed officer to the other. Surrender and all propriety and dignity will be afforded, not only to you, but also to your gallant officers. In doing so may unnecessary bloodshed be averted.'

'But Captain Willis, have you not gone mad? Your ensigns, sir!' he angrily pointed.

'Oh, of course, naturally they will be replaced once you have struck. To do so any earlier would only have resulted in confusion, a bloody mess no doubt. Should your men fire at my men, well, it would quickly spiral out of control. Captain Ryan, it grieves me to ask, but sir, may I please have your sword?'

At first it may have irked Ryan to concede Adams and Cooper had been right all along, but his irritation quickly shifted. To his mind, Captain Willis was a pirate. In no way was he entitled to use the flag of an enemy as such. It had been done before, legally. Usually though, the flag would be swapped as they approached, thereby announcing the call to battle. Yet here stood four Colonial officers, upon his quarterdeck of all places, arrogantly insisting surrender under the fly of the wrong flag. Ryan was already a naturally grumpy captain, ready to flay alive the nearest impudent jack or whip a smug-looking landsman. He didn't even need a reason. He ogled the ensigns, skewing back to Willis in glare. For once he had good reason. It was an affront. He boiled inside. A warring squint mashed his gaze, an indignant spasm forcing a hostile tremble. He eyed the man with disdain, rage filling every thought. To give up his sword would signal the complete surrender of Hinchinbrook. To refuse would instantly see battle joined, commencing on the quarterdeck with himself perhaps first to the sword. He was old and the rebels were young, strong, audacious. Ryan huffed, solemnly nodding, gingerly levering his sword from its sheath. He held it before Willis, much to the befuddled chagrin of Adams and Cooper.

Willis grinned. It was over. He offered his outstretched palms, as if he was about to accept and cradle a newborn. A frigate was a handsome prize, not to mention the headcount of one hundred and ninety souls. He would soon be rich. He might even secure a larger ship, the stepping stones for a privateer ever laced in gold. Scarcely had a frigate ever been captured without a shot being fired. Promotion beckoned, his ingenuity, his bravery, soon to be lauded by his peers. Yet such premature thoughts had no place in the throes of naval battle, an unnecessary distraction, almost disarming. For once Ryan had shown a rare glimpse of his potential worth. Whether he meant to or not, he

had without question lulled the Colonials into a false sense of security. With a sudden twirl, the handle of the sword swiftly found Ryan's grip. Down he brought the blade upon Willis, slashing wildly.

A proficient swordsman would have severed both arms, but Ryan was far from proficient. In fact, his skill was hardly passable. Willis cradled his wound as he stumbled back, hunched, his torn sleeve dyed dark, a crimson muck oozing. It was far from the expected decorum of congeniality, a cordiality to which officers were strongly accustomed. Nonetheless it stood undeniably as an answer to the negative. There would be no surrender. A moment later a musket echoed from the tops, a prearranged signal. The sloops hauled down the British ensigns, swiftly replaced by their own colours, the flag of the Continental Army. A loud rising cheer rang out, the call to battle, the call to take the prize.

Akin to some great duelling standoff, the quarterdeck had transformed into a back-alley pistol fight, the victors likely decided by the quickest draw. It was now four against three. They only had one shot each. Hardly would they miss, barely one yard apart.

Within the sphere of battle there thrived the deadliest of arenas, duelling, a contest one-on-one. They were fights to the death, definitive, brutal, desperate, a lone victor emerging triumphant. Abandon all hope ye who enter here, a practised hand's domain, hardly for the faint of heart. Within this cauldron, to survive one needed experience. Yet in turn, to attain such experience, one needed to survive, hence the conundrum.

To find in actual battle the nimbleness of one's skills somewhat lacking, lost within the bubbling adrenalin of urgency and fright, was to find out the hard way. To draw and accurately fire would require nerves of steel, a steady hand, a focused mind, a ruthless heart. To his credit Ryan's act had taken the rebels by surprise. So much, they were all fumbling for their pistols. Yet in kind had it also taken Ryan's officers by surprise, the playing field somewhat levelled.

It was understandable. The rebels were in the lion's den now, absolute survival dependent upon the vocation of their wits. Yet within the den hardly was the lion assured victory. The outnumbered, the outmatched, the side with more to lose would always fight the hardest. Adams knew this. He was an experienced hand and wasted no time.

Adams lunged forward, electing not to draw his pistol, rushing his opponent empty-handed. Apparently looks can be deceiving. Contrary to his modest appearance, it seemed the first lieutenant of Hinchinbrook was nothing less than a fierce brawler, a lion of all lions. He cleverly caught his opponent by the wrist, holding firm the pistol that in moments would have seen his life to the other side. Shaking it loose, the pistol flew upon the

planking and harmlessly fired. Faced with a loose grappling arm clawing his face, his forehead lunged butting hard his opponent's nose. It was a defining strike, blood spurting as the man wobbled. Adams had the advantage, though hopelessly entangled within a rough embrace.

Ryan, not so unpredictably, had taken a few steps back, his sword nervously pointed. He should have known better, leaving Cooper flanked, now faced with two opponents. One was rummaging his belt, groping. The closest was sturdy, perhaps experienced, or perhaps just a swift hand. Within the officer's palm a flintlock pistol sat balanced. Already the cock was levered, the mechanism which would hammer down and ignite the charge. Cooper's race was trailing, in dire need, in mortal jeopardy. He was alone. Had Spencer been promoted to lieutenant, he might have been stationed somewhat closer. Perhaps it was just a minor detail. However, it would have afforded Cooper assistance, lifesaving no doubt, a somewhat major detail. Indeed *"for the want of a nail the war was lost"*, or in this case, for the want of a friend. Instead, Spencer had been relegated to the side, just a mere midshipman. Yet he was young and strong, a sturdy young man, definitely no slouch. With all his might he rushed to Cooper's aid, fearlessly into the fray, though never would he arrive in time.

In the throes of battle, man to man, one-on-one, there lived a theatre in which widows were made. There would be no running, no surrender and definitely no quarter. The cock of the pistol clicked loudly, echoing within Cooper's lobes. His eyes widened, his heart stiffened, a sudden jolt serving to fix him in place. He eyed the trigger, certain death assured by merely the lightest of touch. His world shrank, caught within some macabre dream and within any dream oh how glacially time annoyingly marched. He eyed the barrel levelled towards him, dim and dusky, his attention strangely caught by the perfection of the metal, an oddity. He peered down the bowels of the darkened snout, a cavernous abyss devoid of reason, the instrument of his demise within. The barrel was barely a yard away, though it might as well have been ten, unreachable. It lined upon him, though seemingly fouled in a small tremble, perhaps nervousness or maybe just the deck pitching in the rolling swell. It was so close now he could almost reach out and touch it. Yet his arms and legs weighed terribly. He urged upon himself an insistence, almost an aching need to forcibly act, to move. Within that moment, perhaps his last, all acuity fell dull. Enveloped he was in haunting silence, an imposition of harshness the innocence of his boyhood years were yet to press. What should have been the blink of an eye passed more as a frozen crawl. The passing of time sought to mock, no less a trudging mire in which he was forced to slog, helplessly watching as if some useless bystander. He noted upon his foe every twitch and rustle, the sweat beading, one eye squinted,

veins bulging. Within the hollowness, within the void, the chambers of his being faded. The emptiness of his soul cried aloud, only the thumping whumps of his heart pounding in trespass. Nearby the wailing cries of jollies fell muted, their gaping mouths hanging as they rushed forth. Yet it was aid which would never come. He was alone, the course of his life his own. He begged to rally his senses, driving with all his might, beseeching his pistol be brought to bear.

The barrel suddenly exploded, the flash immersed within the blazing rage of orange and crimson flame sparking, puffs of whitened cloud wisping, the air dryly bleached. To recant aloud later the ball flying in full view would sound far-fetched. It may have been outlandish, but of it, he was sure. It was a curiosity worth pondering, should he live to see the next moment. Upon his shoulder a deadened weight fell, a hammering, a scorching pinch affirming an unwanted intrusion. It whistled screeching, a wailing chilling cry, though abruptly smothered. Searing his frock, the fragrance of burnt wood wafting settled. Bludgeoned, slammed, his shoulder burning, finally he forced a step, though perhaps more a stumble or a trudge. An annoying haze lightly sought to haunt him, overpowering his every thought, his sight flickering as it gradually faded. His pistol dipped, his grip straining, the world weighing within his palm. He squeezed the trigger and stumbled, finally falling to his knees, consciousness fading.

As a hammer to the anvil, the booming din of a nearby pistol shook Cooper loose, wrenched from his lurid slumber. Through the mist of spent powder his gaze strained, unable to penetrate. Squinting hard to discern his attacker, hope faded. He was defenceless, still groggy and wholly unarmed. He waited for the end, one perhaps he might never see coming. Such was the order of battle, he lamented, the fall of the cards, the hazard of the die. He had always been one to wager, a man who not only knew the odds, but played them. To him life was often a matter of chance, the measure of one's luck the fruit of the tree. His run of luck, it seemed, had finally run out. Through the smoke it finally came, vaguely, the boots of his opponent, unmistakable.

Indeed the dice had been rolled, chance now in command. Yet his enemy lay sprawled upon the deck, stiffened, blood soaking what was once a man's face. He was dead, even likely before the planking was struck, a torched hole perforating the forehead. Cooper rallied his thoughts, setting aside all despair, the wildness of a final glare caught in time attesting. Somehow, he had prevailed.

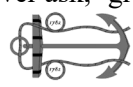
'Coops!' a distant cry hollered, desperation ringing his tone.

Cooper may have been on his knees, he may have been down, but he was not out. All at once the din of battle loudly surfaced, a tumultuous uproar. The faraway cries of war belched from the weather deck, a netherworld littered in

chaos and carnage. Musket balls whizzed through the tops, timbers cracking, splintering as puffs of smoke climbed the rigging. Unable to resist, the sails aloft tore, ripping, canvas randomly popping as if caught in a tempest of windswept corks suddenly discharged. A man fell noiselessly, tumbling as he plummeted, the long drop to the sea his final voyage. Riding the air, ringing, the confusion of musket fire clattered, intensifying. The clangour of steel advanced, a thunderous charge building. No longer was Cooper stuck, no longer was he lost, his senses congregating, a determined grit swelling. Instinctively he grabbed upon his wounded shoulder, a tepid fluid oozing his palm. To his feet he confidently rose, devilry raging his good eye. Shaking his head, still not sure he had survived, he levered out his sword, a cutlass. He would beg to thank god thereafter, his life intact for no other reason but sheer fortune.

Yet to thank god thereafter would presuppose there was in fact a *"there"* in the *"after"*, rather than a *"here"*, a world where breath still filled full Cooper's lungs. The fight for Hinchinbrook had only barely begun. His opponent lay stone dead, shot point-blank. Captain Willis had been slashed and was now on his knees, incapacitated. Adams was still wrestling, though in control. Yet there remained a fourth Colonial officer, untended, roaming free. He was now waving a pistol in each hand, back-peddling daring to aim. For fear of hitting his own had he thus far refrained. But there stood Cooper, open, alone, an easy mark. With eyes widened, he fired. Cooper did not discern the ball, but heard it whizzing, a near miss.

Instinctively Cooper charged, the second pistol already being brought to bear. Another puff of smoke littered the deck, this time the ball glancing the planking about Cooper's feet. At first it was thought to be a poor shot, until a cheeky face surprisingly emerged, a familiar face. Spencer shadowed his target, swinging wildly once again, this time a tremendous punch upon the temple. Oh how he grinned, riotously eyeing Cooper, the lust of battle burning within. Much like a stalker, he snuck next upon Adams's duel. Another solid punch flew, a hammer sledging a reluctant oak. Poor Adams, though ever thankful, appeared somewhat shocked, bewildered. His opponent was suddenly down. He glimpsed the heavens, perhaps searching for a divinity which simply wasn't there, some unseen hand. To the short of it, hardly did it matter. Almost bemused was the first lieutenant, left standing over his fallen foe, a gushing wound washing his face.

'Sirs, let us retire to the cannon abaft. We have a number of jollies there already,' begged Spencer, a kind hand offered.

'Ah, I thought you would never ask,' grinned Adams.