

The Lion and the Rose

‘This is it, Robbie. The day we've been training for. Watch yourself there.’

‘He's just going to get in the way Will. Look at him, a shivering rag. Tripping over the boxes. He'd be more use as a candlestick holder. Not even sure he'd manage that without blowing us all to ...’

‘That's enough Dick. He's trying his best. Look after your own crew. He'll get the hang of it soon enough.’

Dick muttered something and the other men sniggered. Robbie looked close to tears, and I, not for the first time, wondered why the Good Lord had sent this poor lad to me. We'd been trying to keep busy all day, and we were getting restless.

More cannon fire rumbles, distant enough to not cause concern, but sufficient for me to feel the rush, that intoxicatingly strong pull to take charge, to fight, to conquer. To just get on with it and defeat the enemy.

‘See to it you're ready lads. We could receive the order at any time now. Peter, how is it up your way? All set? Did you replace that broken breech wedge?’

I couldn't hear Peter's reply, but saw his head nod once. More yelling above us, instructions bellowed and repeated. Did it seem more confused than usual? We had a new captain, Sir George Carew, one or two of the gunners had served under him in '37 and their opinion was that he was confident, if a little inexperienced at sea. With his new promotion as Vice Admiral, he certainly strutted around like he owned the ship and playing at being a very important representative of King Harry, from the glimpses I had snatched when Carew had been shown the ordnance preparations earlier this morning. But I had never served under him and therefore reserved judgement. Today would surely be the day to test his mettle.

I looked out for the hundredth time through a gap in the gunport, and saw smoke in the horizon, further out to sea, gunpowder discharge amongst the confusion of masts and rigging and sails. Holy Mary, how many ships were out there? The ship turned slightly and when I twisted a little to get a better view I was sure I glimpsed the brand new Southsea Castle. King Harry was apparently watching on those battlements. People, visible on the fortifications. Soldiers. Thousands of them. It suddenly became very real. Could the French really invade? There were rumours that they had landed on the Isle of Wight already, and were busy burning a village. Sally. Had she come? Had she managed to travel down to the port from her village, to see us victorious? What if the French were successful? What if we couldn't hold them back? *Go home*, I willed. *You're safer at home my love.*

'Prepare for a volley, lads, we're about to come around', came the relayed order from the master gunner. I had watched in embarrassment as he had postured and fawned in front of the Vice Admiral on their earlier visit, but had refrained from the swearing and laughing with the other men when they had departed. My own issues with the incompetent master were not to be dwelt on today, of all days.

'You heard him men, prepare the cannons for another round.' I tried to sound confident, in charge, but just couldn't get rid of a terrible feeling in the pit of my gut. It wasn't the beer turned sour I'd used to soften the biscuit over breakfast, and it wasn't the usual spark of excitement to be a small cog in another heroic battle for my King and my country. I'd woken in a cold sweat in the early hours, with an intuition something wasn't going to be right with the day. Deciding to shake it off, I surveyed the young men, boys really, in my charge.

'Robbie, run over to my chest and bring back that spare linstock, there's a good lad.' Encouraging him, instead of the grunts and curses I had received at the same age, by way of training. Life on a navy ship was not for the faint of heart, but I'd survived, made a good life out of it. Then I met Sally, and life hadn't ever been the same. I had promised to quit by

Yuletide, and work the land with her brothers, as I had as a young child with my own brothers and father, be with Sally once and for all. But in the meantime, I had responsibilities, including this spotty boy, made an orphan by the sweating sickness a few months ago.

More movement above us. Feet, running, panic. Orders bellowed, relayed, curses. The gunners on the starboard side had already attempted to engage the French galleys with a volley, and were preparing for another round as well. The ship, starting to turn. The wind was up now, we could feel the sway, the sails picking up, the rocking as the turn was made. But then it began to list starboard. I could see through the gap in the gun port that the current in the strait was not enough to warrant such movement. With the turn I could see more clearly the many ships further out. The French bastards. Taunting with their cannon shots. They'd been teasing us all day. But with little wind we'd been stuck close to shore, not able to meet the enemy and show them the might of the English Navy and with God on our side.

Screams. High-pitched. Men, men afraid of death. It was coming from above us, and on the other side of the ship, my gunner mates, my fellow mariners. I could hear more than screams now. Water. Water rushing, and towards us. The ship was no longer upright. My heart, my whole body. Knew.

'We've been hit! The French bastards have got us!' Dick, suddenly the young boy he really was, near tears. He had grabbed hold of my arm, with an undeniable tremor that I could feel through my shirtsleeve.

As the oldest, their unspoken leader, my men looked to me. I attempted to give them a reassuring smile, faltering for a flicker of a second. But they saw. In that dim space, creaking timbers surrounding us, coming alive with groans and cries, a thousand planks of wood, the tension unbearable.

We were no longer able to stand on the deck floor, but gripping on to anything we could on walls and the low ceiling.

‘Our father whom art in heaven, hallowed be thy name ...’

‘Oh shut up Dick.’ Big John cried out.

‘We've got to get out of here. Up top, we could jump...’ Peter was pleading. My mind instantly recalled the nets that the sailors had put up yesterday, to stop the enemy from boarding us. There was not going to be an option to jump overboard.

The room was almost pitch black now, water gushing, past our knees, waist high, higher still.

‘Feel for the stairs. Follow the voices of the other men.’ I tried to yell above the cacophony of howling men, the banging of loose equipment, boxes and carts and ammunition as they hit the far wall or the men in their way.

But it was no good. Any possible escape route was blocked. Men, clambering on top of each other in the darkness, little light coming in from above. Cries for help muffled. Heavy pieces of cast iron cannons, breaking away from their rope bonds, careering towards us. I could hear Robbie behind me, sobbing.

‘Robbie, it's going to be alright. Make your peace. We will all be together ...’ my voice, breaking with emotion. I tried again, louder, to be heard over the din. ‘Dick, Peter, Big John, join us in prayer will you? There is no greater honour than having served your King, and your God, in this battle.’

‘Surely we'll be saved though Will?’ Peter, usually the quiet one, yelling out, panic filled. ‘There's so many ships out there, they'll come to save us?’

By now the water was rising to our chests, faster and faster. Little Robbie was struggling to keep his head above water. Before I could say anything further, before I could call out, to grab his hand, to tell him, he'd been a fine apprentice these last weeks, he'd done his parents proud, before any of that could be spoken, I heard a large crack, a splintering crash, the whoosh of a heavy object before my face, felt, rather than saw, in this darkened space in the hull of one

of the finest ships I ever served on, the cannon, before contact was made, and then, nothing. My hand, gripped on to the cast bronze lion's head, the English Lion, his curly mane almost waving in the underwater winds.

Silence. All was quiet. After such noise. The screams and cries, for help, for mothers, and kings, for Mother Mary and for Jesus, to come and save them. Nothing now, save small shakes, a movement, a readjusting, a sigh. Silt, filtering through invisible cracks.

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Noise had always been his constant companion. Men yelling, barking or relaying orders. Bare feet on bare boards. Groans of sails catching the wind. Seagulls crying. Even at the midnight hour, never really too far from land, water lapping against the hull. The ship, even when not under sail, and with not a wisp of wind, there was always a banging or clanging. Her bell, chiming out every quarter hour. Sailors, snoring or laughing or singing. Whistling to their own tunes.

But this, this was silence. Perhaps a small shuffle, an air bubble. A whisper. And darkness. Never in all his life had he experienced this. Perhaps the once when he was little, on the land, he remembers a night with his father. A gruff fellow, his body twisted from years of hard farm labour, but always with a kind gesture or word to his children. Will was one of eight, at last count, his mother being with child the last time he'd seen her all those years ago. For some reason Will had woken in the early hours, probably the chill air, the fight for a bit of blanket on the pallet he shared with his brothers long lost. He'd seen a sliver of light and saw the door was ajar. His father, sitting outside, looking up at the sky. He turned, and seeing Will, beckoned for him to join him. Excitedly Will had, for it was a rare thing to have a moment alone with his father, whom he adored.

‘Can you hear that, son?’

‘I can't hear anything’, Will had whispered back.

‘Exactly. Nothing. Nothingness. Just you and me and the stars and this moon, shining brightest of all. Even the birds are asleep. Whole other worlds, son. We'll never fully understand what's out there, but go. Leave here and explore. But soak in these moments, when the world is still, breathe it in, for they are fleeting.’

It was the most he'd ever heard his father speak, and he'd never forgotten it. His father, a farmhand who'd never walked further than the ten miles to the nearest village. What would his father think of this kind of silence now, and without the benefit of the night sky to look upon.

A small jolt. A vibration. Air bubbles. A voice, muffled. Gurgling. More voices. He thought of Sally. And the child Sally was carrying. He was sure it was a girl. *Sally, what did you name her? Mary, after my mother? Or perhaps Agnes, after your own mother? Why haven't I thought of you both for so long?*

Voices again, animated. He could hear them clearer now. English, but not as he knew it. An English Rose. What made him think of roses? Rose. Perhaps Sally had named their daughter Rose? My men, my crew. What of them?

Movement, below him. A scraping. Silt and mud, his surroundings no longer. He could see sunlight now, speckled streaks of a pale greenish tinge dappling from above. Like dust caught in a sun ray. Air bubbles breaking the light. He smiled. It had been a long time since he'd seen light like this. Wait, there was bright light too, brighter than any candle or firelight. Moving about, methodically, along the seabed. He turned to one of the young men who had come up next to him, and asked, if he too, was a seaman like himself. But the man must not have heard, for he didn't answer, concentrating instead on the bags he was carrying. But Will felt eyes on him, watching, nonetheless. Hours passed, and the people left, taking their lights and their bags with them.

They were back again, men, and, to his surprise, a few women. That made him think of Sally. Would she be at the harbour, waiting for him? With their child, the daughter he was sure he would now have?

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The children were, on the whole, well-behaved. The usual suspects; the class clown, the clever one, the one that gets left behind. This group was co-ed, with smart uniforms of navy blazers and ties, matching headbands or ribbons for the girls. Knee high socks with shiny patent leather shoes, lace-ups for the boys and Mary-Jane's for the girls. A scattering of teachers and parents, the latter mostly with cameras, making sure to get good photographs of their darling offspring, out in the world, learning interesting facts. Hand-outs, developed and produced a couple of years ago by colleagues, thank goodness, printed and copied and printed again so now slightly faded, provided to grateful teachers before the visit, so they could relax a little and have some of the work already done for them. Small paragraphs giving facts about what the children were about to look at. Clues as to what to look out for. Project suggestions for the classroom. A former colleague had hit on the grand idea to have the ship's dog featured on every page. The dog, with his own talking points. Unfortunately when it came time to show the children the actual dog and there was just a skeleton, there were inevitable tears.

‘Now class, it's nearly time for Mr Pole the coach driver to collect us, so let's just gather around, and hear Mr John tell us a little more about the men on the ship’.

‘Children, I hope you've enjoyed all you've seen so far of our marvellous ship and all her artefacts. And now, to finish off your exciting day, let's talk a little about the men on board her. Do any of you remember how many men were on the Mary Rose when she was lost at sea?’

His invitation for their answers provided several hands in the air, and he let them guess and speculate for a few moments before moving on.

‘Behind me here, is what we call a fairly complete skeleton, meaning we have managed to collect nearly all of a person's bones. Anyone here know how many bones we have in our bodies?’

Hands shot in the air, the children desperate to guess the correct answer.

‘Well now, we have it on good authority from the specialists, the forensic scientists, who've studied all the bones we excavated a few years ago now, that these young men, these sailors and seamen, archers, soldiers and gunners, carpenters and cooks, well, they looked just like you and me. They could walk down the road today and look just like a regular young man. The scientists have done all sorts of measurements of the skulls, the distance between eyes, how long noses were, the shape of jaws. Whether they cleaned their teeth every night like your mum and dad tell you to do.’

A scattering of laughter, mostly from the parent helpers.

‘Now, take a close look at the chap behind me here. Sometimes, when I look at him, I think he looks a little like me. What do you think?’

That always got the children laughing and pointing at the silly Mr John, for the skeleton didn't look like anybody really, and John always thought it was a good note to end the class visit.

He got home just as the sun was setting, Mavis next door seeing him as she was closing her curtains for the evening, and giving him a wave in greeting. He was getting on now, his volunteer work hours at the museum reducing as his body started packing up. Hours on your feet would do that to a man, and he had noticed he was slowing down. But he felt such a connection to her, the ship. He could still remember the hours he'd spent as part of that

wonderful archaeology team, first learning how to dive and how to overcome the weightlessness to excavate a trench. It was less than a decade ago, but it felt like an age. Door key already primed, he went in to his own small unit, Rose letting him know rather vocally that he was late with her supper.

It was dark when he opened his front door again and stepped out, the moon at her fullest tonight, high in the sky. He was close enough to the harbour to smell the sea air, and if he strained, he could hear the waves. There was a hum of traffic in the distance, and canned laughter from a late-night game show on a tv somewhere down the road suddenly cut off. This was his favourite time, somewhere between midnight and two in the morning, when he could look up at the night sky, take in the stars. The world a little quieter. And think of that other young man, who had been brave and strong and had gone down in the murky Solent, just in the distance there, with his fellow crewmen and mates, over four hundred years ago.

‘What would you think of our world now, father?’, he whispered, waiting, Rose purring as she wrapped her tail around his legs, before he turned around and walked back inside, closing the front door gently behind them both.