

SHIPS OF WAR
— 1791 —

MURKY WATERS

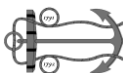
BRADLEY JOHN

1791 — England’s cannon remain ever silent as her shipping is ruthlessly preyed upon, a detestable state of affairs, though soon to be remedied...

England is ill prepared, Europe is in turmoil and the French Revolution is readying to sweep across the continent. A tedious uneasy peace poises on a knife’s edge. Britannia rules the waves, yet as more and more ships mysteriously vanish, it is rightly thought an act of war. However, England needs more time, or all could be lost.

With war looming, Lieutenant Hayden Reginald Cooper, Royal Navy, awaits in Portsmouth braving a bitter cold winter with half pay, beached in a constant state of penury. With little prospects, little “interest” and no chance of promotion or advancement, he is the perfect choice for the Admiralty: unknown, unimportant and wholly dispensable.

As so it begins, a turbulent action-packed naval adventure within the murky waters preceding war, the French piracy soon to discover the grit of a lowly lieutenant, one who has very little to lose...



“Heavily spiced with action... an unbridled and no-holds-barred adventure story that is very much in the illustrious rip-roaring style of the ‘Hornblower’ books of the great C.S. Forester...”

THE HISTORICAL FICTION COMPANY

SECOND EDITION

SHIPS OF WAR—1791—MURKY WATERS

SECOND EDITION

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THE SHIPS OF WAR SERIES

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BY

BRADLEY JOHN*

**THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO
ISOBEL CLARE
(MY DEAR MOTHER)**

PREFACE

The Ships of War series centres around the adventures of Hayden Reginald Cooper, an officer in the Royal Navy. We firstly join him in “*Ships of War—1782—False Colours*”, set in the West Indies within the turmoil of the American Revolutionary War. Dark times forebode, England’s sugar trade at risk, her economy soon to be crippled. A battle of great significance is looming, the Windward and Leeward Islands to be defended at all costs. Our young up-and-coming protagonist, a midshipman barely nineteen years old, tediously awaits the results of his Examination for Lieutenant. Transferred from Flag of the Fleet, Formidable, he is commissioned aboard His Majesty’s Ship Hinchinbrook, a twenty-eight gun frigate charged with scouting the French fleet. It is a shorter narrative, somewhat tumultuous and naturally spiced with battle.

It is now 1791 and Cooper’s adventures continue in England whereupon it is a time of peace, yet hardly peaceful. Unemployed, beached on half pay, times are difficult. However, it seems war is coming. With it comes the chance for employment, promotion and adventure. May I impart that “*Ships of War—1791—Murky Waters*” is an adventure, but unlike False Colours it is also a journey, though hardly smooth sailing. The narrative commences in Portsmouth, whereupon employment is handsomely offered to our protagonist. And so the journey begins, yet one not without its many challenges, Cooper tasked with overcoming a great many obstacles, even just to put to sea.

In this, the second edition, the narrative has been split into three distinct parts, three distinct stages within Cooper’s journey. It will soon become apparent that his commission to fight piracy in fact leads to one pirate in particular, our story’s antagonist. Yet who is the hunter and who is the hunted? Each distinct part causes the narrative to build, ultimately leading to adventure and action, whilst finally culminating in a grand showdown.

In stark contrast to *False Colours*, *Murky Waters* is intended to be lengthy. The reader is afforded breathing space to absorb the stark reality of what is at stake, to gather insights into the background of the period in time. Notably, the reader is afforded the chance to share the depths of Cooper's voyage perhaps in a more personal way. In addition, this edition has been somewhat updated with enhanced descriptions including helpful explanations of the seafaring terms, may our landsmen enjoy the narrative without being lost at sea.

From time to time the style of writing in the *Ships of War* series includes "*atmospheric writing*", a literary technique attempting to create an immersive emotional mood within the narrative, hopefully drawing the reader into the story's world by evoking imagery and visualisation distinct to the reader's experience. An extended example of this is the Prologue, which includes the very first scene of action at sea. In addition, the writing style includes dialogue consistent with the era, sometimes lacking in grammar, yet serving to shape our impression of each character. Rest assured, phrases and words no longer commonly spoken are subtly explained, ensuring fluidity. There is also a detailed Glossary after the Epilogue, an appendix which includes a host of ancient terms, seafaring and otherwise, worth a hearty look.

This instalment of *Ships of War* most importantly introduces the main characters who will sail with Cooper, including their origins and backstories, setting up the many adventures yet to be shared. The reader will find action, conflict, as well as battles at sea within each part, though the heftiest left to last. May your favourite characters live to see the end. We can only hope...

Sincerely
Bradley John

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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.*

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.*

Interest: *is to have support, usually from someone of high society or a position of influence.*

Jack: *is a sailor, but also refers to the union flag which is hoisted in a number of positions upon Agamemnon, the main being at the stern.*

Laid up in ordinary: *a ship out of service for repair or maintenance or a ship no longer required for active service, awaiting a recall.*

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 Cooper’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 “loutenant”.*

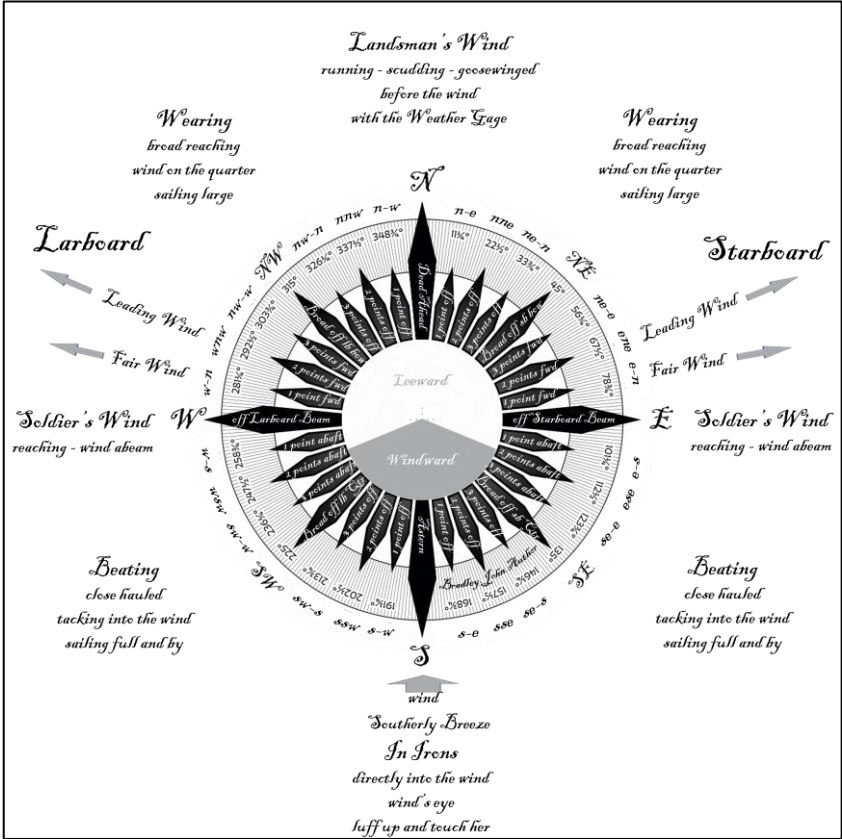
Masthead: *the highest part of a ship’s mast. However, a ship’s mast was often made from a number of smaller masts or spars. As such, “Masthead” also refers to the top of each connecting spar. Platforms (“tops”) were built at the lower mastheads, allowing a base for lookouts, sharpshooters and workers. 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.*

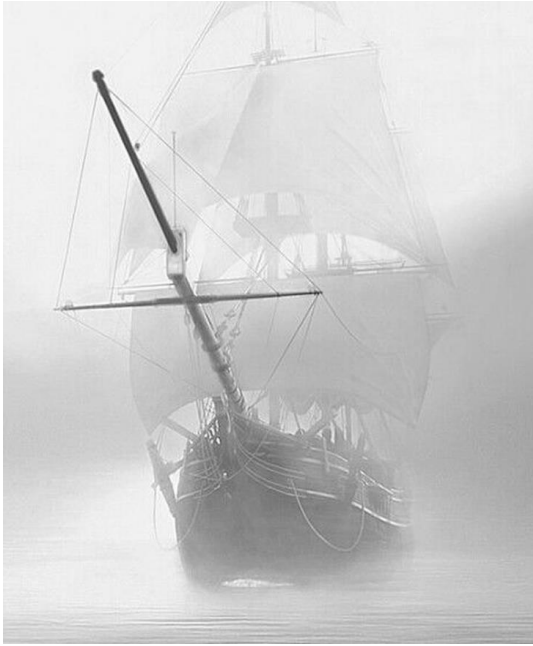
Tops: *are platforms built at the upper end of a mast, bearing in mind that the entire length a ship’s mast was made from a number of smaller masts, or spars. Hence the tops were often situated midway to the entire length of a mast. The tops were used as a base to allow work to be*

performed and also for lookouts to stand watch as well as fighting 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 are three masts from Stem to Stern (front to back): the Foremast, the Mainmast and the Mizzenmast. Upon each mast, one hundred and twenty feet high (Agamemnon) there is a small flat platform, or Masthead, for the lookout, also known as the Top.



POINTS OF SAIL — COMPASS ROSE



PROLOGUE OF MURKY WATERS...

Skulking about the thickened haze, there lurked the sum of every jack's most mortal fear. Already whisperings had begun. Nigh upon the rolling banks, the ship of war leisurely made her way, carefully and quietly, the captain long before having ordered the master to fall off. It was expected. The brig was surrounded. Helplessly the crew grieved as the bow became one with the fog. Entangled about the rigging, collecting upon the decks, ever clawing, the wispy clutches of mist haphazardly descended. Bit by bit was the ship consumed. The captain swore under his breath. Yet even for an old salt, there was naught he could muster, except but to stand tall and keep steady their way. He could not recall a thicker pitch of soup, or so he calmly recounted when pressed by the first lieutenant.

A prodigious fog it ever proved, a vile serpent no jack rightly beholding his senses would ever dare conjure. All sight of sail, even the blackened beams barely afore, had wholly disappeared. The eldest jacks had never seen the like. How they stirred within,

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somewhat disturbed. The vapour ever lingered, wilfully leaking below. It crept upon the planking, it dragged upon the gunwales and oh how it crawled upon the rigging, intent upon devouring whole its prey. Even the nearby reaches of yonder planking all but disappeared, the jacks afar now ghostly apparitions fading to obscurity.

An unnerving disquiet festered upon the quarterdeck and worriedly concerned glances were idly exchanged. Yet whatever the captain felt, he stood as stone, resolute, his withered eyes verily fixed fore and aft, a grim wince barely offering proof of life. To run aground and founder or to hazard and stray unknowingly, or god forbid to have a pirate wickedly bear down and take them a prize, would mean only one thing, the very end. It was a dark thought, a notion ushered with the unsettling certainty of an icy death, cruel and heartless. It was a poor fate indeed, no less a vile torturous demise, no doubt suffered long before the wicked imposition of drowning.

They were officers of the Royal Navy and little else but duty drove their hearts. Britannia ruled the seas. Indeed had she ruled for some years now. And though it was a time of peace, ever did she proffer forth her valiant souls. Into certain peril were they flung, obligated to weather the hazards upon the backs of their own account. No doubt this was one of those times, the fog wisping against the gunwales, the decks darkened fore and aft. Yet such were the hearts of her sons that ever did each and every one clamber to be the first.

The lookout sat worriedly within the masthead, all but shivering, his eyes washed within the eerie calm. He searched hoping for the Channel's early morning respite. It would never come. The brig had slowed, hardly making way, barely a breath of wind afforded. The fog lingered cruelly, a pale shark circling, enveloping her in a world she ought never have been. It was deathly quiet, the crew barely holding to hope, one hundred odd souls desperately struggling to retain the wits of their vocation.

'Captain? Sir, just then, I thought I heard something?' the master worriedly reported. He held fast to the helm as his head tilted, straining to discern the source. 'Sounded like something, maybe, like a whispering?'

PROLOGUE

‘Sir!’ the first officer added, now pointing into the misty haze. ‘Hear that? Sounded very much like a hatch squeaking, resonating from larboard, perhaps directly abeam?’

‘Good god! Ring the bell!’ ordered the captain, fearing the worst.

‘Ship ho!’ cried the lookout above. But the captain had already seen her and openly he swore, ruing the tardiness of his man atop. His good eye remained upon the fog, the other reserved for the wrath he would later lay upon his lookout. It was an unforgivable act, perhaps even an unpardonable sin and the jack atop knew it, much to his chagrin. A tolerant first officer might argue that hardly was the man to be blamed. After all, such was the soup, no less a dragon’s breath, the murk utterly masking the outside world. It would be an argument sorely lost.

The entire weather deck scrambled, the eyes of each officer steadily fixed upon the looming presence. Verily from the banks the fog parted and a great darkened shape emerged. The captain expected the worst, a crazed bull charging from the woods and there they sat, limping, nowhere to go. He at once recognised her, a large brig moving quite briskly, but curiously it was not her bowsprit he first beheld. Rather had she turned, now safely running abreast, which is to say, parallel with their heads equally advanced.

‘Thank god!’ the master’s mate cried, an experienced hand who once before had suffered his ship to be rammed. Yet jubilation turned to horrid dread. The whites of his keen eyes widened and a paralysing consternation took hold. A row of cannon bore directly, darkened sentinels protruding the gloom. Afore the ghostly ship one by one the long snouts came to bear, evil slits bulging within the vapour, emerging from the hatches worse than hounds curiously sniffing their prey. About each barrel the mist haplessly wafted, the heaving snorts of a great herd of wild beast, moreover a bevy of seething demons readying to spark. ‘Captain, sir!’ he gasped. ‘She’s a pirate!’

The report came in a rolling wave, one shot sent meticulously after the other. It was a moment in time hopelessly dragged, a deafening myriad of mayhem, a horror truly attesting the madness of men. Into the abyss all spoken word descended, consumed and strangled, forever muffled as man and ship despaired within the

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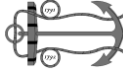
relentless fury of many an eight pound shot. The decks trembled, desperately shuddering as the iron passed easily through her timbers. Each fiery shot laid true its waste, eventually stifled within the bowels of her hull. She splintered from fore to aft, chips flying violently amidst the chaos. A terrible confusion reigned, holier than a winter's storm bearing wildly upon a festering sea. Indiscriminately did men fly, hideously plucked from their stations, some thrown directly into the sea whilst others soaked red their dye upon the decks. Amidst their scattered cries the storm all but gathered, fearing never to relent. The thunder ever growled, blazing sparks promoting the might of every thump. With every flash thereafter tallied a horrid boom, attesting to each murderous strike the fury within. Blow after blow continued, felt deep within the hull and the ship rocked forcibly, helpless to stay the undeniable might of each unwanted incursion.

As suddenly as it had begun, the rattling spray of hail ceased and profoundly did the din of battle subside. From the smoke she limped, battered, left lying utterly helpless, a winged duck on the pond stranded. Her planking continued to ache, grumbling and whining in the weakness of its offended state, the ship hopelessly rent. Yet the masts somehow still held, even the canvas. It was a mocking curiosity, a feeble whim to those with breath still shaping their lungs. Storming aboard in torrents the sea indignantly washed the decks, the ship fearing to list as the icy hands of the beast swelled upon each and every jack. Oh how the meandering flood slithered through the timbers, a great serpent wrapping its prey, strangling its coil. Cruelly did it wring her, the ship filling until at last the hull surrendered under the final weight of its relentless grip.

Still perched above within the masthead the lookout helplessly cried, the ship gently slipping into the deep, the product of his ineptitude laid verily before him. The jack's every being, his every effort, scrambled in vain to somehow avoid the inevitable. Hungrily the seas clawed the heights of the mast, eager to seize its prize. He swore one last time as the chill first gripped him. His breath stiffened and a cruel silence ensued. And so from god's earth did he and his ship hopelessly depart, almost as if they had never been.

PROLOGUE

Arrested aimlessly upon the sea the mist toiled in silence, creeping and crawling, forever searching. Into the depths of its banks did the ghostly brig slither, a hound from hell slipping idly back into the belly of her master's domain.





“Si vis pacem, para bellum”
If you wish for peace, prepare for war...

Royal Navy

An angered blade is a blade rarely blunted...

Hiro

PART ONE — CALL TO ARMS



CHAPTER I

PORTSMOUTH — 1791

A knock on one's door can often be quite telling and this broadside was no exception. Even and yet heavy, dragging with the moderation of three distinct thumps, squarely each bang boomed, almost professionally one might think. It was verily enough to mostly waken the dead.

'Good grief, Coops! Is the rent paid?' gasped Spencer as he shot out of his armchair, anxiously righting himself as if battle had been declared.

'Quite,' he calmly responded, only for a moment lifting his nose from the latest naval journal to thoughtfully eye the door. Cooper was still a young man, late in his twenties, but wore a façade more accustomed to an old salt. The hearth before him was warm. In turn his gaze bore deeply upon the random flickering hazarding the embers, the casual wandering of a sharp mind. An intrusion it definitely was, not quite the unannounced French invasion of England, but an intrusion of some proportion nonetheless. Never, not in their wildest dreams, were they expectant of company. In consideration, Portsmouth's early months of 1791 had produced a most astonishing and most bitter

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cold. It was irrefutable. Only a mad lunatic recently escaped would be out. Nonetheless, Cooper railed through the logical choices, his mind tinkering before finally dismissing the worst. Well, what did it really matter, he thought. His cottage was comfortable, albeit somewhat small and undeniably quaint, nonetheless a saving grace if truth be told. And though it was evenly shared with his particular friend, it was a grand manor in comparison to the officers' berths that more or less acquainted their lives at sea. He detested such commotions, such intrusions, but the villain soon enough would be revealed. Probably some beggar not worth waiting on, he finally considered. Eventually he motioned to the door. 'Be a good fellow would you, Spence?'

Spencer cautiously levered back the lock. He was almost the same age, but of a stronger, stouter build. Like Cooper, he had been promoted to the rank of lieutenant long ago, the momentous day since slipping in time, relegated now to just a fleeting memory. Even as officers in the Royal Navy, they rarely had the honour of receiving guests, lest it be collectors of debt or arrears in rent. He adjusted his knitted pullover, the gaping holes a telling sign, reaching now for his heavy wool coat. Times had been hard, the buzz of the last war some eight years distant. Most ships had been paid off and summarily had His Majesty's men scattered to the four corners of England's best bars, pubs and houses, never to be seen again. It was true from time to time an old shipmate might stumble on in, scrounging for work. After all, it was Portsmouth, a shipping port of some considerable note. Unfortunately, the prospect of employment was scarce, let alone good employment. Indeed, it might prove refreshing to receive a guest, hopefully one bereft of frostbite. Yet the likelihood was remote, especially considering their lowly stations as lieutenants in the navy, not to mention the annoying imposition of continuing peace, an unfortunate nuisance which had set their careers nigh upon a lee shore.

Spencer barely knew what to think. It was late and it was cold. What the blazes, surely not another effrontery duel! Please no, not that again, he silently grumbled. He peered out into the waning daylight hoping for the best, very much expecting the worst. Oddly, before him stood a diminutive but officious-looking fellow, a little plump as most often these gents are, but splendidly

dressed. In one hand the fellow attempted to clean his rounded spectacles, whilst in the other he proffered a sealed letter. Spencer at once recognised the wax seal, the Admiralty of the Royal Navy, his attention now duly collected.

‘And who might you be, sir?’ enquired the man sharply, adjusting his spectacles, taking immediate examination.

‘Oh? Lieutenant Charles Prescott Spencer, sir, of the Royal Navy,’ he stoutly replied, a little miffed. ‘And you sir, are?’

‘Here for Lieutenant Cooper,’ he asserted, quite deficient of any semblance of cheerfulness. ‘I have come a long way, directly from the Admiralty,’ he pompously added. ‘Good god, is it supposed to be snowing out here?’

‘Then you must come in,’ Cooper interrupted, now standing beside Spencer. Cooper too had adorned a coat, naturally, ready to receive his guest. The frock was somewhat worn, though not exactly shabby, most of the holes well hidden. ‘Take a drink, perhaps? It is deathly cold. You have had a long journey? Sir, allow me to introduce myself. I am Lieutenant Hayden Reginald Cooper, at your service.’

‘Quite, very well, alright then, but first the dispatch,’ he insisted, shoving it into his hand, quickly making his way to the hearth. He looked about as Spencer offered him a glass, soon to find himself comfortably seated. The cottage was as expected, small, quaint, somewhat simple and altogether sparse, yet immaculately maintained. ‘Perhaps some brandy or a port, if you please, Lieutenant?’ he begged, rubbing his hands.

‘I regret, deeply, as officers beached on half pay with little prospect, we unfortunately have neither on offer. Perhaps rum?’

Cooper broke the seal and read the dispatch. His eyes drew swiftly down the parchment, glancing the obligatory wording, wording to which he was quite readily accustomed, “*required and directed...*”, “*fail and answer the contrary at your peril...*” and of course, the complimentary close, “*By Command of Their Lordships...*”. It was abundantly clear. It was summons.

‘Sir, I am Fredricks. May I have your answer?’

‘Aye, yes, yes, of course I will attend,’ he quickly returned, still wandering over the particulars of the letter. ‘Inform Their Lordships that I will attend at my earliest convenience, most definitely in the next day or two, weather permitting.’

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‘Oh dear,’ Fredricks lamented, shaking his head. ‘I dare say, oh dear, that will not do. No, it will just not do.’

‘But the orders do not stipulate a specific time?’

‘Indeed, they never do, do they.’

‘And the winter of good Portsmouth has turned shockingly bleak. Bewildering, is it not? You may have noticed, but there is even snow on the ground. Snow! Can you believe it! Outrageous!’

‘Nonetheless, I am to take you back directly, sir, tonight.’

‘Upon my soul man, what the blazes for? Am I to rush to Whitehall in the extremes of my own risks in this godforsaken weather, only to waste around for days, nay maybe weeks, withering in the Admiralty waiting rooms! It behoves me to wonder why this dispatch was not sent by the regular means. After all, we are not at war and what the living hell could they ever want with me? Meanwhile, there are some good positions on some very good ships which will be petitioned tomorrow. Do you hear me, tomorrow and tomorrow only, sir!’

‘Of course, you are right. And I am sorry, naturally, as to your predicament. But there you have it. I have my orders. And yours, sir, now sit before you. If you are to accept the order, you must come with me tonight, if you please.’

‘If I am to accept the order? If I am to accept the order!’ he indignantly bellowed. ‘Are you sure you’re from the Admiralty, or even the navy? Have you not gone mad! This is the Royal Navy, man, the parchment a rhetorical courtesy, lest one wants to hang! And disobedience would surely see the end of my half pay and reserve status.’

‘Not to mention the hanging,’ whispered Spencer casually.

‘Quite! And they would likely throw Spence in with my lot as well, just for the pleasure of proximity. Hell, they might even nab Larboard here, our scrawny little cat, just to be sure. What’s one or two more ’ey, dangling from the yard! I do wonder, what the devil is going on?’

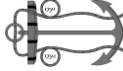
‘Indeed, Coops, it’s got to be eighty miles!’

‘Seventy-three and one-half miles, Spence, my dear fellow, from here to Central London. Best guess, we won’t be there until evening tomorrow, not in this muck. Now, sir,’ he pressed, eyeing Fredricks. ‘Am I to see Their Lordships in the morrow evening? Really? Come now, madness!’

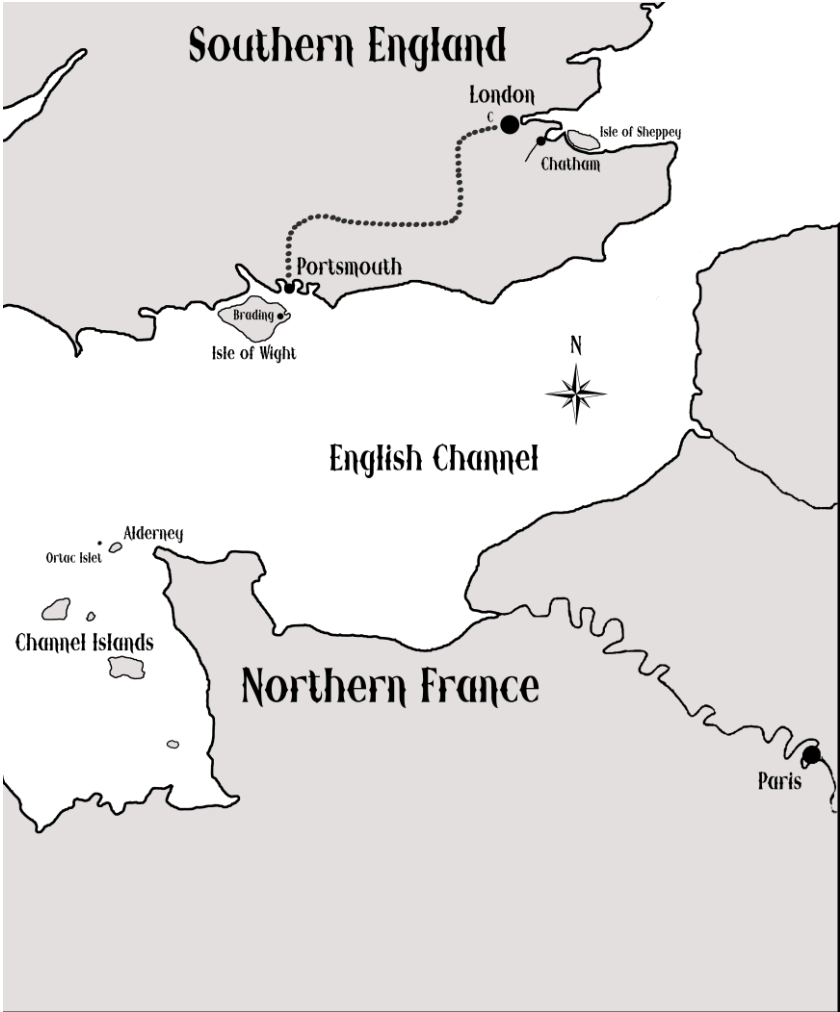
PORTSMOUTH — 1791

‘Your answer, if you please, sir?’

‘Very well, very well,’ he reluctantly announced, shaking his head with a polite huff. ‘It seems we are outgunned and must strike. Spence, I see no other course. Time to weigh anchor. Let’s get the cottage battened down and make our usual arrangements.’ Amenably, he turned to Fredricks. ‘Well then, lead the way my good man, to Whitehall. We have not a moment to lose!’



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CHAPTER II

THE ADMIRALTY

It was a sombre stroll, the final steps upon arrival a grave reminder of the peril lying in wait. More naval careers had been sunk at the Admiralty than in battle at sea, a subduing most sobering thought. The building itself was imposing, no less a hundred and twenty gun first-rate leading a squadron. It appeared simple enough, but in essence had been slyly commissioned with intimidation wholly in mind, no doubt a shrewd attempt to cool the heels of the most tenacious commissioned officers. Even though the hour was quite late, Cooper remained vigilant, mindful that prominent figures may well be about. It was prudent enough too, as one's naval career, indeed one's fortunes, might sink or swim depending upon who was lurking.

The Admiralty stood as the stalwart almighty, prestigiously positioned between Whitehall, Horse Guards Parade and The Mall, right in the heart of London, no doubt a hive for senior naval officers and government officials. Nonetheless, it was a small joy to be back in London, Cooper quite conscious of his extended absence. It was true he had not ventured these hallowed grounds for some considerable time, not that he really cared and why

should he, or so he rightly considered. He was indeed a lieutenant, but so low on the Seniority Lists it would only prove a grand waste to stalk the halls of the Admiralty. No, his time was better served scrounging for berths, the practicality of feeding himself more prevalent. Indeed, endeavouring to find suitable employment at sea was paramount and the only place for that was in a port, a good port such as Portsmouth.

Cooper cautiously halted, beholding the grandeur of the Admiralty entrance. He peered thoughtfully upon the building, noting its peculiar shape. What a modern feat of architecture, but not exactly what he last remembered. There seemed to be a pale-coloured extension behind the small courtyard on the left, a three-storey building constructed of yellow brick, the rear façade facing directly onto Horse Guards Parade. Ah yes, he suddenly recollected, they had announced this in the London Gazette, the official residence of the First Lord of the Admiralty. Admiralty House, or so they called it, promoted as a moderately-proportioned mansion featuring interiors of neoclassical design, whatever that truly meant. As he recalled, the main or original structure was a three-storey u-shaped building surrounding a grand courtyard. Indeed, this was a most handsome arrangement, but not so recent. Most likely was it built in the twenties, so he guessed. And there was more, from the street one would usually discern all three sides of the inner parts of the structure, including a goodly-sized courtyard. But here today, before him, a great screen now blocked the way.

‘Interesting,’ he whispered, admiring the additional works and the effect it had on the building and its grounds. ‘When in blazes did they add that?’ he further mumbled.

‘It was in eighty-eight,’ a familiar voice attested from behind. ‘To be sure, it was no less the wild concoction of one Robert Adam. Our original architectural hero, Ripley, of course, passed in fifty-eight. A good year though, I can personally attest. As such, he is none the wiser, may he forever roll in his grave.’

‘Captain Nelson, sir! How grand to see you again!’ he exclaimed, firstly saluting, thereafter profusely shaking his hand. ‘I have not attended the Admiralty for some time. Yet that fact is plainly obvious to one as astute as yourself. And sir, my belated congratulations on your extrication from that dirty business in

THE ADMIRALTY

Antigua, with Boreas. I regret not having the pleasure of attending to you since, before she was paid off in eighty-seven.'

'Aye, thank ye, Lieutenant. And 'twas dirty business, indeed,' he agreed. 'But in the end, patience and tenacity won through, not to mention a tiny bit of interest, not that I had any other course. The courts served them a mighty broadside they shan't soon forget, one hundred and twenty gun if I was to gauge. The battle was won, but alas, the action did not leave me unscathed. I regret, deeply, that I have not had the honour of another command since.'

'Oh, I am profoundly sorry to hear that, sir.'

'Beware the damned bureaucrats of peacetime, Lieutenant. Their aim is ever so true and be damned if I didn't pay for it. A lesson learnt, most unfortunately.'

'Aye, but sir, I assumed the Admiral might perhaps step in for you? Oh, how he loved you so. Surely, he would steer a command your way?'

'Oh, Hood,' he smiled. 'Do not be too hard on the old bark. His hands were tied and I assure you peace can do that most handsomely, even to an admiral. No, it was my own fault. Bear witness, Lieutenant, it's not about being right or wrong. It's about being able to win, to win through and ultimately withdraw with honour.'

'Quite, sir.'

'Alas, but I shall not keep you a moment longer, especially as it appears you have business with Their Lordships. Now straighten that button, check that hat. The devil, man, don't let them see that hole! Never mind the cold, tuck it under your armpit. Aye, there's a good fellow.'

The state of Cooper's bicorne hat was far removed from the usual extravagance of a commander or captain, alas one too many holes. At least it was the latest fashion, having recently replaced the long-established tricorne. Indeed, the bicorne was the newest thing, a black two-cornered "*cocked*" hat. Affording a broad handsomely sized brim, it sat not unlike a semi-circular fan with the front and rear halves turned up and pinned together. It begged the question as to which way to wear it, of course, pointing forwards or sideways. It seemed the flavour of 1791 was to wear it athwart style, which is to say, side-to-side. The state of a hat was always telling too, a book always invariably judged by the cover.

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No doubt, Cooper's bicorne would produce many a gasp, one way or the other.

Nelson looked him squarely in the eye and offered his hand. Yet the gleam in Cooper's returning façade fell strangely disturbed, the sensation of a small piece of paper now tucked inside his palm. He bid farewell, gathering himself towards the Admiralty doors. Surreptitiously he helped the note into his pocket. He looked about and with all good purpose strolled up to the steward, ready to beg admission.



The Admiralty steward eyed Cooper as a last meal not quite prepared to his liking, reluctantly showing him to a waiting room. There were many waiting rooms and unfortunately over the years the young lieutenant had experienced most of them. Of course, they were all somewhat memorable, considering the immeasurable expanse of time spent in each. It seemed naval officers were indeed required to be men of absolute discipline, lest they turn barking mad, lost to the cavernous catacombs of the Admiralty. He sat, readying for a most arduous wait.

Cooper at once retrieved Nelson's note and was now studying it carefully, ever so curiously as was his duty. For his old captain to go to such pains, something was seriously afoot. Well he knew, even respected, the ploys and antics of Captain Horatio Nelson. Over and over he read it, checking for hidden meanings or some subtle code. The note simply read: "*Wish you joy... Attend all haste in the regular hour...*". With a sigh he immediately knew he was at the right place. Nothing much changed in the Royal Navy. Whether it was a time of peace or the ravages of war, being required and directed by one's superiors was definitely a common theme.

Cooper barely wasted a moment before setting about deciphering the meaning of it all. It was, without doubt, a coded message. He immediately noted the existence of the two messages within the one. To the first, he had no idea why joy was being wished, very odd. To the latter, he was to attend, an easy tell, a meeting. No mention of the "*where*" or the "*when*", but at least he was confident of the "*who*". He, of course, noticed the subtle existence of three dots after each part of the message. This was an

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old familiar tell. It clearly meant the writer assumed the recipient knew all about the particulars of that part of the message. Hence, they would not regurgitate it by spelling it plainly out on paper for all to possibly decipher.

‘Well, my secret message has been somewhat solved, at least in part,’ he silently rejoiced. ‘Now, if only I knew the “*why*”, the “*when*” and the “*where*”, it would be most helpful and a tad less disconcerting.’

‘They say this room is particularly haunted,’ a voice sparked, looming from a darkened corner, much to Cooper’s surprise. Another officer sat waiting, no doubt in the same predicament. ‘Lieutenant Shillings, sir.’

‘Lieutenant Cooper, sir,’ he responded, as is the custom. ‘What do you mean, haunted?’

‘Oh yes, indeed, haunted,’ he oddly accounted. ‘Of course, the obvious remedy firstly springs to mind. That is, perhaps some poor wretch, a forgotten lieutenant no doubt, lingered too long in here and well, there you have it, over he keeled. Alas no, nothing of the sort. In fact, it is a woman, you know.’

‘A woman?’

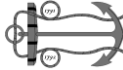
‘Aye, the entire house is reputed to be haunted, by a lady called Martha Ray. She was said to have been killed by her lover. She was purportedly the mistress of the Earl of Sandwich who, as you must know, was in residence. Apparently she embarked upon an illicit affair with a penniless army lieutenant, one James Hackman. Can you fathom that, an army lieutenant, hopelessly impoverished mind you! But she would not marry him, rightly so. So he left the army and became a clergyman, no doubt a vocation just as equally impecunious. Defies reason, does it not? Then one night in April of seventy-nine, madly jealous outside a theatre in Covent Garden, he shot her stone dead with his pistol. Of course, he later claimed he had decently intended to only shoot himself, as long as it was before her eyes. Witnessed by virtually the entire theatre audience, he could not in any circumstance escape his guilt. Later upon being found officially guilty, he was sentenced to death and subsequently executed. He is gone, but rather it seems she still roams the halls and rooms.’

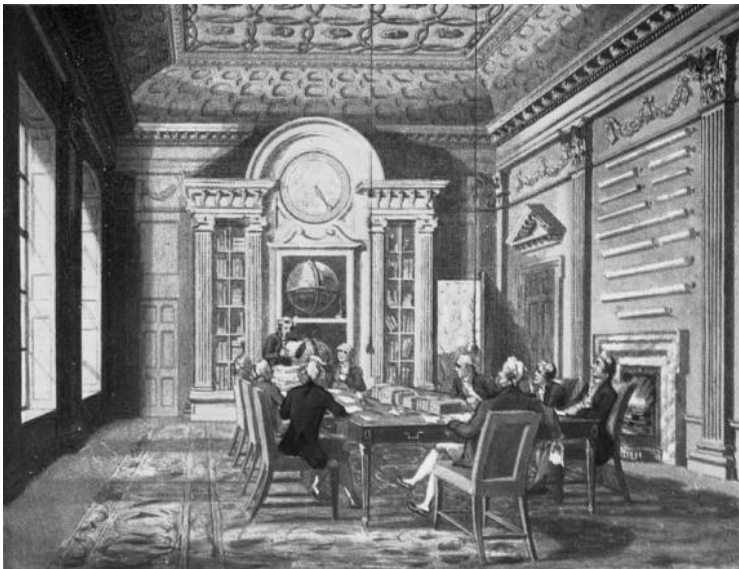
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‘Indeed? I see,’ Cooper granted, now silently appraising the sanity of the man before him, perhaps fearing the worst. ‘And sir, how long have you been waiting, may I ask?’

‘Oh, all of yesterweek and that of today, the standard average I would submit. It won’t be long now. Ah, here’s the steward!’

‘Lieutenant Cooper?’ the steward curtly announced, his cheek rolling to a wince. ‘Sir, come with me, if you please,’ he gruffly insisted, much to the chagrin of poor Shillings. ‘Their Lordships will see you now.’





CHAPTER III

THE BOARDROOM

Cooper, youthful as he was, prided himself as a bold but shrewd tactical officer, especially when it came to warfare. And meeting with the Lords of the Admiralty indeed qualified as warfare, a skirmish he could ill afford to lose. Should a gale blow, should he be forced to strike his colours, he might easily find himself wrecked or indefinitely beached, his reserve status revoked and his pay summarily discontinued. Destitution, it logically seemed, loomed but a door away. He must not waver or slip and oh how he must choose his words, or so he wisely considered.

Upon first receipt of the dispatch from Fredricks he was not alarmed, not in any way. However, his state of being had now unquestionably altered. After all, he had waited only the sum total of thirteen and one-half minutes before he was summoned. Never had he heard the like, especially pertaining to a lieutenant. Poor Shillings had been there a week and very much looked ready to forthrightly hang himself. It was a good thing, he rightly observed, that arms were not permitted past the cloakroom of the Admiralty doors.

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Cooper collected his thoughts, rummaging for any possible grievances, charges they might bring against him. Maybe there was something, maybe not. Damnation, perhaps they mean to execute me, he wildly accounted. His mind immediately evoked the nasty business with Byng in fifty-seven, a naval officer tried and shot for “*failing to do his utmost*”. And Byng was an admiral, so what hope might a lowly lieutenant hold should even one finger be pointed his way? He shuddered at the thought.

Cooper prepared himself, finally ushered into the boardroom, a meeting place commonly used by the First Lord. What a grand room, supporting a monstrous fireplace amidst a row of elongated hung windows. Magnificently did the light draw, emphasising the delicate architecture of the ceiling. In the exact middle of the room sat a great oaken table. Alongside, a well-stocked library shrewdly crafted itself into the walls. Upon a shelf, built cleverly within the library, a great spinning globe sat and upon another table a host of naval charts and maps lay idle. Most definitely, it was a room fit for a naval king.

Waiting before Cooper sat the Right Honourable John Pitt, Second Earl of Chatham, First Lord of the Admiralty and of course, brother to the current Prime Minister, William Pitt. It immediately struck Cooper that Lord Pitt was a relatively young man, especially for such a rated position. He could not have been more than thirty-five years old, not a great deal older than himself. And holy hell, he cringed, Admiral of the Fleet, John Forbes, was sitting right next to him. Cooper well knew this man and his reputation, the commander of the entire Royal Navy, serving ever since Lord Hawke passed in eighty-one. Admiral Forbes must have been nigh on eighty years old, but how earnest and dignified the man remained. Well, he sarcastically wondered, who might pop out next, perhaps the Prime Minister or even the King himself? Indifferent, he stood awaiting instruction, clandestinely dredging the far reaches of his memory in the hope of recalling the etiquette required of a lowly lieutenant when confronted by the First Lord and the Admiral of the Fleet.

‘Aye, sit down Cooper, sit,’ Lord Pitt hastily motioned. ‘The Admiral hasn’t so many years left that we can muck around now, can we, sir?’

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‘Don’t you worry about that,’ Admiral Forbes protested. ‘I have enough in me for a few more broadsides. But indeed, let us get on with it, the late hours hasten and don’t forget our supper arrangements.’

‘Well, Lieutenant. I confess I have never actually heard of you before this month,’ Lord Pitt started, peering deeply, blank muted eyes worthy of a great reptile. ‘But I dare say, you have come highly recommended.’

‘Indeed, sir?’

‘Does that surprise you?’

Cooper detested these kinds of questions. Open-ended, proffered to illicit some telling response. In point of fact, any response tended on the subject would be far from helpful to his cause. It was, of course, part of the First Lord’s strategy, or so he guessed, to flush something out, to assess his character.

‘I have always endeavoured to do my duty, sir,’ he evenly stated. ‘...to the utmost,’ he quickly added, thinking of poor Admiral Byng. ‘But alas, I remain unmarried and have no family interest. Nor do I possess any other influence within the gentry to support such a recommendation, not to which I know in any case. I was born of a clergyman, a decidedly large family, of which I was eighth.’

‘Hood? A man of no influence, you say?’ Lord Pitt tested, eyeing him as if he was already dining upon this evening’s eye fillet. ‘It is he, in fact, who has reported to Their Lordships upon your presence. And it seems he has mightily commended you, with some glowing remarks.’

More like mightily condemned, Cooper thought. Surely the First Lord wasn’t reading it right. It really didn’t make any sense. It was true Hood had been his commander-in-chief, but as a lieutenant he had very little direct contact with the Admiral and that included the many dinners that went hand in hand with such fleet cruises.

‘Admiral Hood, sir? Indeed, he was my squadron commander, when I was third upon Albemarle, West Indies.’

‘Aye, Albemarle, under Captain Nelson, of course. But it says here you were second, not third?’

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‘Aye, sir, I commenced as the third lieutenant. Later due to, well sir, due to the normal circumstances which creates such vacancies, I was subsequently promoted acting second.’

‘You had your share of command I see, from time to time?’

‘Aye, sir,’ he nodded. ‘That is, mostly with the prizes, bringing them back to port, in course.’

‘Safely back, of course?’

‘Aye, sir.’

‘Says here you sank a pirate within five minutes of engagement, upon one of these prizes? Is that true, Lieutenant, even with such a limited prize crew, as it were?’

‘Aye, sir. I had command of a sloop, eighteen gun, bringing her into port and we were set upon suddenly by another sloop, eighteen gun. They had laid in wait beyond a local island. They were brimming with men ready to board, had the weather gage and without warning bore directly upon us.’

‘Good god, man!’ interrupted Admiral Forbes, astonished.

‘If I may, sir, they were not good seamen. Even though they were only wearing the ship, that is with the gage upon their back, they overdid it a tad and brought themselves to, almost to a founder. With a small tack, we were able to position our broadside, if we could call it that, directly upon her stern.’

‘Raked her, stem to stern, ’ey?’

‘Aye, sir, but we had not enough crew to fire all our cannon. So every man standing worked a gun, including myself, firing it, leaping to the next, until all shots were away.’

‘So, you would not have been able to reload, what, more than even one gun?’ surmised Lord Pitt.

‘Aye, sir.’

‘Mother and Mary!’ swore Admiral Forbes.

‘But here you sit, Lieutenant?’ queried Lord Pitt.

‘A lucky shot, sir. But in actuality, a horrible one, direct to her powder. She instantly exploded. No survivors, I regret to say.’

‘Oh, come now! What a fellow you are, Cooper. Let us damn those devils to hell, ’ey,’ Admiral Forbes smiled. ‘Good seamanship and English zeal will always win the day.’

‘I am sure Captain Nelson was very pleased not to lose his prize, to which you were wholly responsible. Tell me, what think ye of Captain Nelson, if you do not mind telling, of course?’

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Cooper cringed, so much, his insides turned. Another detestable poser. It was common etiquette to most definitely refrain from openly vilifying the captain, even if it was deserved, lest one be forever tarnished. However, His Majesty and the Lords of the Admiralty all but expected lieutenants to report negatively about their captains. Otherwise, why would they require each and every one to maintain a separate ship's log and hand it in at the end of each cruise. It was somewhat obvious that with the captain vilified, the more likely a lieutenant might promote to post. The incentive was there. But to the contrary, one mustn't overglorify their captain, lest it smack of self-promotion and vanity, traits most unbecoming a naval officer. Cooper felt himself drifting upon a lee shore, nary a boat to be had.

'Not at all, sir, happy to oblige,' he smiled. 'It was an honour to serve under Captain Nelson. He is a prolific seaman and a master tactician, as can be attested by the many prizes taken or burned during his cruise.'

'I see,' Lord Pitt confirmed, nodding and smiling. 'We think so too, not that we have been able to do much for him of late. But that is his own damned fault and he knows it, or so I would beg to suggest. Would it surprise you to learn that he too was born of a large family and his father was a clergyman?'

'I had no idea, sir.'

'Yet,' Admiral Forbes interrupted, 'He had the good common sense to be born into a family where his mother was the grandniece of Sir Robert Walpole, First Earl of Orford, once the de facto First Prime Minister of the British Parliament.'

'Quite, sir,' agreed Cooper smirking.

'Do you always smirk, Lieutenant, in the presence of your superiors?'

'No, sir! Never, sir!'

'Lieutenant, it is clear you are a fighting officer, a loyal one at that. In addition, you most definitely fit the profile we require. A full explanation is due, of course, but will have to wait. In short, we really need someone of fighting worth. I must make that clear, but it must be someone who is not so well known, not so compromised by their own public successes to date.'

And expendable, of course, Cooper immediately surmised. Someone they can disavow should the whole thing come a

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cropper, whatever it was. And whatever it was, it must be quite the commission. One thing was sure, his career this very day was likely over, either to be lost in some fool's action, disavowed, or drummed immediately out of the service for not taking the job in the first place.

'I can assure you, sir, no one is even mildly aware of me, or I mean to say, aware of my career highlights to date.'

'Quite. And possessing no interest in the gentry, your naval career has not advanced in any haste, of course, notwithstanding skills you might possess or even deeds well done. So, you do understand. That is good. As such, I must conclude you fit the profile and may be suited for our proposition. Furthermore, I must tell you, there is game afoot, big game. Now, might you be further interested?'

Another rhetorical question, this one begging an obligatory response. Of course, he could say no, simply leave his coat and rank at the door and become a homeless rat catcher begging the next street corner. He could beg to think about it, with much the same outcome. Or he could answer in the affirmative and at least go down honourably with his ship. This really wasn't favourable news. He was dished, caught between an enemy squadron and a lee shore.

'Sir, it would be an honour.'

'Splendid. Then let us perhaps share with you some intelligence which succinctly appraises where we are at. It goes without saying that anything hereby learnt or spoken, must never leave this room, lest you answer the contrary to your peril.'

'Of course, sir.'

'Now, we have here a letter from Leopold II, who has the honour of being King of Austria. It seems he has had enough of the French and their so-called revolution. We honestly wagered this thing might just go away by itself, but damned if it hasn't. As you know, it has been going on now since eighty-eight. For the love of Mary, three goddamned years! And of course, Leopold isn't the only one fed up.'

'Well, Pitt, don't forget that our Holy Roman Emperor Leopold is, in point of fact, the brother of Louis XVI's Queen, Marie Antoinette,' Admiral Forbes added with a sly nod. 'I am

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guessing there is a might annoyance at the scant treatment of his beloved sister.'

'Quite. Indeed, most of Europe is just sitting back now, waiting and watching, albeit most carefully. Leopold is insisting, quite clearly, that England ally together with Austria, Prussia, Spain, Russia, Sweden and a host of other smaller nations. This would form a European military coalition, if you will. He even suggests we might, together I hazard to assume, chance to invade France and reinstall the bloody monarchy. He calls this letter the Padua Circular. It's not official, not yet. Not a bloody soul has read it, except for a chosen few. He so intends to send the letter perhaps in a few months' time, maybe in July. Of course, we have the letter now, but that's just the way these regents work. No good sending a letter if the answer is no, right?'

'In course, sir.'

'And here is a draft, rough mind you, of the Declaration of Pillnitz, jointly crafted by Leopold II and Frederick William II, King of Prussia. This, it seems, is meant to be released shortly after the Padua Circular. It's a tad more formal, as you may note. But we, that is, King George and England, are not quite convinced about the timing. After all, it's February now and five or six months is not long enough to properly ready for any real military action. And I promise you, action is no doubt assured. We cannot go rattling the cage and expect the bird to sit still. Whether England is ready or not, it is our considered opinion that war is all but coming.'

'I understand, sir.'

'And not that anyone really knows, but this bloody business has been going on right under our noses. Indeed, for some time now, a great bloody time!'

'Aye, pirates! Damned dirty so-called pirates!' Admiral Forbes cried, thumping the oak with his fist. 'Well, that is what the Frenchies expect us to believe, bloody pirates! As if I was born yesterday! Cooper, do I look like I was born yesterday?' eyeballing him in all seriousness. Cooper solemnly returned his gaze, the young lieutenant steadfastly tight-lipped, motionless, bereft of breath, a sedated lunatic recently bound and gagged more likely to stir. 'Now Pitt may have been born yesterday, but he isn't one to be fooled either.'

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‘Quite, thank you, Admiral,’ Lord Pitt commended. ‘Now, I hear you have a sharp mind, Lieutenant, good with numbers and such? And you speak four languages it seems, with mathematics being the fifth? Also, I am told you know France and her waters like the back of your hand?’

Cooper sat quietly.

‘Well come on, no time for modesty, man,’ Admiral Forbes boomed. ‘Is it true or not?’

‘Aye, sir, it is accurate.’

‘Well then, let us test you, perhaps?’ Lord Pitt posed.

‘Would you do us the honour of having a little glance at something?’

‘Of course, sir.’

‘This is a list of English shipping which has been recorded as unaccounted, overdue or lost. All of them are traders and such. Goodness, such a goddamned waste. The chart attests their positions when they were taken, or at least where they likely should have been. There is a side legend setting out their cargoes, including the port of departure, destination, dates and whatnot. Have a good look now and take your time. In the meantime, the Admiral and I will partake in a sip of something, perhaps a white ribbin for me.’

‘Aye, but no gin for me, Pitt. A bristol milk, if you please.’

‘Very well, a spot of sherry it is. Now Cooper, when you are ready, apprise us what you make of it, if anything?’

Cooper poured over the figures, swiftly and efficiently. This was his forte, of course, the study of maths, logic and navigation. The numbers stood out, the positions upon the chart obvious. Patterns started to evolve. He ran his fingers along the routes. He measured spots upon the coastlines, including the rough distances from nearby ports and the last known locations of English ships. His mind rattled through the known sea productivity of each vessel, each according to its class. He compared the sea miles required of the more capable French ships such as corvettes, frigates and even ships of the line. It was clear to him as a summer’s day, a French one, of course. With some ink and parchment, he would quickly prove his theories.

The Admiral and the First Lord, for the first time, were standing. They sensed he was onto something. They crowded

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about the chart, keenly watching, a young master working his craft. Sipping their drinks, they marvelled silently as Cooper edged his notes, notarising the enemy ships and their probable ports. He even started to list by name potential French ships, mostly sloops, corvettes and frigates. The smaller corvettes were marked most heavily, though there were quite a few frigates and even one ship of the line. He gradually explained his theories. For the moment, politely yet correctly, he disregarded the enormity of the two flag ranks before him. It held him in great stead, of course, a moment which did not go unnoticed. Senior staff had very little time for grovellers, or for the larks of frightened sea rats.

‘Sir, if I may, the losses of shipping are wholly unacceptable, for peacetime that is. It is far greater than the expected norm, by many more points than the allowable variance. It cannot be just the French either. The number of ports required to support such piracy counts far wider and greater than she presently affords. The quantity of attacks, the widespread nature of the locations, the winter weather together with the type of shipping lost, is all a great tell. Most definitely it suggests the pirates used multiple bases. They could be as widely spread from the far reaches of Spain through even all Northern France. They leave a distinct trail, very traceable in fact. With time, I believe I could pinpoint the exact number of ships, give or take a few here and there. I also believe I might be able to include each ship’s probable class and most definitely their likely base of origin.’

‘Come now, Lieutenant, you are not just making this up, are you, man? In the last few months of discerning, even our best analysts have failed to draw any such conclusions, which you seem to have arrived at in less than sixty goddamned minutes, indeed!’

‘I am certain, sir. It grieves me to hear our analysts have not made headway, to be sure. But I cannot overlook the obvious, not for the sake of their honour. Allow me to put ink to parchment and thereafter perhaps put my findings to any test you deem necessary?’

‘I am convinced already, Pitt!’ Admiral Forbes boomed. ‘The lad appears sound in his reasoning. Should his maths prove out, which I will not wager to the contrary, then we have our puzzle solved. It doesn’t take much to guess who is behind all this, the

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bloody Girondins and that other mob, the Society of the Friends, the bloody Jacobins. But the Spaniards as well, this is indeed news! It's a goddamned prelude to war! Take out our trade, weaken us in the frost of our winter months and in they all bloody well flood!

'Either way, it seems England will have to act. We cannot have our trade preyed upon. If it is only pirates, then we will deal with them and peace will continue as is, for now. But if they are French or Spanish privateers, bearing Letters of Marque, then war cannot reasonably be avoided I am afraid.'

'Aye, forsooth!' barked Admiral Forbes.

'The Spanish! I guess we should have known better? Hands down, it seems they never forgave us for that business in Nookta Sound last year in ninety, in May to be precise.'

'Precise? Sir, you do not have to be precise,' Admiral Forbes attested. 'Old Howe cruising around Ushant in peacetime with thirty-five line of battle ships for a good month or two is something I wouldn't ordinarily forget. I wager being stuck in port with the sharks circling may have somewhat unsettled our old dago friends and might perhaps have served to raise their annoyance? And what the hell came of it all, nary a shot fired!'

'Bloody diplomats!' Lord Pitt cursed. 'They stepped in, of course. We should have gone in and finished them all, right then and there.'

'What?' Admiral Forbes mused. 'The diplomats, sir? Or the Spanish?'

'Ha! Perhaps both, now I come to bloody well think of it.' They all had a good chuckle, even Cooper who did his best not to raise his station too obviously in such esteemed company.

'Lieutenant, allow the Admiral and myself a short recess. Please continue your analysis. We will leave you here in peace and return shortly. This, so far, has been most illuminating. Indeed, most enlightening.'



'We are going to offer you a command, Cooper,' Lord Pitt started as he re-entered the boardroom. 'It must be understood from the outset that it is only an offer, not an order. The order will come

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later. For now, we will hash out the details, in course. But please, I urge you to weigh your options carefully.'

'Aye, sir.'

'Alright, if you are willing, listen, weigh the offer and simply stay seated. If you are seated at the end of our discussion, we will take this as your indication in the positive. If it is your intent to withdraw, at any time hence forward during our discussion, simply stand. You need not say anything. Your honour and your reserve status will remain intact and you may leave.'

How civilised, he considered, much more than reasonably thought possible. The First Lord seemed quite forthrightly genuine and somewhat less than duplicitous. To accept, all he had to do was stay seated. He was of a mind, of course, that even should the building catch fire and fall to rubble, he would hold to his seat. He would hold fast, even if he had to withdraw with it still attached to his backside. This was his chance, finally, a great wondrous chance. It was a chance one dreams, yet very rarely sees. Now it was here. It was real. A ship, his own command. Hunting in the Channel, no less! It would be dangerous dirty work, he knew that. If he somehow managed to survive, there would be the prospect of promotion to post-captain, not to mention prize money from taking a ship or two. He would afford Spencer a position, even the chance of promotion. He would secure wages for himself, no less the full rate pursuant to the acumen of master and commander. Indeed, this was a great chance, one he fully intended to secure with all his might. He was of a mind that he would do anything, even take on a line of battle ship with no more than a rowing boat, if they so ordered.

'Do you understand, sir?' Admiral Forbes confirmed. 'No matter your choice here today, words so uttered are not to be repeated, at all, upon your own peril. And I assure you, I can dream up some pretty decent peril!'

'Aye, Admiral,' he responded evenly. 'I fully understand my duty. And thank you, sir.'

'Very good,' Lord Pitt interrupted. 'Let us make this arrangement clear for the written record, which I assure you, Lieutenant, not a damned soul is ever likely to see.'

'Understood, sir.'

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‘Do you, Lieutenant Cooper, agree that England is presently not at war?’

‘Aye, sir.’

‘And as such, as an officer of the Royal Navy, you must understand that we, meaning King George and England, are somewhat restrained in the legal sense. Meaning, we are very much limited when it comes to acts of aggression and indeed, violence upon the seas. And sufferance of such, we, meaning King George and England and most definitely you, will be held accountable.’

‘Aye, sir.’

‘Then we propose your commission, sir,’ Admiral Forbes officially announced. ‘...to take, burn, or destroy any ships of piracy, as you see fit.’

‘This will be a damned dirty business. And it must be a principally secret business. Most likely you won’t be eyeing your name in the London Gazette. And should senior officers get a sniff of what’s going on, there may well be some significant resentment, very significant. Many of them are beyond destitute. They won’t fathom why they are left sitting on their backside, beached on half pay, whilst a mere lieutenant, one without a whiff of interest mind you, has been given a peacetime command. They do so enjoy clinging to the Seniority Lists, you know. You will need to perform out there, or they will no doubt organise some form of moral reprisal in protest. Good god, I wouldn’t put it past them to even arrange in some way to call you out.’

‘Have you ever been out, Cooper?’ asked Admiral Forbes.

‘Sir, if you mean challenged, that is, due to some effrontery of honour, then aye, I have been out, on occasion.’

‘I have been out myself, so I know how it feels. Damned dirty business, detestable really. So, “*on occasion*” you say? What, more than once or twice?’

‘Quite, sir.’

‘Pistols, I assume?’

‘Not quite, sir. I strictly insist upon the blade.’

‘Indeed, do you? That’s quite personal, isn’t it? Well, I expect when you are the one called upon, you are no doubt afforded the prerogative of choice, correct?’

‘Aye, sir, indeed.’

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‘I take it you are handy with a cutlass, then?’

‘I regret, sir, that I cannot use a cutlass to much proficiency. I know it is the standard norm for naval officers, but with it I am horribly inept. Rather, I have a different style of blade, of which I have been privately schooled.’

‘Indeed, fascinating, do tell?’

‘If I may explain, sir, it is steel from the Orient. Very similar to a cutlass, though it has a longer handle, so it can be wielded with two hands. It boasts a slightly curved tip, harbouring a modest blood groove along the length of its back and is renowned for its proclivity to never break. The steel, if I may be so bold, has been folded more times than perhaps a lunatic with a wild fancy might ever dare imagine. It is quite sturdy, light, well-balanced and most heartily able to carve through almost any known body armour, even steel and rarely needs to be sharpened. I had the good fortune to acquire it in the West Indies, upon where I had the honour of learning from a master of its art, a most interesting seaman from the Orient whose life I chanced to save. I later discovered that we had saved him after some wreck, his lot being lost at sea during a local battle of some note. In his country, he was a royal guard of some renown. Peculiar fellow, had we not come along he would most definitely have killed himself, as is their custom when they lose in battle and become masterless.’

‘We could use a bit of that in the Royal Navy,’ mused Admiral Forbes, having a little chuckle.

‘And you have been out with this thing, whatever it is called, how many times?’ probed Lord Pitt.

‘It is called a katana, by their language, sir. And aye, I have been out with it some nineteen times, each time I assure you, most regretfully. But may I add, if you please sir, not once did I request such a calling and each and every challenge did I resist... to the utmost.’

‘And not one did you bloody well lose either, ’ey?’ snorted Admiral Forbes.

‘But nineteen, seems somewhat above the norm?’ winced Lord Pitt.

‘If I may, sir? And I do hazard to be humble here, but I am most prolifically successful in the playing of cards, especially

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when it is for money. Following, I am often accused of cheating, most unfortunately.'

'And do you cheat?'

'Never, sir, unless the proficiency of calculating mathematical chance, surmised by watchful observation accounts as such?'

'I believe it does not.'

'If anything, I have been called out mostly because I have a hankering for mathematics, which is invariably confused with the accurate counting of cards, that is, from those cards tossed or summarily discarded from the game.'

'And a great big bag of coin summarily taken from the offended,' added Admiral Forbes snickering.

'Nonetheless, you are responsible for the loss of nineteen able-bodied souls of His Majesty's Empire,' Lord Pitt reminded. 'Even if it was legal!'

'Sir, I am content to say that not one man was lost. All nineteen left the field, able-bodied, with their honour intact, air filled in their lungs, each matter settled in the noble tradition. May I offer, I do so regret the manner in which each and every one did call upon me, though of their honour and their opinions, I cannot hope to control.'

'Not one dead, Cooper? Amazing. Well, you must show me your sword and your method? I am most intrigued, as is the Admiral, no doubt. You cannot hope to leave us now without our satisfaction.'

'It lies in the Admiralty cloak room this very moment.'

'Oh joy!' Lord Pitt exclaimed ringing his tiny bell, ordering his staff to immediately bring the sword, much to the steward's look of utmost shock and indecent displeasure. 'And please understand, Cooper, we don't condone this practice, but we cannot very well stop it. It is wholly engrained in our system these days.'

'Rest assured, sir, should I be called out, I will be fine.'

'I am hardly worried for you, good sir. Last thing we need, with war coming, is to see good officers cut up by this... cat did you say?'

'Katana, if you please, sir.'

'Aye, cut up with this cat, when we need them readying for the Frenchies. Let us pray nothing comes of it and that nineteen is the end of it.'

THE BOARDROOM

The sword was carefully presented, almost as if the steward were offering it to the King himself. Lord Pitt and Admiral Forbes immediately stood, their eyes running watchfully along its length. The sheath was truly bleak and unassuming, naturally, its sole purpose to conceal the blade within. With permission, Cooper took the katana and drew the blade, slowly yet surely, an absolute precise hand. He glided about the room, his movements barely discernible, a serpent slithering side to side, mesmerising its prey. Suddenly he lunged, swishing at a nearby candle, taking no more than a whisker from the top.

‘Ha!’ screeched Admiral Forbes joyously.

‘Aye! Impressive, Cooper!’ Lord Pitt commended. ‘Aye, yes, please sit back down. Had I blinked, I fear I might have missed your exhibition. Absolutely splendid! May I?’

‘Nineteen!’ Admiral Forbes rejoiced as he admired the First Lord wielding the katana, testing its balance. ‘Damn, Pitt, I think we have our pirate hunter well and truly selected, don’t you? Nineteen and not a scratch! I have never heard the like! But I believe it wholeheartedly, oh yes indeed! Now, Cooper, or I should say, Captain Cooper, bring me nineteen pirates and their ships intact and I’ll see you make admiral one day, perhaps even the next day, ha, ha!’

‘Aye, sir! And may I add, a hurricane amidships could not displace me from this chair. I, if I may be so bold, am your man.’

‘Indeed? Good, very well then, Captain,’ Lord Pitt commended. ‘This will be no ordinary command, I assure you. Hunting pirates and Letters of Marque in peacetime will prove very precarious and not just for England, mind you. You may recall the predicament Nelson found himself in, with Boreas in Antigua? Courts in peacetime, goodness. Aye, indeed, very bloody precarious.’

‘I understand, sir,’ Cooper offered. ‘But I have no wealth to speak of, which is to say, nothing to lose.’

‘Ah yes, but what about debtors’ prison? We would be hard pressed to intercede on your behalf should it come to that.’

‘Aye, sir. But I would wager my shipmates would never allow it. At the very worst, I would be confined to quarters on board, unable to step upon land. The debtor bailiffs cannot board a ship of His Majesty and hope to leave unscathed and intact.’

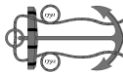
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‘Especially if our good captain has his bloody cat with him,’ jested Admiral Forbes.

‘Ha! Quite!’ Lord Pitt agreed, looking for the steward, ringing his tiny bell. ‘Call for His Lordship, should he be so inclined, if you please! It is time for a late sup and a much-needed chat. Apart from entertaining us, Cooper here has been most forthcoming with all this business. I would like to share his preliminary findings with our esteemed dinner guests.’

A side door opened and Admiral Lord Howe and Admiral Hood casually entered the boardroom. Cooper stood at once, which was quite acceptable, of course, no harm done as he had already accepted his commission. He saluted Admiral Lord Howe directly, a fighting admiral of some distinction. He had always admired the Admiral. Howe had also been First Lord of the Admiralty prior to Lord Pitt. No doubt, he was the likely candidate to succeed as the next Admiral of the Fleet. Cooper turned to Admiral Hood who already had his hand out. It was an honour, of course, to be recognised by such seniority. Cooper knew Hood as his old squadron commander. Yet he also knew him as the reigning First Sea Lord, appointed in eighty-nine after retiring from his command in Portsmouth. The First Sea Lord, not to be confused with the First Lord, is the professional head of the Royal Navy, a man who definitely wielded untold power. The room now accommodated the four most powerful men in England, bar one. Each and every one could make or break a career. Yet, not to be disappointed, Cooper’s eyes suddenly widened. Holy Mary and Joseph, he screamed inside. Lord Pitt’s brother was in company, the Prime Minister himself.

‘Good luck, Captain,’ Lord Pitt bade. ‘Your written orders will be forwarded directly. In the meantime, there’s a new blue frock and a white waist coat, your size, waiting for you on the way out.’ And he paused to eye his hat, wincing as he detected the small hole. ‘And you may want to purchase a new hat, godspeed now!’





CHAPTER IV

INN ALL HASTE

Cooper resolved to make good his way from the Admiralty along Whitehall. The shadows deepened and the streets somewhat darkened, no less a small buzz of folk milling about. As he navigated the waning light, the prominence of his new blue frock kept him in good stead. To his utmost surprise, many more than a few hats were cordially tipped his way. Nonetheless, he had business to attend, not a moment to lose. Should he suddenly encounter a wild squall teeming from a robust sea he would still find the way, or at least he thought he would. Should his navigation prove precise, it would not be much farther, his destination falling dead ahead, directly afore a much-acclaimed tavern known as The Garter.

In the near distance The Garter loomed, lit up almost with an obscene extravagance. It was a brothel, of course, one which had stood since the thirteenth century. Interestingly enough, the place had at one time been reputedly rumoured to hold favour with His Majesty, Charles I. It may have been a brothel, but it was also one of the best taverns in town. It had become such, perhaps nigh on a

hundred years past, when the son of a politician acquired it, licence and all. He did not own it long and quite rightly, of course. Cooper eagerly eyed it, a lighthouse bathing the shoals. Beside it lay the front door of his intended destination, the Inn All Haste, dimly lit and somewhat less bawdy. Now, this was a modest yet respectable looking inn, definitely not a brothel. Never would one find the local rabble disturbing this establishment. Of late, its patronage was more frequented as a tavern though. To be sure, it definitely harboured a distinct charm, a subtle eloquence.

‘Welcome, sir?’ greeted the innkeeper with a polite nod.

‘Captain Cooper, ma’am,’ he formally announced, pausing a moment to realise the enormity of his new title. He couldn’t help but grin. ‘A table, if you please, for two?’

‘Captain? I see,’ she returned warmly, a knowing smirk.

‘Welcome to the Inn All Haste. I am Missus Smythe,’ she cordially added, introducing herself. ‘I will be at your service tonight. Your table is already waiting, a private room specially picked and may I add, cleaned for you both. Your esteemed colleague is already seated. He has since started with the port, I dare say,’ she sniffed, raising an eye before parading him through the tavern, a most prominent guest for all to see.

‘Captain Cooper, I presume?’

‘Captain Nelson, sir!’ he smiled. ‘Indeed!’

‘I see you have deciphered my note, no small task either, I must admit. Take a drink, sir, not a moment to lose,’ he welcomed, standing to hold his glass high. ‘Allow me to officially give you joy of your command and your promotion!’ he congratulated, a knowing look passed as they downed their port and profusely shook hands. ‘Have a seat, if you will, most comfortable this place, most comfortable.’

‘I must admit, sir, it took a while this time, the note that is, “*Attend all haste in the regular hour...*”. Then it dawned on me that without commas to intercede the words “*all haste*”, it may allude to be a noun, most logically a place. We, of course, attended here some years ago for a similar officers’ meeting, at this very hour if I am correct?’

‘Aye, Coops,’ he congratulated. ‘It was this very hour. But if I recall we were a door or two up, in the other place lit up like a bloody lighthouse, you know, the house of disrepute, ha, ha!’

INN ALL HASTE

‘For king and country, sir, in course!’

‘And how long “*a while*” did it take exactly, this act of decrypting?’

‘Oh, sir, I am mortified to say it was a good twelve minutes and one-third, thereabouts. Though I was terribly put out of sorts by a lieutenant waiting in the same room, poor wretch.’

‘Thereabouts, ’ey? It is good you have retained your wits, for you shall need them. Now, I have taken the liberty of booking this private room and ordering us some late supper, pork suckling if you please. And I have something for you!’ he declared, drawing from his pocket a sealed parchment. ‘Your orders, Captain!’

Cooper managed to contain his exuberance, but only just. Without a moment to lose he broke the seal and poured over the wording. It read:

*“To Lieutenant Hayden Reginald Cooper hereby appointed
Commander of His Majesty’s Ship Agamemnon.*

By Virtue of the Power and Authority to us given We do hereby constitute and appoint you Commander of His Majesty’s Ship Agamemnon willing and requiring you forthwith to go on board and take upon you the Charge and Command of Commander in her accordingly strictly Charging and Commanding all the Officers and Company belonging to the said ship to behave themselves jointly and severally in their respective Employments with all due Respect and Obedience unto you their said Commander and you likewise to observe and execute as well the General Printed Instructions and such Orders and Directions you shall from time to time receive from us, from Captain Horatio Nelson, or your superior Officers for His Majesty’s Service hereof nor you nor any of you may fail as you will answer the contrary at your peril. And for so doing this shall be your Warrant.

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*Given under our hands and the Seal of Office of Admiralty,
February 1791.*

By Command of 'Their Lordships.'

It was the standard wording, as he much expected. The excitement buzzed, but upon reaching the end he couldn't help but feel a little deflated. There was no mention yet of his intended cruise in the Channel. No mention of pirates or his mandate to take, burn or destroy. Nonetheless, he smiled and nodded. Here was proof irrefutable he had been granted his first actual command, a commission from the Admiralty. He was finally to captain a ship of war.

'Oh sir, thank you!' Cooper acknowledged. 'They mentioned Admiral Hood as my proposer, of whom I had no idea he even knew I existed. But sir, I knew immediately it was all your doing. They mentioned you too, in course. I shall not let you down!'

'My oath, Coops! I know you will not let me down, 'tis why you have been chosen.'

'How grand, sir,' he reflected, looking over his orders. 'Did your first letter affect you some, upon being given Badger, if I may be so bold?' And before he could allow Nelson to respond, it suddenly hit him, no less the full weight of a broadside unawares. 'Good god, sir! Agamemnon! My ship, sir!'

'Indeed,' he nodded, smiling as the penny finally dropped.

'She's a sixty-four! A third-rate and barely saw service out of the docks. Aye, she was built in eighty-one, just before the end of the war, Ardent class out of Buckler's Hard in Hampshire, technically a ship of the line! Captain Caldwell had her if I recall. Oh, what a ship, a draught of about seventeen feet, very good for shoals and chasing along the coast after smaller craft. Not to mention a broadside of five hundred and seventy-five pounds! Very handsome, sir, with a deck of twenty-fours, a deck of eighteens, a quarterdeck full of four pounders and a couple of very nice nines on the forecastle. Those nines will come in very handy in the chase. I remember her, sir, in the West Indies. She was uncommonly fast for her class.'

'I dare say you do remember!' Nelson commended, his brow drawing in astonishment. 'You are right, of course. She was

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uncommonly fast, paid off late in eighty-three and as I understand, she was subsequently laid up in ordinary. They have pulled her out of the docks for our little enterprise. But what you do not know, lest you run an organised spying ring, of course, is that I have personally afforded her a new hull, copper-sheathed from stem to stern. Cost a pretty penny. If you thought she was fast before, wait til you stand upon her quarterdeck and let fly. She will outrun any seventy-four, which you may very well need to do. She will run down any of the latest frigates. And dare I say, not even the luckiest and slickest of sloop will ever sneak away, lest they ditch all their iron and even so, I believe it may not be enough. She's a pirate killer now, Coops!' he grinned and he slapped his leg as he jiggled in his seat. 'By god, I wish I was going with you!'

'Sir? You are not going with me?'

'Beached, I am afraid.'

'Beached? Alas, sir, they failed to warrant you a ship?' he protested. Of course, Cooper was relieved to learn Nelson was his immediate senior in this endeavour, but this news was most unsettling. How was that to come about if his commander didn't even have a ship? 'But sir,' he griped.

'Aye Coops, I am still licking my wounds it seems. Oh, they all wish me this and wish me that, but hands high up are tied, for now anyway. I am too prominently high on the Seniority Lists, they said. Can you believe it, ha, "*too high*" to be given a ship, for the love of Mary. But I must not be ungrateful, Coops. No, not at all, for that would not do. Their Lordships have afforded me a position of commodore, second class. But this second class commodore will be one who directs his squadron from shore, which accounts as a first in naval history I fear. So, Coops, I will not be putting to sea. The silver lining, thank god, is that I will never fear discomfiture of the position, to be maintained as a closely guarded state secret of the highest proportion. As such, you are not permitted to address me as commodore, lest we are at sea. And I may not wear my commodore's uniform, again, lest we are at sea. We will not see our names in the Gazette, lest it be a complete pile of fabricated rubbish. Damn the secrecy!'

'Quite, sir!'

'However, in the meantime, I may afford my old shipmates, the ones of worth and loyal to a fault, of course, the esteemed

honour of position, command, a chance of promotion and the great fortune of prizes! Do not fret, I will succeed, provided you succeed. Handsomely, as well, my split of any prize is generously set at one-quarter.'

'Upon my soul, sir, more than most admirals are afforded!'

'Indeed, a "*silver*" lining,' he chuckled, admiring his own pun. 'But no admiral wants anything to do with this endeavour. It's a career breaker, or maker, so you see. To take, burn or destroy in peacetime is mostly frowned upon, so they tell me. Especially should one choose unwisely with their target. The truth is, Coops, you and I will be most expendable.'

'Nonetheless, sir, nothing ventured, nothing gained,' he judiciously suggested. 'They chose you wisely. If anyone can do it, you can.'

'Perhaps, Coops, perhaps.'

'Sir?' Cooper prompted, standing with his glass. 'May I give you joy of your command, a commodore no less! In any event, dare I say Their Lordships have fundamentally made you an admiral, for what it's worth!'

'Thank ye, Coops,' he acknowledged, smiling. 'Indeed.'

'It is up to our enterprise now, sir, to see what your squadron can make of it. May I ask, how many other ships do we afford?'

'Oh? Other ships? Why, Coops, we have no other ships,' he announced most sombrely. 'We have but Agamemnon to complete our task.'

Cooper died inside. The fate of his old captain, now his commodore, lay solely upon his singular success at sea. A lot can happen at sea. Even a second-rate, a great ship of the line, can be easily lost within a varying host of ill-fated circumstances. Storms, shoals, lee shores, uncharted reefs, tidal rocks, not to mention the numerous pirates he knew to be scourging the Channel, all and any, could happen upon him without a moment's notice. And Agamemnon was only a third-rate and she would be alone, most worrying. Nelson had seemingly invested heavily upon the enterprise, not just his waning fortunes, but also his reputation and perhaps even his career. The weight of the world gathered and so it piled upon Cooper, a gargantuan squall falling fell upon a tiny sloop.

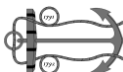
'I see, sir.'

INN ALL HASTE

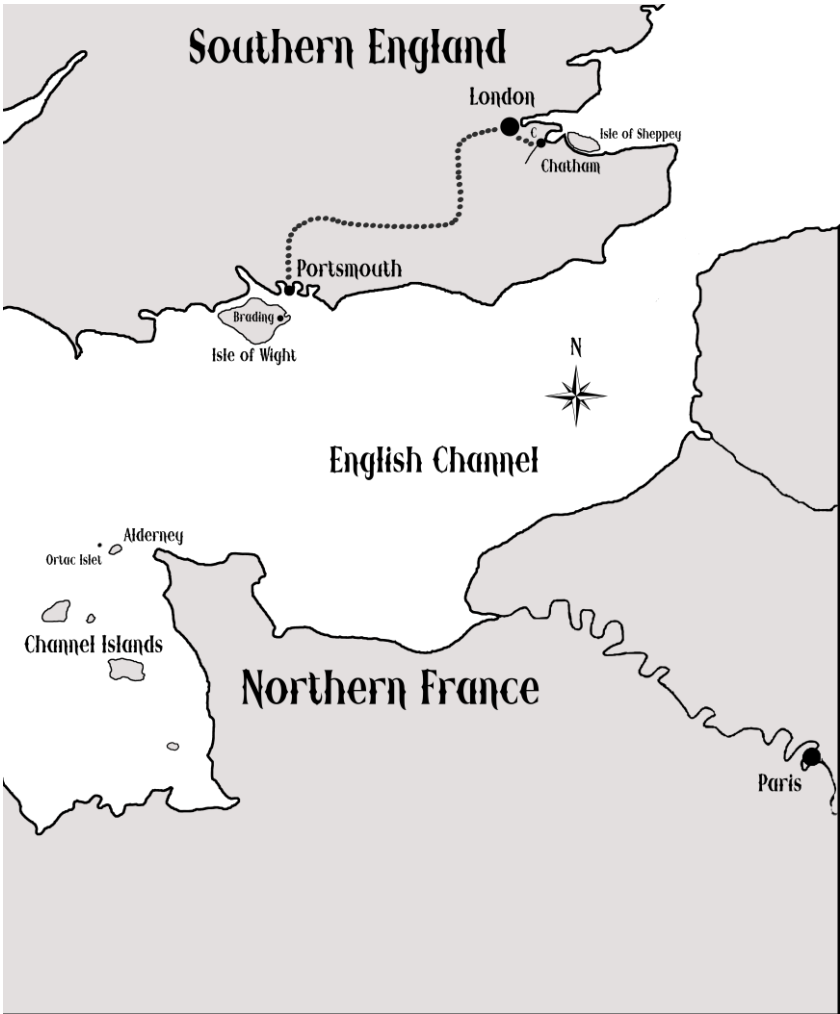
‘Do not agonise, Captain, for I have a plan,’ he added, beaming as if he had just landed a flush, the pot maxed out. ‘Let us discuss it in full, perhaps on the incoming tide of the next day’s morrow? That should afford you enough time to get there. Say, early morning aboard our flagship?’ he grinned.

‘Aboard our flag, ha!’ he smiled. ‘Of course, sir.’

‘She’s down at Chatham.’



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CHAPTER V

AGAMEMNON

Cooper waited expectantly upon the cobbler. The morning was brisk, the heavens uncommonly bright and the wind near dead. A distinct eerie still filled the Chatham dock. It was deathly quiet. A red haze rose within the horizon, one Cooper had been admiring for some time, patiently anticipating the arrival of Nelson. The coach halted and immediately he levered the door for his commodore.

‘Morning, sir.’

‘Well, the early bird snatches the worm, ’ey Captain,’ he complimented, commencing to leisurely stroll along the dock. He looked about at the sky. ‘Red in the morn...’

‘...sailors be warned,’ Cooper finished for him, grinning.

‘Indeed. And I must confess, when I first saw you last evening, I imagined your colour might be a tad more pale. After all, it is not often, or ever for that matter, that lowly lieutenants meet with the First Lord and the Admiral of the Fleet, especially at Whitehall and especially to decide our nation’s woes. But you appeared quite in command of your faculties, so I must commend you. Lord Pitt can be quite the testing tyrant, you know, yet it

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appears you have weathered his broadsides. I wonder, did Hood and Howe eventually attend, give you the once over, 'ey?'

'Aye, sir, they did, as did Lord Pitt's brother.'

'What's that? The Prime Minister!'

'Aye, sir, the Post Master General himself!'

'Well, Coops, now you have lived. Been to hell and back, one might say. Yet here you stand, unscathed,' he nodded, looking him up and down. 'You are going to be alright, my lad, indeed. Good god, you have just met personally with England's entire war cabinet! Well, I guess it makes perfect sense,' he jested. 'Since presently, you and your ship ostensibly comprise, in whole I might add, the entirety of His Majesty's British War Fleet, ha!'

'I believe, sir, I could be feeling a tad more pale now.'

'Ha, quite!' he teased. 'I must say, the new uniform suits you, quite dashing. I noticed you still cling to that monstrosity of a sword. Did they insist to see it? They can be most officiously childish sometimes, I fear to admit.'

'Aye, sir,' he replied, stunned. 'How did you know?'

'A calculated guess, of course, based upon Lord Pitt's propensity to gouge information. Tell me,' he smiled. 'Did you do the candle thing?'

'Aye, sir, ha! Yes, I did. How well you know.'

'It is good, Coops. They respect a captain who knows his job, who weighs the chances quickly and goes straight on in, a fighting captain. I imagine your katana would have made quite the impression. Bloody scary thing, if I may.'

Scarcely were there any ships docked at Chatham and Cooper spotted Agamemnon directly. She was riding high on the water and her three masts towered higher than reasonably thought possible. Her lines appeared quite appealing. How manoeuvrable her hull must be, he ventured. This was a well-built ship, so he decided almost immediately. She looked straight off the yard. It took his breath. It was basically a goliath of a frigate, or rather a small ship of the line. Of course, it was commonly thought most sixty-fours couldn't actually stand in the line, the consideration being that they just couldn't match the weight of a returning seventy-four. No, a sixty-four was built to move in battle, manoeuvre its victories with agility and skill, rather than slug it out.

AGAMEMNON

‘Beautiful, sir!’

‘Aye, I cannot lie, I am most jealous, Coops. It is a ship to my liking, I find. But you will have your work cut out, if we are to get her ready for sea in time. Spring is almost upon us and you must be underway by then. As you can see, there are no cannon aboard, no spars, no cloth, not even a tender. She is nothing more than a skeletal frame. There are a multitude of items which need to be acquired to get her in shape, not to mention a crack crew.’

‘Aye, sir. I believe five hundred is her intended complement.’

‘Indeed?’ he remarked, somewhat surprised. ‘That many? Finding those directly will be our biggest struggle, I fear. Let us repair aboard. We should have adequate privacy in the great cabin,’ he urged, pausing a moment to survey the surroundings. ‘I would not expect much activity here, at Chatham. Apart from Leviathan, a seventy-four last October and Rattlesnake, a sixteen last month, there hasn’t been a whiff of action. And I am told from Their Lordships, moving forward, they likely won’t be launching a damn thing. Goodness, a perfectly good dockyard just sitting wasting itself, fairly well doing much of nothing.’

‘It’s perfect, sir!’

‘Indeed, isn’t it so, Coops!’ he grinned. ‘Perfect!’



The great cabin was spacious, that is, for a ship of war. It had been entirely stripped. Only a small table sat modestly within, just two spindly half-broken chairs limping nearby.

‘We shall have to rectify this too, of course. Nonetheless, let us sit and I’ll outline our situation,’ he urged, pulling out the very charts Cooper had notarised at the Admiralty. ‘They are very impressed with your summations, Coops, as am I. The experts were too, much to their chagrin, of course. They very much wish to meet you. I dare say some are genuinely impressed and wish you joy, whilst the rest wish to see you forthrightly lynched. Now, last night I mentioned I had a plan and it was no idle boast. I fear our endeavour much depends upon the first encounter. So, for what it is worth, this is what I propose,’ he outlined, standing as if commanding a legion of captains in a great fleet action, entirely focused upon the charts and the delivery of the plan. He was rather diminutive in stature, yet right now he appeared some seven feet

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tall. ‘We will put to sea and immediately chase down our first target. Our course will be wholly based upon your summations of the active attacks, naturally. I submit that our first target must be one of utter insignificance, the smallest, if you will. Perhaps a schooner, sloop, or even a yacht.’

‘A yacht, sir?’ he responded, dumbfounded.

‘Indeed,’ Nelson smiled. ‘It is my intention that we do not burn, we do not destroy, but sir, we definitely are going to take! We are going to take and take, until it hurts. Naturally, we will need funds, more than you can imagine. Pitt is hardly going to steer even a halfpenny our way, not a sou. Prizes will have to provide the necessary gold. We were lucky to get Agamemnon, to be sure, but already have they pencilled in the cost. It is up to us to balance the ledger. I am told she came off the docks at twenty-four thousand pounds and all told they have already spent another twenty-six thousand pounds on her, minor repairs apparently.’

‘So, we are in for fifty thousand, sir?’

‘Almost, but best you add another thirteen to the pot.’

‘Sir? For the coppering?’

‘A product of being penny-wise and pound-foolish, I fear.’

‘Sir, you have put in thirteen yourself?’

‘Yes and no. Let us say a great portion, is on loan.’

‘I see, sir,’ Cooper responded, immediately weighing the gravity of the situation. Failure would mean certain bankruptcy and disgrace for Nelson, perhaps even debtors’ prison. It was a detestable predicament, one Cooper could only avoid by engineering complete and utter success upon the sea. Naturally, he was immediately resigned to ensure the debt would be repaid, at all costs, the fate of all now held within his grasp. ‘Then, sir, we most definitely must succeed, quite swiftly.’

‘I am sure I would be most grateful, in course,’ he thanked.

‘To that end, our immediate goal is to capture certain classes of ships, should they present themselves. This is especially important at the outset of our cruise...’

‘Sir?’

‘Indeed, how else are we to build our squadron?’

‘Our squadron, sir?’ he excitedly replied.

‘Aye, Captain!’ he cheekily confirmed. ‘If Their Lordships are not willing to provide us with a fleet, nor a penny, then by god, we

AGAMEMNON

will provide our own. Once we have a fleet, I deem our enterprise will have much less chance of failure, a hedged bet, if you will.’

‘Agreed, sir, brilliant!’ Cooper applauded, very much respecting such cautious stratagems and the men who contemplated them. ‘A squadron has the power to overwhelm and to be sure, not be so easily scuttled by any one pirate.’

‘Very well. Let us agree to commence our takings with a nice sloop, something which can scout, go back and forth in haste with dispatches and such. She must be very fast. Next, let us see about adding a frigate? A forty at least would be most grand, or even two twenty-eights. But beware. We do not want so many ships that our fleet is suddenly noticed. And the speed and efficiency of our entire endeavour is paramount. We cannot be weighed down. Our squadron must be wholly mobile, with the utmost speed. In course, let us wish for a squadron which comprises a sixty-four, two modern frigates and a nice fast yacht.’

‘Indeed, that’s a tidy number, most manageable. If I may, sir, I would suggest one other,’ he offered with a sly grin. ‘We should at the very outset arrange to acquire one of these packet style ships.’

‘What? A merchantman, really? Well, I am intrigued, but what the hell should we do with that? Do you want to run it into Brest, as a fire ship? Good god, man, the First Lord would skin us alive! If we are lucky, such a vessel might boast perhaps one, maybe two cannon, nothing of real use. The purpose is to take, not burn, in case you really were thinking of a fire ship.’

‘Aye, sir, agreed. But to catch a rat, we will need cheese.’

‘Ah, I see,’ Nelson replied, pausing in deep thought. ‘I think I like where you’re going, Captain, indeed! Let us make it so. But I think we will have a small legal issue. We are not at war. In our effort to capture such a ship, we cannot hope to account any such prize as a vicious pirate who set upon us. French merchantmen only tend to be stocked with an obligatory four pounder here and there, nothing worthy of staring down our squadron or robbing our cradles. Nay, Coops, let us go one better. I will purchase us a merchantman, a good solid British-looking piece of cheese. Five hundred pounds should do it.’

‘Indeed, sir. It will have to be fast, to keep up with Agamemnon. That may fetch more than a pretty penny. It shall have to look like she has expensive tastes, to entice our rats?’

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‘Very well, make it so.’

‘I shall look into this, directly.’

‘I shall wait with bated breath,’ he teased. ‘Now, for the crux of it, our ultimate aim, so to speak. Once we have established our fleet, we will cruise after the real targets, ones which might return some real funding!’ he declared, stopping short as he eyed the charts. ‘Goodness, Coops, it says here on your footnotes there’s a bloody ship of the line prowling about. You are sure?’

‘It is most likely Pompée, a French seventy-four, Téméraire class. She’s new too, sir.’

‘New? How new?’

‘Well, sir, she was only recently laid down. Out of Toulon, in fact, about this time last year. I would have rightly guessed she couldn’t possibly have been launched yet, not until at least this upcoming May. I am thinking something is going on. Somehow, she has been commissioned a tad early.’

‘Indeed?’ he warily responded. ‘And you are sure?’

‘I am only guessing, but aye, the mathematics bears out and there are no other capable ships. The vectors, the distances, the area of sea, all point to a larger ship. I know this area. I know she is being built there. Well, anyway, according to the French naval journals of which I have come to acquire.’

‘Indeed? I find that most enterprising, Captain, most enterprising!’

‘She’s a beast, sir, thirty-six pounders!’

‘The devil she is! We will leave her alone then, til we are ready. Whilst I might be inclined to wager upon the Royal Navy at the outset, we cannot risk such an engagement one to one. It would not be a fair match, by any means. Should we chance to lose, they would hang us.’

‘Sir, surely the French wouldn’t...’

‘The Admiralty, Coops...’

‘Ah, of course, sir.’

‘Now, let us work on the particulars. This isn’t normal of course, Captain. As you know, in course we would just employ you to a ship, issue you some general orders. You would work the rest out yourself or suffer the peril. But this will be complex. We will have to gather the right men, furtively. We simply cannot go around sticking posters up everywhere about a grand pirate hunt!

AGAMEMNON

There are bound to be French spies about. No, it will require a delicate hand. We will need to gather some cannon and a goodly amount of dry powder. We will need to furnish the ship with the right amount of stores. We are operating close to home, so it is well we can possibly lighten the ship somewhat. In all of this, the need for secrecy is paramount. We cannot be loading her up in plain sight, as if we are going off to blockade Brest. Your official orders will indicate that you are to be a packet, for the general correspondence and such. This will afford you the privilege of ignoring any orders of detention by ships of seniority. Simply fly the packet flag if challenged. We cannot have you boarded, ever, understood.'

'I understand, sir.'

'Now, let us discuss frankly what has been going on. I suspect you might already have a handle on things, considering your proclivity for spying,' he grinned. 'As you may know, the French are building dissent against their crown. Soon enough they will revolt. It is true that to date their revolution has not taken up arms, not officially, but we can see all too well what is happening. These things always follow the same course. And the so-called pirates, it seems, are wildly prevalent. Our trade and shipping have been quite harassed and very much reduced. With only a small percentage of our military fleet operable, we cannot hope to protect much of anything. Were we to suddenly bring ships out of dock and into service, it would be very much noticed. Our escalation would give the French the necessary reason to act in kind, to build their fleets and in turn, send them to sea.'

'But our spies, thankfully, have put two and two together,' Cooper added. 'Or so the Admiral told me.'

'Aye, they are good at that,' Nelson casually jeered. 'Finally, we are now the wiser. But we cannot in good conscience start a war, not just yet, for we are not ready. But by god, when it comes, we can damn well finish one. In the interim, we must endeavour to diminish our enemy, if only to prolong their inability to strike. The more French ships we take, the more British ships we safeguard and likewise, so will it all account in the grand scheme. So, Captain, it is Their Lordships' wish that we are to silently prepare for war. And it must be silent, you understand. We cannot go throwing the likes of a Captain Nelson out into the Channel on

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some guard duty or some packet runs, not without heads turning. They just won't swallow it. But if we send some unknowns, all good up-and-comers, then it will look like peacetime business as usual.'

'Brilliant, sir.'

'So, is that you, Coops? An unknown?'

'More than you can ever not know, sir.'

'Up-and-comer?'

'Up is the only direction I can physically go, indeed, sir.'

'No doubt, the French spies will be looking, especially when their ships don't come home. Aye, they will looking, but they won't see, not if we are careful. As you know, Captain, you have no interest and not a penny to support you. And I have seen where you rate in the Seniority Lists for lieutenants. Good gracious, man, bent my neck swooping that far down the page! So you see, the French will not see. We have been provided with a ship, a decent one and Their Lordships will make your commission public too. It will be portrayed as something necessary, something of the mildest importance, like a packet run. But in point of fact, you will be hunting our so-called pirates!'

'Indeed, sir!'

'So, there you have it. I will afford you the honour, of course, of selecting your officers. I will not intervene. You are the captain of Agamemnon and it is wholly your prerogative. If you get stuck, of course I will be willing to provide some names. Let us fill our ship with the finest England has to offer. There is little time with much to do. Good luck, Captain!' he bade, wholeheartedly shaking his hand.

