

The Hand of Destiny

C. S. Forester

* A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook *

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

Title: The Hand of Destiny

Date of first publication: 1940

Author: C. S. Forester (1899-1966)

Date first posted: Aug. 22, 2019

Date last updated: Aug. 22, 2019

Faded Page eBook #20190857

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

[Source: Collier's Weekly, November 23, 1940]

The Hand of Destiny

By C. S. Forester

**Mutiny results in the good of the service and
brings about the promotion of your old friend,
Lieutenant Hornblower**

Lieutenant Hornblower came on deck, a little self-conscious about his new uniform. Yesterday he had been only Mr. Midshipman Hornblower, with the white patches—"the mark of the beast"—on his collar to indicate his rank. Now his epaulette gleamed in the corner of his eye as he stole furtive glances around at it, and he was a full-blown lieutenant at the age of twenty, holding His Majesty's commission instead of a mere warrant, and publicly acknowledged as competent—a thing that vaguely worried him—to be officer of the watch and responsible for the handling of any of H.M.'s ships.

He touched his hat to the quarter-deck and hurried to his

division; everyone was too preoccupied to take the slightest notice of his new uniform, for the whole crew were running madly to their positions. Captain Courtney of His Britannic Majesty's frigate Marguerite had a habit of flogging the last man to obey an order, and the present order was for all hands to witness punishment. With grating and boatswain's mates and cat-o'-nine-tails all waiting, Captain Courtney would be even more ready than usual to order a man to be flogged, and the hands were frantic in their haste to fall in.

Courtney came forward to the break of the poop and looked down at the scurrying mass with sardonic satisfaction. Hornblower, looking up at him, could swear he saw the man's lips smacking in anticipation of the bloody treat before him. Courtney was one of those gloomy tyrants who should never have been entrusted with the absolute powers of a captain; he took delight in blood and agony. Hornblower cursed the chance that had transferred him to this command from that of the just and humane Sir Edward Pellew. The vacancies aboard the Marguerite were a result of the courts-martial upon two lieutenants driven frantic by Courtney's bullying, and Hornblower wondered how long it would be before he, himself, provided another vacancy.

Now every man was in position, lining the waist and the gangways, facing inward, rigid and still, awaiting in rapt silence the horrible scene that was to be enacted before them. It was a human sacrifice they were to witness, as though they were some tribe of savages, Aztecs or Ashantees, and no man knew whether or not he might be the next victim if Courtney's lust for blood was not slaked by the fifteen floggings scheduled for today. All the ship was deathly still, tense and silent.

Captain Courtney stood ready with the Articles of War in his hand, the document that gave him the powers he was about to wield. When the victims should be brought up heads would be bared in solemn submission, and the drum would roll, and the captain would read out those portions of the Articles of War that bore upon the cases of the fifteen men who were to suffer. Captain Courtney was at this moment checking the paragraphs he was to read, flipping the pages impatiently from time to time. The master-at-arms was slow in bringing up the prisoners; he would have a taste of his own medicine if he were not careful.

A little group of men appeared on the forecastle, climbing up through the hatchway. They fell to work unobtrusively and noiselessly, like men engaged upon a responsible task; Hornblower noticed them and wondered what in the world they were doing at a moment like this; Courtney was too preoccupied with the Articles of War to notice them for a space, and no one dared call his attention to them. Now somebody came tumbling up onto the main deck, someone tousled and disheveled, looking about him, bewildered. It was one of the ship's corporals—the master-at-arms' assistant—who had been sent below to bring up the criminals. He ran his hand through his hair and stared around, and then he saw the group on the forecastle and uttered a wild cry.

Everyone could relax then, and cease to look straight in front of him. Courtney looked up sharply from his papers.

"Sir!" shouted the ship's corporal, pointing frantically forward. "Sir—"

The little group on the forecastle had worked with a will. They had cast loose the big eighteen-pounder carronade there and manhandled it around so that it looked aft; one man had just finished ramming a charge home down the gaping muzzle, and another man—Hornblower recognized him as Garton, a gun captain in his own division and one of the men marked for punishment this morning—was twirling the elevating screw so as to depress the carronade to sweep the deck.

The frantic excitement of the ship's corporal, and the presence of Garton on the forecastle, told Hornblower what had happened. The fifteen criminals confined below had managed to slip their irons during the night, and had overpowered by surprise the escort sent to bring them up on deck. Now they were in a strong position—he noted that six of them had muskets, presumably taken from the marine escort, and, while one man guarded the hands seized on the forecastle, and another the hatchway, four more were prepared to help the gunners in their defense of the forecastle. There were two men at the carronade, and six at work running a second carronade up beside it. That made fourteen altogether—Hornblower counted them again to make sure—and left in doubt where the fifteenth was.

"What the devil's all this?" blared Captain Courtney from the poop. The spluttering ship's corporal on the main deck tried to explain—apparently he had escaped from the bonds in which the criminals had left him and all his colleagues. But Garton's voice from the forecastle interrupted him.

"It ain't no go, sir!" he shouted. "We're here, an' we sticks here."

He had a portfire burning in his hand, ready to fire the gun, and he made a menacing gesture with it over the breech.

"Put that thing down and don't be a fool!" shouted Courtney in reply.

"Not me, sir. Leastways, not without your promise. Promise you won't flog us, not for nothing. Promise you won't flog nobody for a week, neither, an' we'll come back to duty, sir."

"Promise be damned!" said Courtney, and then to his officers: "Here, Mr. Cuffe, Roberts, Peterson, go and bring those fools off there. Mutiny, by Gad, and on my ship!"

Garton could guess the import of the aside, even though he could not hear the words.

"Wait!" he yelled. "There's grape atop o' canister in this 'ere gun."

The effect of such a charge fired into the serried ranks of the main deck would be simply appalling—the ordered lines there eddied and then stood still. Cuffe and Roberts and Peterson all looked helplessly at their captain; Hornblower could feel the sentiment of the men about him. They were wholeheartedly in sympathy with the mutineers even if they had not yet snapped the bonds of discipline. It would be hard to gather them to make a determined attack upon the forecastle.

"Peterson!" said Courtney out of the corner of his mouth.

"Get below. Collect what men you can find and go for'ard along the orlop. Rush the hatchway when we attack from here."

"Don't no one move!" shouted Garton—it was not hard for him to guess at the captain's plan, which was indeed the obvious one. "This other gun's got a round shot. We'll shoot the masts down, sir, and that there's a lee shore!"

He pointed to the distant Spanish mountains, and everyone recognized the force of what he said. At that close range few shots would be necessary to dismast the ship. Even if they did not set her on fire as well, as was quite likely, she would be helpless, and the gentle breeze would push her to destruction before she could be got under control again. A little murmur ran through the ranks.

Hornblower's heart was warming toward Garton. Mutineer he might be, and therefore quite detestable, but he was a man of ingenuity and courage.

"Damn you!" Courtney raved. Alternately he shook his fists and pounded the rail in front of him. "I'll see you at the yardarm for this, you blasted mutineer! You and all those poor fools with you, damn your souls. Come down from there, or I'll—I'll—I'll—"

There was no effective threat he could make, and Courtney's ravings died away in inarticulate mouthings.

"We'd rather hang than be flogged, Cap'n, an' that's flat," replied Garton, philosophically.

Captain Courtney was on the horns of a most unpleasant dilemma—he must either yield or risk his ship. Hornblower looked at him with a great deal of curiosity, wondering how he would react. For a moment the issue was postponed by Roberts, the white-haired second lieutenant, who apparently was suddenly carried away with desperation at sight of mutiny.

"Let's knock 'em on the head!" he shouted, loudly and suddenly; he started forward, waving his hand and gesticulating to his men as if he were leading a boarding party. But hardly a soul moved. A couple of master's mates started, and then halted as they realized that all the hands were standing still. Roberts checked his men and stood wringing his hands in mortification. The crew were deadly still and silent, save for one man hidden in the crowd, who shouted boldly to the mutineers—

"Don't fire, lads. We're not coming."

Hornblower realized with a shock that a very little more would suffice to carry the whole crew over from passive mutiny to active, to a general explosion of riot and murder that would only end when the last officer's throat was cut. Even Courtney, biting his nails with fury on the quarter-deck, appreciated the position at last.

"What is it you want, then?" he shouted.

"Send us a orficer," called Garton. "Send Mr. Hornblower. We can trust 'im."

Courtney looked down to where Hornblower stood waiting.

"A singular honor, Mr. Hornblower," he said.

Hornblower swallowed the innuendo as the rules of the service dictated.

"Have you any orders for me, sir?" he asked.

"Oh, go and treat with 'em. I'll not stoop to speak to 'em again."

"Do you give me full powers, sir?" asked Hornblower, nervously.

"Gad, yes, man!" snapped Courtney testily and yet offhandedly. "Get it settled. Are my officers questioning my orders, too?"

So it was with no very light heart that Hornblower climbed the stairs to where the mutineers stood at their posts; Garton handed his portfire to a companion beside the carronade and greeted Hornblower with two of his fellows in crime at his back.

"This is a bad business, Garton," said Hornblower.

"Aye aye, sir. But it wasn't us that started it, begging your pardon, sir. You've been on board a week, sir, and know what we've been through. We've had six months of it, sir."

"Well, what do you want?"

"Tain't much, sir. Supposin' the cap'n lets us all off this floggin'? We'll do our duty, honest we will, sir. We don't need floggin' for that."

"It's Courtney I don't trust!" exclaimed another mutineer. "If it ain't for this, he'll flog us for summat else."

Hornblower thought that was likely enough, but he did not say so.

"Make 'im promise he won't flog us no more," said the third member of the committee, but Garton turned on him with contempt for such a notion.

"How could 'e promise that?" he demanded. "What'd happen to discipline if we all couldn't be flogged, not never?"

It was odd to find discipline being discussed by mutineers, but they saw that difficulty as well as Hornblower did. Discipline in the ship's crew would fall to pieces quickly if there was a large section of the crew perpetually free from punishment.

"Tell you what, sir," said Garton. "Let's do what I arst for fust. Supposin' the cap'n promises not to flog none of us fifteen for a week, sir. How's that?"

These men were simple, and their range of vision was limited although crystal clear as far as it went. They had the ship at their mercy, and could have made unlimited demands.

The terms they asked were ridiculously small when the strength of their position was considered.

"That's the best thing, men," Hornblower said. "The captain will forgive this behavior of yours, and he'll not flog one of you for a week."

"Can you swear to that, sir?" asked the second committee member.

"I won't swear to it," said Hornblower indignantly. "Captain Courtney has given me his word, and that should be enough."

Despite the solemnity of the occasion Hornblower was piqued at the suggestion that he should make an oath to mutineers—it would be upsetting to his precious dignity.

"Mr. Hornblower's word's as good as his oath," said Garton. "Come on, fellows, get those guns run back and secured. May I go below, sir? Fletcher's in the magazine with flint and steel. He was goin' to blow the ship up if we was rushed, an' I don't expec' he'll come out unless I arsts him to myself."

"Quick!" said Hornblower. "Run quick."

Fletcher was one of the half-wits on board—press-gang methods always brought in a high proportion of half-witted recruits—and he was quite capable of blowing up the ship. Pictures of Fletcher in the magazine with flint and steel occupied Hornblower's mind all the way back to the poop.

"Well, Mr. Hornblower?" asked the captain.

"I've promised them oblivion for their crimes to date, sir," said Hornblower. "And immunity from punishment for a week."

He spoke with all the formality he could manage; he knew the danger he was in.

"You promised them *what*, sir?" demanded Courtney. "*What* did you say?"

Hornblower repeated himself.

"God bless my soul! Oblivion and immunity for mutineers! Mr. Hornblower, I fail to understand."

"I have pledged my word, sir," Hornblower said hotly, "and yours too. My honor is at stake, sir, and I do not have to tell you what that means to me."

"Indeed, Mr. Hornblower? Indeed?" Courtney was speaking coldly, and with his eyes narrowing. "I do not have to say what I think of an officer who stakes his honor to mutineers. I hope this is the last you will hear of this affair, Mr. Hornblower, but I doubt it. You display altogether too much sympathy with the criminals."

The week of truce was one of horror for Hornblower. He knew how the crew would react to any course that they considered to be sharp practice. If Courtney did not play his part, if he would not let bygones be bygones, but instead had

those fifteen men horribly punished, the consequences would be incalculable.

Hornblower expected a general mutiny and massacre, such as had happened when the crew of the *Hermione* rose and killed Pigott and the officers and surrendered their ship to the Spaniards. Courtney was one of the same class as Pigott, brutal and untrustworthy—it was not surprising that in a service employing two hundred thousand fighting men an occasional brute might attain promotion. Hornblower raged against the practical difficulties the admiralty experienced in detecting and replacing a brute across hundreds of miles of desolate sea, just as he raged against the fate that had placed him under the command of the brute—and just as he raged against the feeling of artistic discontent at seeing a potential masterpiece like *H.M.S. Marguerite* and her crew mishandled and wasted.

But it was during the night following the sixth day, as the *Marguerite* sailed the Biscay waters under a bright moon, that a sharp-eyed lookout at the mast-head caught a glimpse of a dark shape just visible over the glittering water. Some ship or other was trying to break the blockade the *Marguerite* had been maintaining so relentlessly over Ferrol. Courtney was called on deck, and stared at the dark shape through his night-glass.

"That's Castilla," he said. "She's been ready for sea for six weeks back. Eighteen guns a side, so that Dutch trader said. Turn up the hands and beat to quarters."

Courtney rubbed his hands with pleasure as he walked the deck. Brutes sometimes attained promotion in the British navy, but cowards never. The prospect of fighting a ship of considerably superior force set his blood aflame. Hornblower beside him on the quarter-deck—he had the morning watch—could feel the man's passionate pleasure at the prospect of a fight.

"We'll be up to her by daylight," said Courtney. "We'll have her before eight bells. And then our friends Garton and Fletcher and company will get what's been waiting for them for a week. That'll make a satisfactory morning. Steer small, you blasted soldier, you."

The last remark was addressed to the quartermaster at the wheel—Hornblower suspected that the man's attention had lapsed a little on overhearing the threat to flog the recent mutineers.

A little blade of orange fire pricked the dwindling darkness to leeward; the Castilla was trying the range.

"Just like all Dagos," said Courtney. "Never know how to wait."

Courtney knew: Hornblower grudgingly had to admit as much. The Marguerite held her fire as she ran grimly down upon her quarry, even though occasional shots from the Castilla cut a rope here and there, and opened one or two holes in her sails. Even trained seamen and gunners could not be trusted to load and fire to perfection once fire was opened. The first broadside, aimed with deliberation, was worth any five

subsequent ones—it was a tactical necessity to save it up until it could be delivered with the most crushing effect. The shots from the Castilla hummed overhead; twice they crashed into the hull, and the surgeon's crew of idlers had their first wounded to carry below, but Courtney would not allow a shot in return, while the night faded into a pearly dawn, and the dawn changed to blazing day, and the Marguerite closed steadily upon the Castilla.

They were within half-gunshot at last; they could see with the naked eye the glitter of gold on the Castilla's quarter-deck, where her officers stood looking back at the Marguerite. Over their heads hung from the peak the flaunting red and yellow of Spain.

"She's coming into the wind," said Courtney. "Port your helm, there!"

The Castilla was bracing around to meet her opponent; perhaps her captain had some idea of raking the Marguerite as she came down, but he had no chance against the well-handled English ship.

"Starboard broadside, there! Mr. Cuffe, we'll board her in the smoke."

The Marguerite came grinding alongside the Castilla—foretop gallant mast snapping with the force of the collision—and as the ships touched, they heaved and rocked with the recoil of the almost simultaneous broadsides and the dense smoke billowed out, engulfing the two ships under the blue sky. The boarders were thronging the gangways, but Cuffe was

not there to lead them—an unlucky shot had brought him down. There was a moment's hesitation, and the gap had to be filled instantly, before the Spaniards had time to recover or reload, before the impetus died away. Hornblower saw the need, saw the hesitation.

"Come on!" he yelled. There was no room for any thought in his head save that instant action was necessary. He vaulted onto the bulwarks hat in hand—it did not even occur to him to draw a weapon.

"Come on, boarders!" he called, and he leaped onto the Castilla's deck, where the dead and wounded lay, and where the remnants of the Spanish crew, dazed by the broadside, stood inactive. The boarders cheered and followed him.

"Boarders away!" shouted the petty officers, and everywhere the Marguerite's men grabbed up weapons and came pouring over into the Castilla, yelling like madmen in their excitement.

Here and there resistance was offered to them. Somebody banged off a weapon apparently right at Hornblower, but the bullet missed him miraculously, although his left hand bore for the rest of his days the ingrained stain of the burning powder. Most of the Spaniards—raw recruits without a shred of discipline to hold them together—broke and ran before the attack, scuttling below to safety. Only on the high poop did the officers attempt a last resistance, but Hornblower, his mind working like lightning as the excitement keyed it up, collected

his men in the waist and rushed at them, while at the same moment Courtney came down upon their flank with the afterguard from the Marguerite's quarter-deck.

So the Castilla was won and Hornblower and Courtney met upon the high poop of the Castilla, Hornblower hatless and sweating and grimy in the sunshine, Courtney with his drawn sword dangling by its knot from his wrist.

"Creditable, Mr. Hornblower," said Courtney. "Positively creditable."

Hornblower realized that that was the highest praise.

"Thank you, sir," he said.

There was a loud popping of pistols under their feet—some desperate Spanish officers were still defending themselves in their cabins while the English boarders were beating in the doors. Hornblower's mind was still working like lightning. He realized at once the stimulating effect this victory would have upon the Marguerite's crew, the chance open to Courtney to let bygones be bygones and turn his crew from a mass of sullen, incipient mutineers into an organization of enthusiasts such as Pellew commanded in the Indefatigable. And this was the one moment when he could proffer requests or suggestions. He swept the sweat from his forehead as he spoke.

"If you please, sir," he said, "I would like to submit that you select for the prize crew of the Castilla those men whom you marked for punishment last week. It would be a convenient way of ridding the ship of their influence."

Courtney stared at his disheveled fourth lieutenant, stared at him and then ran his gaze over him from head to foot in a manner that made Hornblower ashamed of his honorable untidiness.

"Indeed, sir? Do you think by any chance you are captain of the Marguerite? Oh, I suppose you had it in mind that I should appoint you prize master so that you could go off with your mutineering friends?"

That had not occurred to Hornblower at all, although now that it was suggested to him it seemed an excellent notion—too excellent to be hoped for.

"Mr. Hornblower," said Courtney, "you fill me with the gravest doubts—with very grave doubts indeed. I hardly know what course of action to follow with regard to you."

Hornblower looked despairingly about him. Another pistol shot went off under his feet. He thought of the Marguerite and the sullen discontent of her crew; he thought of everything, including the menace to his own career.

"You mean that, sir?" he said.

"I mean all that I say!" snapped Courtney.

Over on the quarter-deck of the Marguerite lay Fletcher, wounded; save for the helmsman the Marguerite's quarter-deck was peopled only by the dead and the badly wounded. A stray puff of wind was swinging the sterns of the two ships closer together; Fletcher held a pistol in his hand, and he was pointing it toward the two officers—toward Courtney. Months of

brutal ill-treatment had shocked Fletcher out of what little wits he had. Hornblower's instinct was to put out his hand and drag Courtney out of the line of fire. There was only the tiniest moment of hesitation between the thought and the action, a moment during which Hornblower could think once more of the approaching ruin of the *Marguerite* if Courtney should continue unchecked. Then his hand went to Courtney's shoulder, at the very moment when Fletcher's pistol banged, and Courtney fell to the deck with the bullet in his knee.

The ministrations of the *Marguerite*'s surgeon made it finally certain that Courtney's wound would incapacitate him from further service. That was how Hornblower received his important promotion to first lieutenant of the *Marguerite*. His conscience troubled him often enough after that, largely because of that promotion; but he was so busy restoring the discipline and good spirits of the *Marguerite*'s crew that he was able usually to shrug off those accusations of his conscience. After all, the incident had certainly resulted in the further good of the service. And discipline had not suffered as a result of Fletcher's action, for no one had seen him fire the shot—it had passed unnoticed among the popping of the pistols in the *Castilla*'s cabins. No one had seen it, that is to say, save Hornblower, and he never told.

[The end of *The Hand of Destiny* by C. S. Forester]