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Master and Commander

Written by Patrick O'Brian

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PATRICK O'BRIAN



*Master and
Commander*



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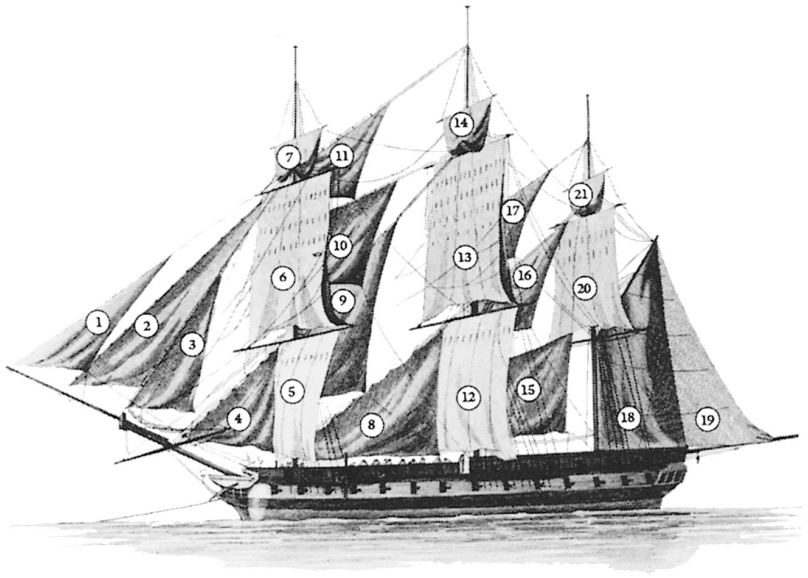
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MASTER AND COMMANDER I

'The Winning Post at Last' by Alan Judd 405

MARIAE LEMBI NOSTRI
DUCI ET MAGISTRAE
DO DEDICO



The sails of a square-rigged ship, hung out to dry in a calm.

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 Flying jib | 12 Mainsail, or course |
| 2 Jib | 13 Maintopsail |
| 3 Fore topmast staysail | 14 Main topgallant |
| 4 Fore staysail | 15 Mizzen staysail |
| 5 Foresail, or course | 16 Mizzen topmast staysail |
| 6 Fore topsail | 17 Mizzen topgallant staysail |
| 7 Fore topgallant | 18 Mizzen sail |
| 8 Mainstaysail | 19 Spanker |
| 9 Main topmast staysail | 20 Mizzen topsail |
| 10 Middle staysail | 21 Mizzen topgallant |
| 11 Main topgallant staysail | |

Illustration source: Serres, Liber Nauticus.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

When one is writing about the Royal Navy of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries it is difficult to avoid understatement; it is difficult to do full justice to one's subject; for so very often the improbable reality outruns fiction. Even an uncommonly warm and industrious imagination could scarcely produce the frail shape of Commodore Nelson leaping from his battered seventy-four-gun *Captain* through the quarter-gallery window of the eighty-gun *San Nicolas*, taking her, and hurrying on across her deck to board the towering *San Josef* of a hundred and twelve guns, so that 'on the deck of a Spanish first-rate, extravagant as the story may seem, did I receive the swords of the vanquished Spaniards; which, as I received, I gave to William Fearney, one of my bargemen, who put them, with the greatest *sang-froid*, under his arm'.

The pages of Beatson, James and the *Naval Chronicle*, the Admiralty papers in the Public Record Office, the biographies in Marshall and O'Byrne are filled with actions that may be a little less spectacular (there was only one Nelson), but that are certainly no less spirited – actions that few men could invent and perhaps none present with total conviction. That is why I have gone straight to the source for the fighting in this book. From the great wealth of brilliantly-fought, baldly-described actions I have picked some I particularly admire; and so when I describe a fight I have log-books, official letters, contemporary accounts or the participants' own memoirs to vouch for every exchange. Yet, on the other hand, I have not felt slavishly bound to precise chronological sequence; and the naval historian will notice, for example, that Sir James Saumarez' action in the Gut of Gibraltar has been postponed until after the grape-harvest, just as he will

see that at least one of my *Sophie's* battles was fought by quite another sloop, though one of exactly the same strength. Indeed, I have taken great liberties; I have seized upon documents, poems, letters; in short, *j'ai pris mon bien là où je l'ai trouvé*, and within a context of general historical accuracy I have changed names, places and minor events to suit my tale.

My point is that the admirable men of those times, the Cochranes, Byrons, Falconers, Seymours, Boscawens and the many less famous sailors from whom I have in some degree compounded my characters, are best celebrated in their own splendid actions rather than in imaginary contests; that authenticity is a jewel; and that the echo of their words has an abiding value.

At this point I should like to acknowledge the advice and assistance I have had from the patient, erudite officials of the Public Record Office and of the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, as well as the Commanding Officer of HMS *Victory*: no one could have been kinder or more helpful.

P.O'B.

Chapter One



The music-room in the Governor's House at Port Mahon, a tall, handsome, pillared octagon, was filled with the triumphant first movement of Locatelli's C major quartet. The players, Italians pinned against the far wall by rows and rows of little round gilt chairs, were playing with passionate conviction as they mounted towards the penultimate crescendo, towards the tremendous pause and the deep, liberating final chord. And on the little gilt chairs at least some of the audience were following the rise with an equal intensity: there were two in the third row, on the left-hand side; and they happened to be sitting next to one another. The listener farther to the left was a man of between twenty and thirty whose big form overflowed his seat, leaving only a streak of gilt wood to be seen here and there. He was wearing his best uniform – the white-lapelled blue coat, white waistcoat, breeches and stockings of a lieutenant in the Royal Navy, with the silver medal of the Nile in his buttonhole – and the deep white cuff of his gold-buttoned sleeve beat the time, while his bright blue eyes, staring from what would have been a pink-and-white face if it had not been so deeply tanned, gazed fixedly at the bow of the first violin. The high note came, the pause, the resolution; and with the resolution the sailor's fist swept firmly down upon his knee. He leant back in his chair, extinguishing it entirely, sighed happily and turned towards his neighbour with a smile. The words 'Very finely played, sir, I believe' were formed in his gullet if not quite in his mouth when he caught the cold and indeed inimical look and heard the whisper, 'If you really must beat

the measure, sir, let me entreat you to do so in time, and not half a beat ahead.'

Jack Aubrey's face instantly changed from friendly ingenuous communicative pleasure to an expression of somewhat baffled hostility: he could not but acknowledge that he *had* been beating the time; and although he had certainly done so with perfect accuracy, in itself the thing was wrong. His colour mounted; he fixed his neighbour's pale eye for a moment, said, 'I trust . . .', and the opening notes of the slow movement cut him short.

The ruminative 'cello uttered two phrases of its own and then began a dialogue with the viola. Only part of Jack's mind paid attention, for the rest of it was anchored to the man at his side. A covert glance showed that he was a small, dark, white-faced creature in a rusty black coat – a civilian. It was difficult to tell his age, for not only had he that kind of face that does not give anything away, but he was wearing a wig, a grizzled wig, apparently made of wire, and quite devoid of powder: he might have been anything between twenty and sixty. 'About my own age, in fact, however,' thought Jack. 'The ill-looking son of a bitch, to give himself such airs.' With this almost the whole of his attention went back into the music; he found his place in the pattern and followed it through its convolutions and quite charming arabesques to its satisfying, logical conclusion. He did not think of his neighbour again until the end of the movement, and then he avoided looking in his direction.

The minuet set Jack's head wagging with its insistent beat, but he was wholly unconscious of it; and when he felt his hand stirring on his breeches and threatening to take to the air he thrust it under the crook of his knee. It was a witty, agreeable minuet, no more; but it was succeeded by a curiously difficult, almost harsh last movement, a piece that seemed to be on the edge of saying something of the very greatest importance. The volume of sound died away to the single whispering of a fiddle, and the steady hum of low conversation that had never stopped at the back of the room

threatened to drown it: a soldier exploded in a stifled guffaw and Jack looked angrily round. Then the rest of the quartet joined the fiddle and all of them worked back to the point from which the statement might arise: it was essential to get straight back into the current, so as the 'cello came in with its predictable and necessary contribution of *pom, pom-pom-pom, poom*, Jack's chin sank upon his breast and in unison with the 'cello he went *pom, pom-pom-pom, poom*. An elbow drove into his ribs and the sound *shshsh* hissed in his ear. He found that his hand was high in the air, beating time; he lowered it, clenched his mouth shut and looked down at his feet until the music was over. He heard the noble conclusion and recognized that it was far beyond the straightforward winding-up that he had foreseen, but he could take no pleasure in it. In the applause and general din his neighbour looked at him, not so much with defiance as with total, heart-felt disapprobation: they did not speak, but sat in rigid awareness of one another while Mrs Harte, the commandant's wife, went through a long and technically difficult piece on her harp. Jack Aubrey looked out of the long, elegant windows into the night: Saturn was rising in the south-south-east, a glowing ball in the Minorcan sky. A nudge, a thrust of that kind, so vicious and deliberate, was very like a blow. Neither his personal temper nor his professional code could patiently suffer an affront: and what affront was graver than a blow?

As it could not for the moment find any outward expression, his anger took on the form of melancholy: he thought of his shipless state, of half and whole promises made to him and broken, and of the many schemes he had built up on visionary foundations. He owed his prize-agent, his man of business, a hundred and twenty pounds; and its interest of fifteen per cent was about to fall due; and his pay was five pounds twelve shillings a month. He thought of men he knew, junior to him but with better luck or better interest, who were now lieutenants in command of brigs or cutters, or who had even been promoted master and com-

mander: and all of them snapping up trabacaloes in the Adriatic, tartans in the Gulf of Lions, xebecs and settees along the whole of the Spanish coast. Glory, professional advancement, prize-money.

The storm of applause told him that the performance was over, and he beat his palms industriously, stretching his mouth into an expression of rapturous delight. Molly Harte curtseyed and smiled, caught his eye and smiled again; he clapped louder; but she saw that he was either not pleased or that he had not been attending, and her pleasure was sensibly diminished. However, she continued to acknowledge the compliments of her audience with a radiant smile, looking very well in pale blue satin and a great double rope of pearls – pearls from the *Santa Brigida*.

Jack Aubrey and his neighbour in the rusty black coat stood up at the same time, and they looked at one another: Jack let his face return to its expression of cold dislike – the dying remnants of his artificial rapture were peculiarly disagreeable, as they faded – and in a low voice he said, ‘My name is Aubrey, sir: I am staying at the Crown.’

‘Mine, sir, is Maturin. I am to be found any morning at Joselito’s coffee-house. May I beg you to stand aside?’

For a moment Jack felt the strongest inclination to snatch up his little gilt chair and beat the white-faced man down with it; but he gave way with a tolerable show of civility – he had no choice, unless he was to be run into – and shortly afterwards he worked through the crowd of tight-packed blue or red coats with the occasional civilian black as far as the circle round Mrs Harte, called out ‘Charming – capital – beautifully played’ over heads three deep, waved his hand and left the room. As he went through the hall he exchanged greetings with two other sea-officers, one of them a former messmate in the gun-room of the *Agamemnon*, who said, ‘You are looking very hipped, Jack,’ and with a tall midshipman, stiff with the sense of occasion and the rigour of his starched, frilled shirt, who had been a youngster in his watch in the *Thunderer*; and lastly he bowed to the commandant’s

secretary, who returned his bow with a smile, raised eyebrows and a very significant look.

‘I wonder what that infamous brute has been up to now,’ thought Jack, walking down towards the harbour. As he walked memories of the secretary’s duplicity and of his own ignoble truckling to that influential personage came into his mind. A beautiful, newly-coppered, newly-captured little French privateer had been virtually promised to him: the secretary’s brother had appeared from Gibraltar – adieu, kiss my hand to that command. ‘Kiss my arse,’ said Jack aloud, remembering the politic tameness with which he had received the news, together with the secretary’s renewed professions of good will and of unspecified good offices to be performed in the future. Then he remembered his own conduct that evening, particularly his withdrawing to let the small man walk by, and his inability to find any remark, any piece of repartee that would have been both crushing and well clear of boorishness. He was profoundly dissatisfied with himself, and with the man in the black coat, and with the service. And with the velvet softness of the April night, and the choir of nightingales in the orange-trees, and the host of stars hanging so low as almost to touch the palms.

The Crown, where Jack was staying, had a certain resemblance to its famous namesake in Portsmouth: it had the same immense gilt and scarlet sign hanging up outside, a relic of former British occupations, and the house had been built about 1750 in the purest English taste, with no concessions whatever to the Mediterranean except for the tiles; but there the likeness stopped. The landlord was from Gibraltar and the staff was Spanish, or rather Minorcan; the place smelt of olive oil, sardines and wine; and there was not the least possibility of a Bakewell tart, an Eccles cake or even a decent suet pudding. Yet, on the other hand, no English inn could produce a chambermaid so very like a dusky peach as Mercedes. She bounced out on to the dim landing, filling it with vitality and a kind of glow, and she called up the stairs, ‘A letter, Teniente: I bring him . . .’ A

moment later she was at his side, smiling with innocent delight: but he was only too clearly aware of what any letter addressed to him might have in it, and he did not respond with anything more than a mechanical jocosity and a vague dart at her bosom.

‘And Captain Allen come for you,’ she added.

‘Allen? Allen? What the devil can he want with me?’ Captain Allen was a quiet, elderly man; all that Jack knew of him was that he was an American Loyalist and that he was considered very set in his ways – invariably tacked by suddenly putting his helm hard a-lee, and wore a long-skirted waistcoat. ‘Oh, the funeral, no doubt,’ he said. ‘A subscription.’

‘Sad, Teniente, sad?’ said Mercedes, going away along the corridor. ‘Poor Teniente.’

Jack took his candle from the table and went straight to his room. He did not trouble with the letter until he had thrown off his coat and untied his stock; then he looked suspiciously at the outside. He noticed that it was addressed, in a hand he did not know, to *Captain* Aubrey, R. N.: he frowned, said ‘Damned fool’, and turned the letter over. The black seal had been blurred in the impression, and although he held it close to the candle, directing the light in a slanting manner over its surface, he could not make it out.

‘I cannot make it out,’ he said. ‘But at least it ain’t old Hunks. He always seals with a wafer.’ Hunks was his agent, his vulture, his creditor.

At length he went so far as to open the letter, which read:

By the Right Honourable Lord Keith, Knight of the Bath, Admiral of the Blue and Commander in Chief of His Majesty’s Ships and Vessels employed and to be employed in the Mediterranean, etc., etc., etc.

Whereas Captain Samuel Allen of His Majesty’s Sloop *Sophie* is removed to the *Pallas*, Captain James Bradby deceased –

You are hereby required and directed to proceed on board the *Sophie* and take upon you the Charge and Command of Commander of her; willing and requiring all the Officers and Company belonging to the said Sloop to behave themselves in their several Employments with all due Respect and Obedience to you their Commander; and you likewise to observe as well the General Printed Instructions as what Orders and Directions you may from time to time receive from any of 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 Order.

Given on board the *Foudroyant*
at sea, 1st April, 1800.

To John Aubrey, Esqr,
hereby appointed Commmander of
His Majesty's Sloop *Sophie*
By command of the Admiral Thos Walker

His eyes took in the whole of this in a single instant, yet his mind refused either to read or to believe it: his face went red, and with a curiously harsh, severe expression he obliged himself to spell through it line by line. The second reading ran faster and faster: and an immense delighted joy came welling up about his heart. His face grew redder still, and his mouth widened of itself. He laughed aloud and tapped the letter, folded it, unfolded it and read it with the closest attention, having entirely forgotten the beautiful phrasing of the middle paragraph. For an icy second the bottom of the new world that had sprung into immensely detailed life seemed to be about to drop out as his eyes focused upon the unlucky date. He held the letter up to the light, and there, as firm, comforting and immovable as the rock of Gibraltar, he saw the Admiralty's watermark, the eminently respectable anchor of hope.

He was unable to keep still. Pacing briskly up and down the room he put on his coat, threw it off again and uttered a series of disconnected remarks, chuckling as he did so. 'There I was, worrying . . . ha, ha . . . such a neat little brig – know her well . . . ha, ha . . . should have thought myself the happiest of men with the command of the sheer-hulk, or the *Vulture* slop-ship . . . any ship at all . . . admirable copperplate hand – singular fine paper . . . almost the only quarterdeck brig in the service: charming cabin, no doubt . . . capital weather – so warm . . . ha, ha . . . if only I can get men: that's the great point . . .' He was exceedingly hungry and thirsty: he darted to the bell and pulled it violently, but before the rope had stopped quivering his head was out in the corridor and he was hailing the chambermaid. 'Mercy! Mercy! Oh, there you are, my dear. What can you bring me to eat, manger, mangiare? Pollo? Cold roast pollo? And a bottle of wine, *vino* – two bottles of *vino*. And Mercy, will you come and do something for me? I want you, *désirer*, to do something for me, eh? Sew on, *cosare*, a button.'

'Yes, Teniente,' said Mercedes, her eyes rolling in the candlelight and her teeth flashing white.

'Not teniente,' cried Jack, crushing the breath out of her plump, supple body. 'Capitan! Capitano, ha, ha, ha!'

He woke in the morning straight out of a deep, deep sleep: he was fully awake, and even before he opened his eyes he was brimming with the knowledge of his promotion.

'She is not quite a first-rate, of course,' he observed, 'but who on earth wants a blundering great first-rate, with not the slightest chance of an independent cruise? Where is she lying? Beyond the ordnance quay, in the next berth to the *Rattler*. I shall go down directly and have a look at her – waste not a minute. No, no. That would never do – must give them fair warning. No: the first thing I must do is to go and render thanks in the proper quarters and make an appointment with Allen – dear old Allen – I must wish him joy.'

The first thing he did in point of fact was to cross the road to the naval outfitter's and pledge his now elastic credit to the extent of a noble, heavy, massive epaulette, the mark of his present rank – a symbol which the shopman fixed upon his left shoulder at once and upon which they both gazed with great complacency in the long glass, the shopman looking from behind Jack's shoulder with unfeigned pleasure on his face.

As the door closed behind him Jack saw the man in the black coat on the other side of the road, near the coffee-house. The evening flooded back into his mind and he hurried across, calling out, 'Mr – Mr Maturin. Why, there you are, sir. I owe you a thousand apologies, I am afraid. I must have been a sad bore to you last night, and I hope you will forgive me. We sailors hear so little music – are so little used to genteel company – that we grow carried away. I beg your pardon.'

'My dear sir,' cried the man in the black coat, with an odd flush rising in his dead-white face, 'you had every reason to be carried away. I have never heard a better quartetto in my life – such unity, such fire. May I propose a cup of chocolate, or coffee? It would give me great pleasure.'

'You are very good, sir. I should like it of all things. To tell the truth, I was in such a hurry of spirits I forgot my breakfast. I have just been promoted,' he added, with an off-hand laugh.

'Have you indeed? I wish you joy of it with all my heart, sure. Pray walk in.'

At the sight of Mr Maturin the waiter waved his forefinger in that discouraging Mediterranean gesture of negation – an inverted pendulum. Maturin shrugged, said to Jack, 'The posts are wonderfully slow these days,' and to the waiter, speaking in the Catalan of the island, 'Bring us a pot of chocolate, Jep, furiously whipped, and some cream.'

'You speak the Spanish, sir?' said Jack, sitting down and flinging out the skirts of his coat to clear his sword in a wide gesture that filled the low room with blue. 'That must be a

splendid thing, to speak the Spanish. I have often tried, and with French and Italian too; but it don't answer. They generally understand me, but when *they* say anything, they speak so quick I am thrown out. The fault is here, I dare say,' he observed, rapping his forehead. 'It was the same with Latin when I was a boy: and how old Pagan used to flog me.' He laughed so heartily at the recollection that the waiter with the chocolate laughed too, and said, 'Fine day, Captain, sir, fine day!'

'Prodigious fine day,' said Jack, gazing upon his rat-like visage with great benevolence. 'Bello soleil, indeed. But,' he added, bending down and peering out of the upper part of the window, 'it would not surprise me if the tramontana were to set in.' Turning to Mr Maturin he said, 'As soon as I was out of bed this morning I noticed that greenish look in the nor-nor-east, and I said to myself, "When the sea-breeze dies away, I should not be surprised if the tramontana were to set in."' "

'It is curious that you should find foreign languages difficult, sir,' said Mr Maturin, who had no views to offer on the weather, 'for it seems reasonable to suppose that a good ear for music would accompany a facility for acquiring – that the two would necessarily run together.'

'I am sure you are right, from a philosophical point of view,' said Jack. 'But there it is. Yet it may well be that my musical ear is not so very famous, neither; though indeed I love music dearly. Heaven knows I find it hard enough to pitch upon the true note, right in the middle.'

'You play, sir?'

'I scrape a little, sir. I torment a fiddle from time to time.'

'So do I! So do I! Whenever I have leisure, I make my attempts upon the 'cello.'

'A noble instrument,' said Jack, and they talked about Boccherini, bows and rosin, copyists, the care of strings, with great satisfaction in one another's company until a brutally ugly clock with a lyre-shaped pendulum struck the hour: Jack Aubrey emptied his cup and pushed back his chair.

'You will forgive me, I am sure. I have a whole round of official calls and an interview with my predecessor. But I hope I may count upon the honour, and may I say the pleasure – the great pleasure – of your company for dinner?'

'Most happy,' said Maturin, with a bow.

They were at the door. 'Then may we appoint three o'clock at the Crown?' said Jack. 'We do not keep fashionable hours in the service, and I grow so devilish hungry and peevish by then that you will forgive me, I am sure. We will wet the swab, and when it is handsomely awash, why then perhaps we might try a little music, if that would not be disagreeable to you.'

'Did you see that hoopoe?' cried the man in the black coat.

'What is a hoopoe?' cried Jack, staring about.

'A bird. That cinnamon-coloured bird with barred wings. Upupa epops. There! There, over the roof. There! There!'

'Where? Where? How does it bear?'

'It has gone now. I had been hoping to see a hoopoe ever since I arrived. In the middle of the town! Happy Mahon, to have such denizens. But I beg your pardon. You were speaking of wetting a swab.'

'Oh, yes. It is a cant expression we have in the Navy. The swab is this' – patting his epaulette – 'and when first we ship it, we wet it: that is to say, we drink a bottle or two of wine.'

'Indeed?' said Maturin with a civil inclination of his head. 'A decoration, a badge of rank, I make no doubt? A most elegant ornament, so it is, upon my soul. But, my dear sir, have you not forgot the other one?'

'Well,' said Jack, laughing, 'I dare say I shall put them both on, by and by. Now I will wish you a good day and thank you for the excellent chocolate. I am so happy that you saw your epop.'

The first call Jack had to pay was to the senior captain, the naval commandant of Port Mahon. Captain Harte lived in a big rambling house belonging to one Martinez, a

Spanish merchant, and he had an official set of rooms on the far side of the patio. As Jack crossed the open spaces he heard the sound of a harp, deadened to a tinkle by the shutters – they were drawn already against the mounting sun, and already geckoes were hurrying about on the sunlit walls.

Captain Harte was a little man, with a certain resemblance to Lord St Vincent, a resemblance that he did his best to increase by stooping, by being savagely rude to his subordinates and by the practice of Whiggery: whether he disliked Jack because Jack was tall and he was short, or whether he suspected him of carrying on an intrigue with his wife, it was all one – there was a strong antipathy between them, and it was of long standing. His first words were, ‘Well, Mr Aubrey, and where the devil have you been? I expected you yesterday afternoon – Allen expected you yesterday afternoon. I was astonished to learn that he had never seen you at all. I wish you joy, of course,’ he said without a smile, ‘but upon my word you have an odd notion of taking over a command. Allen must be twenty leagues away by now, and every real sailorman in the *Sophie* with him, no doubt, to say nothing of his officers. And as for all the books, vouchers, dockets, and so on, we have had to botch it up as best we could. Precious irregular. Uncommon irregular.’

‘*Pallas* has sailed, sir?’ cried Jack, aghast.

‘Sailed at midnight, sir,’ said Captain Harte, with a look of satisfaction. ‘The exigencies of the service do not wait upon our pleasure, Mr Aubrey. And I have been obliged to make a draft of what he left for harbour duty.’

‘I only heard last night – in fact this morning, between one and two.’

‘Indeed? You astonish me. I am amazed. The letter certainly went off in good time. It is the people at your inn who are at fault, no doubt. There is no relying on your foreigner. I give you joy of your command, I am sure, but how you will ever take her to sea with no people to work her out of the harbour I must confess I do not know. Allen took his lieutenant, and his surgeon, and all the promising

midshipmen; and I certainly cannot give you a single man fit to set one foot in front of another.'

'Well, sir,' said Jack, 'I suppose I must make the best of what I have.' It was understandable, of course: any officer who could get out of a small, slow, old brig into a lucky frigate like the *Pallas*. And by immemorial custom a captain changing ships might take his coxswain and boat's crew as well as certain followers; and if he were not very closely watched he might commit enormities in stretching the definition of either class.

'I can let you have a chaplain,' said the commandant, turning the knife in the wound.

'Can he hand, reef and steer?' asked Jack, determined to show nothing. 'If not, I had rather be excused.'

'Good day to you, then, Mr Aubrey. I will send you your orders this afternoon.'

'Good day, sir. I hope Mrs Harte is at home. I must pay my respects and congratulate her – must thank her for the pleasure she gave us last night.'

'Was you at the Governor's then?' asked Captain Harte, who knew it perfectly well – whose dirty little trick had been based upon knowing it perfectly well. 'If you had not gone a-caterwauling you might have been aboard your own sloop, in an officerlike manner. God strike me down, but it is a pretty state of affairs when a young fellow prefers the company of Italian fiddlers and eunuchs to taking possession of his own first command.'

The sun seemed a little less brilliant as Jack walked diagonally across the patio to pay his call on Mrs Harte; but it still struck precious warm through his coat, and he ran up the stairs with the charming unaccustomed weight jogging there on his left shoulder. A lieutenant he did not know and the stuffed midshipman of yesterday evening were there before him, for at Port Mahon it was very much the thing to pay a morning call on Mrs Harte; she was sitting by her harp, looking decorative and talking to the lieutenant, but

when he came in she jumped up, gave him both hands and cried, 'Captain Aubrey, how happy I am to see you! Many, many congratulations. Come, we must wet the swab. Mr Parker, pray touch the bell.'

'I wish you joy, sir,' said the lieutenant, pleased at the mere sight of what he longed for so. The midshipman hovered, wondering whether he might speak in such august company and then, just as Mrs Harte was beginning the introductions, he roared out, 'Wish you joy, sir,' in a wavering bellow, and blushed.

'Mr Stapleton, third of the *Guerrier*,' said Mrs Harte, with a wave of her hand. 'And Mr Burnet, of the *Isis*. Carmen, bring some Madeira.' She was a fine dashing woman, and without being either pretty or beautiful she gave the impression of being both, mostly from the splendid way she carried her head. She despised her scrub of a husband, who truckled to her; and she had taken to music as a relief from him. But it did not seem that music was enough, for now she poured out a bumper and drank it off with a very practised air.

A little later Mr Stapleton took his leave, and then after five minutes of the weather – delightful, not too hot even at midday – heat tempered by the breeze – north wind a little trying – healthy, however – summer already – preferable to the cold and rain of an English April – warmth in general more agreeable than cold – she said, 'Mr Burnet, I wonder whether I might beg you to be very kind? I left my reticule at the Governor's.'

'How charmingly you played, Molly,' said Jack, when the door had closed.

'Jack, I am so happy you have a ship at last.'

'So am I. I don't think I have ever been so happy in my life. Yesterday I was so peevish and low in my spirits I could have hanged myself, and then I went back to the Crown and there was this letter. Ain't it charming?' They read it together in respectful silence.

'*Answer the contrary at your peril*,' repeated Mrs Harte.

‘Jack, I do beg and pray you will not attempt to make prize of neutrals. That Ragusan bark poor Willoughby sent in has not been condemned, and the owners are to sue him.’

‘Never fret, dear Molly,’ said Jack. ‘I shall not be taking any prizes for a great while, I do assure you. This letter was delayed – damned curious delay – and Allen has gone off with all my prime hands; ordered to sea in a tearing hurry before I could see him. And the commandant has made hay of what was left for harbour duty: not a man to spare. We can’t work out of harbour, it seems; so I dare say we shall ground upon our own beef-bones before ever we see so much as the smell of a prize.’

‘Oh, indeed?’ cried Mrs Harte, her colour rising: and at that moment in walked Lady Warren and her brother, a captain in the Marines. ‘Dearest Anne,’ cried Molly Harte, ‘come here at once and help me remedy a very shocking injustice. Here is Captain Aubrey – you know one another?’

‘Servant, ma’am,’ said Jack, making a particularly deferential leg, for this was an admiral’s wife, no less.

‘– a most gallant, deserving officer, a thorough-paced Tory, General Aubrey’s son, and he is being most abominably used . . .’

The heat had increased while he was in the house, and when he came out into the street the air was hot on his face, almost like another element; yet it was not at all choking, not at all sultry, and there was a brilliance in it that took away all oppression. After a couple of turns he reached the tree-lined street that carried the Ciudadela road down to the high-perched square, or rather terrace, that overlooked the quays. He crossed to the shady side, where English houses with sash windows, fanlights and cobbled forecourts stood on unexpectedly good terms with their neighbours, the baroque Jesuit church and the withdrawn Spanish mansions with great stone coats of arms over their doorways.

A party of seamen went by on the other side, some wearing

broad striped trousers, some plain sailcloth; some had fine red waistcoats and some ordinary blue jackets; some wore tarpaulin hats, in spite of the heat, some broad straws, and some spotted handkerchiefs tied over their heads; but they all of them had long swinging pigtails and they all had the indefinable air of man-of-war's men. They were Bellerophons, and he looked at them hungrily as they padded by, laughing and roaring out mildly to their friends, English and Spanish. He was approaching the square, and through the fresh green of the very young leaves he could see the *Généreux's* royals and topgallants twinkling in the sun far over on the other side of the harbour, hanging out to dry. The busy street, the green, and the blue sky over it was enough to make any man's heart rise like a lark, and three-quarters of Jack's soared high. But the remaining part was earthbound, thinking anxiously about his crew. He had been familiar with this nightmare of manning since his earliest days in the Navy, and his first serious wound had been inflicted by a woman in Deal with a flat-iron who thought her man should not be pressed; but he had not expected to meet it quite so early in his command, nor in this form, nor in the Mediterranean.

Now he was in the square, with its noble trees and its great twin staircases winding down to the quay – stairs known to British sailors for a hundred years as Pigtail Steps, the cause of many a broken limb and battered head. He crossed it to the low wall that ran between the stair-heads and looked out over the immense expanse of enclosed water before him, stretching away left-handed to the distant top of the harbour and right-handed past the hospital island miles away to its narrow, castle-guarded mouth. To his left lay the merchantmen: scores and, indeed, hundreds of feluccas, tartans, xebecs, pinks, polacres, polacre-settees, houarios and barca-longas – all the Mediterranean rigs and plenty from the northern seas as well – bean-cods, cats, herring-busses. Opposite him and to his right lay the men-of-war: two ships of the line, both seventy-fours; a pretty twenty-eight gun

frigate, the *Niobe*, whose people were painting a vermilion band under the chequered line of her gunports and up over her delicate transom, in imitation of a Spanish ship her captain had admired; and a number of transports and other vessels; while between them all and the steps up to the quay, innumerable boats plied to and fro – long-boats, barges from the ships of the line, launches, cutters, yawls and gigs, right down to the creeping jolly-boat belonging to the *Tartarus* bomb-ketch, with her enormous purser weighing it down to a bare three inches off the water. Still farther to the right the splendid quay curved away towards the dockyard, the ordnance and victualling wharfs and the quarantine island, hiding many of the other ships: Jack stared and craned with one foot on the parapet in the hope of catching a glimpse of his joy; but she was not to be seen. He turned reluctantly away to the left, for that was where Mr Williams' office lay. Mr Williams was the Mahon correspondent of Jack's prize-agent in Gibraltar, the eminently respectable house of Johnstone and Graham, and his office was the next and most necessary port of call; for besides feeling that it was ridiculous to have gold on his shoulder but none to jingle in his pocket, Jack would presently need ready money for a whole series of grave and unavoidable expenses – customary gifts, douceurs and the like, which could not possibly be done on credit.

He walked in with the utmost confidence, as if he had just won the battle of the Nile in person, and he was very well received: when their business was over the agent said, 'I suppose you have seen Mr Baldick?'

'The *Sophie's* lieutenant?'

'Just so.'

'But he has gone with Captain Allen – he is aboard the *Pallas*.'

'There, sir, you are mistaken, if I may say so, in a manner of speaking. He is in the hospital.'

'You astonish me.'

The agent smiled, raising his shoulders and spreading his

hands in a deprecating gesture: he possessed the true word and Jack had to be astonished; but the agent begged pardon for his superiority. 'He came ashore late yesterday afternoon and was taken to the hospital with a low fever – the little hospital up past the Capuchins, not the one on the island. To tell you the truth' – the agent held the flat of his hand in front of his mouth as a token of secrecy and spoke in a lower tone – 'he and the *Sophie's* surgeon did not see eye to eye, and the prospect of a cruise under his hands was more than Mr Baldick could abide. He will rejoin at Gib, no doubt, as soon as he is better. And now, Captain,' said the agent, with an unnatural smile and a shifty look, 'I am going to make so bold as to ask you a favour, if I may. Mrs Williams has a young cousin who is with child to go to sea – wants to be a purser later on. He is a quick boy and he writes a good clear hand; he has worked in the office here since Christmas and I know he is clever at figures. So, Captain Aubrey, sir, if you have no one else in mind for your clerk, you would infinitely oblige . . .' The agent's smile came and went, came and went: he was not used to be on the asking side in a favour, not with sea officers, and he found the possibility of a refusal wonderfully unpleasant.

'Why,' said Jack, considering, 'I have no one in mind, to be sure. You answer for him, of course? Well then, I tell you what, Mr Williams, you find me an able seaman to come along with him and I'll take your boy.'

'Are you in earnest, sir?'

'Yes . . . yes, I suppose I am. Yes: certainly.'

'Done, then,' said the agent, holding out his hand. 'You won't regret it, sir, I give you my word.'

'I'm sure of it, Mr Williams. Perhaps I had better have a look at him.'

David Richards was a plain, colourless youth – literally colourless except for some mauve pimples – but there was something touching in his intense, repressed excitement and his desperate eagerness to please. Jack looked at him kindly and said, 'Mr Williams tells me you write a fine clear hand,

sir. Should you like to take down a note for me? It is addressed to the master of the *Sophie*. What's the master's name, Mr Williams?

'Marshall, sir, William Marshall. A prime navigator, I hear.'

'So much the better,' said Jack, remembering his own struggles with the Requisite Tables and the bizarre conclusions he had sometimes reached. 'To Mr William Marshall, then, Master of His Majesty's sloop the *Sophie*. Captain Aubrey presents his compliments to Mr Marshall and will come aboard at about one o'clock in the afternoon. There, that should give them decent warning. Very prettily written, too. You will see that it reaches him?'

'I shall take it myself this minute, sir,' cried the youth, an unhealthy red with pleasure.

'Lord,' said Jack to himself as he walked up to the hospital, gazing about him at the vast spread of severe, open, barren country on either side of the busy sea, 'Lord, what a fine thing it is to play the great man, once in a while.'

'Mr Baldick?' he said. 'My name is Aubrey. Since we were so nearly shipmates I have called in to ask how you do. I hope I see you on the way to recovery, sir?'

'Very kind in you, sir,' cried the lieutenant, a man of fifty whose crimson face was covered with a silvery glinting stubble, although his hair was black, 'more than kind. Thankee, thankee, Captain. I am far better, I am glad to say, now I am out of the clutches of that bloody-minded sawbones. Would you credit it, sir? Thirty-seven years in the service, twenty-nine of them as a commissioned officer, and I am to be treated to the water-cure and a low diet. Ward's pill and Ward's drop are no good – quite exploded, we hear: but they saw me through the West Indies in the last war, when we lost two-thirds of the larboard watch in ten days from the yellow jack. They preserved me from that, sir, to say nothing of scurvy, and sciatica, and rheumatism, and the bloody flux; but they are of no use, we are told. Well, they may say what they please, these jumped-up young

fellows from the Surgeons' Hall with the ink scarcely dry on their warrants, but I put my faith on Ward's drop.'

'And in Brother Bung,' remarked Jack privately, for the place smelt like the spirit-room of a first-rate. 'So the *Sophie* has lost her surgeon,' he said aloud, 'as well as the more valuable members of her crew?'

'No great loss, I do assure you, sir: though, indeed, the ship's company did make great case of him – swore by him and his silly nostrums, the damned set of gabies; and were much distressed at his going off. And how ever you will replace him in the Med I do not know, by the by, such rare birds they are. But he's no great loss, whatever they may say: and a chest of Ward's drop will answer just as well; nay, better. And the carpenter for amputations. May I offer you a glass, sir?' Jack shook his head. 'As for the rest,' the lieutenant went on, 'we really were very moderate. The *Pallas* has close on her full complement. Captain A only took his nephew and a friend's son and the other Americans, apart from his cox'n and his steward. And his clerk.'

'Many Americans?'

'Oh no, not above half a dozen. All people from his own part – the country up behind Halifax.'

'Well, that's a relief, upon my word. I had been told the brig was stripped.'

'Who told you that, sir?'

'Captain Harte.'

Mr Baldick narrowed his lips and sniffed. He hesitated and took another pull at his mug; but he only said, 'I've known him off and on these thirty years. He is very fond of practising upon people: by way of having a joke, no doubt.' While they contemplated Captain Harte's devious sense of fun, Mr Baldick slowly emptied his mug. 'No,' he said, setting it down, 'we've left you what might be called a very fair crew. A score or two of prime seamen, and a good half of the people real man-of-war's men, which is more than you can say for most line of battle ships nowadays. There are some untoward sods among the other half, but so there

are in every ship's company – by the by, Captain A left you a note about one of 'em – Isaac Wilson, ordinary – and at least you have no damned sea-lawyers aboard. Then there are your standing officers: right taut old-fashioned sailormen, for the most part. Watt, the bosun, knows his business as well as any man in the fleet. And Lamb, the carpenter, is a good, steady fellow, though maybe a trifle slow and timid. George Day, the gunner – he's a good man, too, when he's well, but he has a silly way of dosing himself. And the purser, Ricketts, is well enough, for a purser. The master's mates, Pullings and young Mowett, can be trusted with a watch: Pullings passed for a lieutenant years ago, but he has never been made. And as for the youngsters, we've only left you two, Ricketts' boy and Babbington. Block-heads, both of them; but not blackguards.'

'What about the master? I hear he is a great navigator.'

'Marshall? Well, so he is.' Again Mr Baldick narrowed his lips and sniffed. But by now he had drunk a further pint of grog, and this time he said, 'I don't know what *you* think about this buggery lark, sir; but *I* think it's unnatural.'

'Why, there is something in what you say, Mr Baldick,' said Jack. Then, feeling the weight of interrogation still upon him, he added, 'I don't like it – not my line at all. But I must confess I don't like to see a man hanged for it. The ship's boys, I suppose?'

Mr Baldick slowly shook his head for some time. 'No,' he said at last. 'No. I don't say he *does* anything. Not now. But come, I do not like to speak ill of a man behind his back.'

'The good of the service . . .' said Jack, with a general wave of his hand; and shortly afterwards he took his leave, for the lieutenant had come out in a pale sweat; was poorly, lugubrious and intoxicated.

The tramontana had freshened and now it was blowing a two-reef topsail breeze, rattling the fronds of the palms; the sky was clear from rim to rim; a short, choppy sea was getting up outside the harbour, and now there was an edge

to the hot air like salt or wine. He tapped his hat firmly on his head, filled his lungs and said aloud, 'Dear God, how good it is to be alive.'

He had timed it well. He would pass by the Crown, make sure that dinner would be suitably splendid, brush his coat and maybe drink a glass of wine: he would not have to pick up his commission, for it had never left him – there it was against his bosom, crackling gently as he breathed.

Walking down at a quarter to one, walking down to the waterside with the Crown behind him, he felt a curious shortness of his breath; and as he sat in the waterman's boat he said nothing but the word '*Sophie*', for his heart was beating high, and he had a curious difficulty in swallowing. 'Am I afraid?' he wondered. He sat looking gravely at the pommel of his sword, scarcely aware of the boat's smooth passage down the harbour, among the crowded ships and vessels, until the *Sophie's* side rose in front of him and the waterman rattled his boathook.

A quick automatic searching look showed him yards exactly squared, the side dressed, ship's boys in white gloves running down with baize-covered side-ropes, the bosun's call poised, winking silver in the sun. Then the boat's motion stopped, there was the faint crunch as it touched the sloop, and he went up the side to the weird screaming of the call. As his foot touched the gangway there was the hoarse order, the clump and crash of the marines presenting arms, and every officer's hat flew off; and as he stepped upon the quarterdeck he raised his own.

The warrant-officers and midshipmen were drawn up in their best uniforms, blue and white on the shining deck, a less rigid group than the scarlet rectangle of the marines. Their eyes were fixed very attentively on their new commander. He looked grave and, indeed, rather stern: after a second's pause in which the boatman's voice could be heard over the side, muttering to himself, he said, 'Mr Marshall, name the officers to me, if you please.'

Each came forward, the purser, the master's mates, the

midshipmen, the gunner, the carpenter and the bosun, and each made his bow, intently watched by the crew. Jack said, 'Gentlemen, I am happy to make your acquaintance. Mr Marshall, all hands aft, if you please. As there is no lieutenant I shall read my commission to the ship's company myself.'

There was no need to turn anybody up from below: every man was there, washed and shining, staring hard. Nevertheless, the calls of the bosun and his mates piped *All hands aft* for a good half-minute down the hatchways. The shrilling died away. Jack stepped forward to the break of the quarter-deck and took out his commission. As soon as it appeared there came the order 'Off hats', and he began in a firm but somewhat forced and mechanical voice.

'By the right Honourable Lord Keith . . .'

As he ran through the familiar lines, now so infinitely more full of meaning, his happiness returned, welling up through the gravity of the occasion, and he rolled out the 'Hereof nor you nor any of you may fail as you will answer the contrary at your peril' with a fine relish. Then he folded the paper, nodded to the men and returned it to his pocket. 'Very good,' he said. 'Dismiss the hands and we will take a look at the brig.'

In the hushed ceremonial procession that followed Jack saw exactly what he had expected to see – a vessel ready for inspection, holding her breath in case any of her beautifully trim rigging with its geometrically perfect fakes and perpendicular falls should be disturbed. She bore as much resemblance to her ordinary self as the rigid bosun, sweating in a uniform coat that must have been shaped with an adze, did to the same man in his shirt-sleeves, puddening the topsail yard in a heavy swell; yet there was an essential relationship, and the snowy sweep of the deck, the painful brilliance of the two brass quarter-deck four-pounders, the precision of the cylinders in the cable-tier and the parade-ground neatness of the galley's pots and tubs all had a meaning. Jack had whited too many sepulchres to be easily deceived; and

he was pleased with what he saw. He saw and appreciated all he was meant to see. He was blind to the things he was not meant to see – the piece of ham that an officious fo’c’sle cat dragged from behind a bucket, the girls the master’s mates had hidden in the sail-room and who would keep peeping out from behind mounds of canvas. He took no notice of the goat abaft the manger, that fixed him with an insulting devilish split-pupilled eye and defecated with intent; nor of the dubious object, not unlike a pudding, that someone in a last-minute panic had wedged beneath the gammoning of the bowsprit.

Yet his was an eminently professional eye – it had been nominally at sea since he was nine and, in fact, since he was twelve – and it picked up a great many other impressions. The master was not at all what he had expected, but a big, good-looking, capable middle-aged man – the sodden Mr Baldick had probably got the whole thing wrong. The bosun was: his character was written in his rigging – cautious, solid, conscientious, traditional. The purser and the gunner neither here nor there, though indeed the gunner was obviously too ill to do himself justice, and half-way through he quietly vanished. The midshipmen were more presentable than he had expected: brig’s and cutter’s midshipmen were often a pretty squalid lot. But that child, that youngster Babbington, could not be allowed ashore in those garments: his mother must have counted upon a growth that had not taken place, and he was so extinguished by his hat alone that it would bring discredit to the sloop.

His chief impression was of old-fashionedness: the *Sophie* had something archaic about her, as though she would rather have her bottom hobnailed than coppered, and would rather pay her sides than paint them. Her crew, without being at all elderly – indeed, most of the hands were in their twenties – had an old-fashioned look; some were wearing petticoat-breeches and shoes, a rig that had already grown uncommon when he was a midshipman no bigger than little Babbington. They moved about in an easy, unconstrained manner, he

noticed: they seemed decently curious, but not in the least bloody-minded, resentful or cowed.

Yes: old-fashioned. He loved her dearly – had loved her from the moment his eye first swept along her sweetly curving deck – but calm intelligence told him that she was a slow brig, an old brig and a brig that was very unlikely to make his fortune. She had fought a couple of creditable actions under his predecessor, one against a French twenty-gun ship-rigged privateer from Toulon, and the other in the Gut of Gibraltar, protecting her convoy from a swarm of Algeciras gunboats rowing out in a calm; but as far as he could remember she had never taken a prize of any real value.

They were back at the break of the odd little quarter-deck – it was really more like a poop – and bending his head he stepped into the cabin. Crouching low, he made his way to the lockers beneath the stern-windows that stretched from one side to the other of the after end – an elegant, curving frame for an extraordinarily brilliant, Canaletto view of Port Mahon, all lit with the silent noon-day sun and (seen from this comparative dimness) belonging to a different world. Sitting down with a cautious sideways movement he found he could hold his head up with no difficulty at all – a good eighteen inches to spare – and he said, ‘There we are, Mr Marshall. I must congratulate you upon the *Sophie’s* appearance. Very trim: very shipshape.’ He thought he might go as far as that, so long as he kept his voice quite official, but he was certainly not going to say any more; nor was he going to address the men or announce any indulgence to mark the occasion. He loathed the idea of a ‘popular’ captain. ‘Thank you, sir,’ said the master.

‘Now I am going ashore. But I shall sleep aboard, of course; so pray be good enough to send a boat for my chest and dunnage. I am at the Crown.’

He sat on for a while, savouring the glory of his day-cabin. It had no guns in it, for the peculiar build of the *Sophie* would have brought their muzzles to within six inches of

the surface if there had been, and the two four-pounders that would ordinarily have taken up so much space were immediately over his head; but even so there was not much room, and one table running athwart was all that the cabin would hold, apart from the lockers. Yet it was far more than he had ever owned before, at sea, and he surveyed it with glowing complacency, looking with particular delight at the handsomely mounted inward-sloping windows, all as bright as glass could very well be, seven sets of panes in a noble sweep quite furnishing the room.

It was more than he had ever had, and more than he had ever really hoped for so early in his career; so why was there something as yet undefined beneath his exultation, the *aliquid amari* of his schooldays?

As he rowed back to the shore, pulled by his own boat's crew in white duck and straw hats with *Sophie* embroidered on the ribbon, a solemn midshipman silent beside him in the stern-sheets, he realized the nature of this feeling. He was no longer one of 'us': he was 'they'. Indeed, he was the immediately-present incarnation of 'them'. In his tour of the brig he had been surrounded with deference – a respect different in kind from that accorded to a lieutenant, different in kind from that accorded to a fellow human-being: it had surrounded him like a glass bell, quite shutting him off from the ship's company; and on his leaving the *Sophie* had let out a quiet sigh of relief, the sigh he knew so well: 'Jehovah is no longer with us.'

'It is the price that has to be paid,' he reflected. 'Thank you, Mr Babbington,' he said to the child, and he stood on the steps while the boat backed out and pulled away down the harbour, Mr Babbington piping, 'Give way now, can't you? Don't go to sleep, Simmons, you grog-faced villain.'

'It is the price that has to be paid,' he reflected. 'And by God it's worth it.' As the words formed in his mind so the look of profound happiness, of contained delight, formed once more upon his shining face. Yet as he walked off to his

meeting at the Crown – to his meeting with an equal – there was a little greater eagerness in his step than the mere Lieutenant Aubrey would have shown.