

Hornblower
and
His Majesty

C. S. Forester

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HORNBLOWER and HIS MAJESTY

By C. S. Forester

Introducing the gallant hero of "Beat to Quarters," Captain Hornblower, in the first of a series of grand adventures. This time, the fighting sea dog runs away—but not to fight another day

"Mind you, Sir Horatio," said Dr. Manifold, "I think this treatment of His Majesty is unwise, very unwise."

"Indeed, Doctor?" said Hornblower politely.

"At the last consultation of His Majesty's physicians," said Dr. Manifold, "those of my opinion were just outvoted, but I venture to say, Sir Horatio, that although mere numbers were

against me—and it was only a trifling majority, you must remember—all that are most distinguished in the world of medical science were on my side."

"Naturally," said Captain Hornblower.

"In the matter of accumulated knowledge we were overwhelmingly superior. But the question of His Majesty's health was left to a mere counting of heads. Mark my words, Sir Horatio, this business of voting by numbers, without regard to position in the world, will be the curse of humanity for centuries to come, unless something is done about it."

"That seems only too likely," said Hornblower. One of his guiltiest secrets was the fact that he fancied himself a democrat and radical, but in the exalted circles in which he moved nowadays he had little difficulty in concealing it, because everyone he met took it for granted that he was the opposite.

"A sea voyage for His Majesty!" exclaimed Dr. Manifold contemptuously. "Build up his strength! Distract him from his troubles! Fiddlesticks! A patient in His Majesty's unfortunate condition of mind should be kept low. It stands to reason. Bleeding, Sir Horatio—some ounces twice a week. A thorough course of purgatives with a low diet. Gentle confinement in the dark. That would give His Majesty's unhappy brain a chance to clear itself of its humors and to start again anew—with a *tabula rasa*, a clean sheet, sir."

"There is much in what you say, Doctor."

Hornblower was not lying when he said that; it seemed quite a logical treatment of insanity in the year 1812. But at the same

time he was moved with pity at the thought of his poor mad king exposed to that sort of brutality. His instincts revolted against it, and his reason told him that as the treatment had been tried unsuccessfully for two years now, it might be as well to experiment with the reverse.

What he was more concerned with, if the truth must be told, was the responsibility of his own position. This was his first command since his triumphant escape from captivity in France, and since he had received the accolade of the Bath at the hands of the prince regent. The command of the royal yacht during His Majesty's madness might have been a sinecure had not this decision been taken to give His Majesty a course of fresh air and change of scene. Sailing about the Channel with His Majesty on board while the sea swarmed with French and American privateers meant a grave responsibility for the captain—for him.

Hornblower looked round the decks of the *Augusta*, at the four stumpy six-pounders, and the two long nine-pounders fore and aft. He would not be able to make much of a defense against one of those heavily sparred, heavily gunned New England privateers. Doctor Manifold seemed to be echoing his thoughts.

"Of course," he was saying, "there is no need for me to point out to you, Captain, the need for the utmost precautions against any shock to His Majesty. You have received orders, I fancy, against firing any salute?"

Hornblower nodded.

"And there must be no bustle and no excitement. Everything must be done more quietly than is usually the case on shipboard. And you must be careful not to run into any storms."

"I shall do my best, Doctor," said Hornblower.

A midshipman who had been perched up at the main-topmast crosstrees came sliding down the backstay, touched his hat to the captain and moved hastily forward. The crew assumed an attitude of expectancy.

"Here comes the king!" exclaimed Dr. Manifold suddenly.

Hornblower merely nodded.

A little group of men on foot came slowly down the slope to the jetty against which lay the *Augusta*; it was not until they were no more than fifty yards away that Hornblower blew a single short note on his whistle and woke the ship to life. The side boys, in spotless white gloves and frocks, ran to their positions at the gilded gangplank. The pipes of the boatswain's mates twittered loudly. The six men and the sergeant of the marine detachment appeared miraculously upon the quarter-deck, pipe clay and buttons gleaming, the two drummers with their sticks poised beneath their noses. The crew fell in by divisions, the officers in their cocked hats and silk stockings, sword hilts and epaulets shining in the sun, in front of them. The whole of the little ship was ready and welcoming at the moment when the party reached the shore end of the gangplank, not a moment too early, not a moment too late—it was a neat piece of work.

There was a brief delay at the gang-plank. His Majesty was reluctant to come on board. Hornblower saw the hesitation; he saw the plump, white hands cling to the handrails, and saw them forced free again, unobtrusively, by two of the attendants. There was a burly lord in waiting, immediately behind His Majesty, wearing a fine plum-colored coat with a laced waistcoat in a contrasting shade, crossed by the narrow ribbon of the Thistle—the bearer, presumably, of some historic name from beyond the border. He closed up behind His Majesty, closer and closer. The hands caught and clung again, and again were forced free, and the lord in waiting's ponderous stomach was planted firmly in His Majesty's back and propelled him almost unnoticeably but irresistibly along the gangplank, so that His Majesty arrived on the deck with just a shade of haste.

Every officer's hand came to the salute; the boatswain's mates set their pipes twittering loudly; the drums of the marines beat a long roll. Up to the main truck soared the royal standard, where its opulent folds flapped slowly open in the gentle wind. His Majesty had come aboard.

"Chickens and chimes. What? What?" said His Majesty. His clouded blue eyes caught sight of a sea gull wheeling against the sky, and followed it in its flight. "What? What? Ducks and Dutchmen. What? What? What?"

The little group of courtiers and attendants pressing along the gangplank gradually edged him farther onto the deck. Then his wandering glance caught sight of Hornblower standing at

attention before him.

"Hillo!" said the king. A kindly smile illuminated his face. "Lessons going all right?"

"Yes, thank you, Your Majesty," said Hornblower.

The king reached up and took off Hornblower's cocked hat with its gold lace and buttons, and with his other hand he ruffled Hornblower's sparse hair.

"Don't let 'em beat you too hard," he said. "What? Don't let 'em. What? Good boys get guineas."

Dr. Manifold had approached, and was standing behind Hornblower's shoulder. The king saw him, and cowered away suddenly in fear.

"Your Majesty!" said the doctor, bowing low, but his humble tone and demeanor did nothing to reassure the frightened being before him. The little court closed up round the king and herded him slowly away as before. Hornblower caught up his cocked hat from the deck where it had fallen from the king's trembling hand, and turned away to his duties.

"Fore and main-tops'ls, there!" he called. "Cast off those warps, Mr. White!"

He felt he needed distraction after seeing the abject terror that had convulsed the face of his king at sight of the doctor

who had tormented him. The air of the sea would feel cleaner than that he was breathing now.

With the royal standard at the main, and the white ensign at the peak, the *Augusta* nosed her way out of Newhaven Harbor to where her escort, the twenty-gun corvette *Cormorant*, awaited her coming. Hornblower, looking through his glass at her, thought what a vivid comment it was on the strain to which the British navy was being subjected, that His Majesty, King George III, King of Great Britain and Ireland, could be escorted to sea only by a twenty-gun corvette at a time when one hundred and twenty ships of the line and two hundred frigates flew his flag.

Times were changing. The royal standard at the main no longer sported the lilies of France—they had been quietly dropped a little while ago in favor of the harp of Ireland. And in the past six months the British navy had suffered a succession of minor reverses such as could not be paralleled in the history of the last fifty years. The reverses could hardly continue; now that England had learned the fighting power of the United States Navy, she would certainly smother the infant sea power with a relentless blockade. But blockade could never prevent the escape of raiders and commerce destroyers—nineteen years of war with France had shown that. England would have to grin and bear her losses while the slow process of strangulation went on. What he was concerned about was that the *Augusta* should not be one of those losses.

"Signal midshipman!" he snapped. "Augusta to *Cormorant*. Take station one mile to windward."

The gay flags soared up and were acknowledged by the Cormorant. In her station a mile to windward she was interposed between the Augusta and any stray raider who might try to swoop down upon her.

The Augusta crept out from the shore, and turned down-channel on her cruise. Behind her stretched the cliffs of England, the Seven Sisters and the towering height of Beachy Head. Hornblower looked over at the king and his courtiers. He watched the pathetic, white-haired figure making its way here and there with uncertain steps while the short-sighted blue eyes examined everything, and he came to the conclusion that undoubtedly Manifold was wrong in his notion of the correct treatment. Surely this life, this clean air and these simple distractions were better for a diseased mind than the bleedings and purgatives and solitary confinement which Manifold desired to inflict.

The king's course had brought him close to Hornblower, and the vague blue eyes were studying Hornblower's face again.

"Little Sophia likes the sea," he said.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Hornblower knew that Sophia was the king's favorite daughter, dead these twenty years and more; he had heard of the happy little holidays on the Dorset coast which the king had once enjoyed with his young family. The king's brow wrinkled as he struggled with his memory.

"Little Sophia!" he said. "Where is she now? She was with me a little while ago."

"Her Royal Highness is on a journey, sir," interposed the lord in waiting—there was a perceptible Scotch accent in his voice to match the ribbon of the Thistle which he wore.

"But why? She didn't tell me anything about it," said the king.

"She left the message with me, sir. Her humblest duty and respects, sir, but she did not have time to await Your Majesty's return to say goodby in person. Her Royal Highness will be back again on Tuesday, and meanwhile hopes that Your Majesty will remember to be as quiet and good as if she were here."

"Tuesday," said the king. "Tuesday. It is a long time to wait for little Sophia, but I suppose I must. I will."

Hornblower's eyes met the lord in waiting's, and Hornblower felt his heart warming suddenly to him. The kindly little deception, the dexterous hint of the need for quiet, showed that this Scottish lord had the sense and tact necessary for his position, and his smile showed that he cherished the same kindly feelings toward the mad king as Hornblower did. Hornblower suddenly ceased to remember how much higher the Order of the Thistle ranked above the Order of the Bath which ornamented his own breast.

"His Majesty," said the lord in waiting, "wishes to command your presence at dinner."

"That gives me great pleasure, sir," said Hornblower.

That was hardly a correct statement, Hornblower found. Not that the dinner was not quite excellent, despite the fact that the royal cooks were flustered and unhandy in their unwonted situation. The food was good, and the service, allowing for the cramped space of the great cabin, efficient. But it did Hornblower's appetite no good to see the king, his table cutlery limited to a spoon, seated with a watchful attendant at each side, and eating as clumsily as a child and daubing his cheeks with bread and milk. So it was almost a relief, despite the foreboding of trouble which it brought him, when a midshipman slipped into the great cabin and whispered in his ear:

"Mr. White's respects, sir, and it's getting thick outside."

Hornblower laid aside his napkin, nodded apologetically to the lord in waiting, and hastened out; it was only when his foot was on the companion that he realized that he had completely forgotten about making his bow to the king.

Outside, as Mr. White had reported, it was undoubtedly getting thick. Long, narrow bands of haze were drifting over the surface of the sea, the surest indication of an approaching dense fog. The Cormorant to windward was already nearly invisible. With night approaching, visibility would soon be negligible. Hornblower pulled at his chin and debated what he should do. Shoreham Harbor lay to starboard, but the tide did

not serve and the wind was falling; it would be risky to venture into shoal water in a fog. As with every captain in difficulties, his first instinct was to get out to sea away from the dangerous land. To seaward lay added dangers from raiders, but the chance of meeting a privateer was easily preferable to the certainty of shoal water. Hornblower gave his orders to the helmsman and called the signal midshipman.

"Augusta to Cormorant," he said. "Course south. Keep closer."

It was a distinct relief to see through the thickening haze the acknowledgment mount to the Cormorant's mast-head while the corvette turned obediently and shook out her mainsail to take up her new station; a quarter of an hour later it was too thick to see across the deck, and Hornblower thanked his stars he had decided to get out to sea instead of trying for Shoreham Harbor.

"Get that bell ringing, Mr. White," he ordered sharply.

"Aye aye, sir," said an invisible Mr. White.

The loud rattle of the fog bell echoed dully in the heavy atmosphere, and the silence that ensued hung heavy as the Augusta crept slowly over the invisible water. It seemed a very long two minutes before it rang again. Seemingly close at hand the bell was answered by another on the port quarter.

"That's Cormorant, sir," said White at Hornblower's side—

Hornblower did not condescend to reply to a remark futile in its obviousness. The next time the other bell sounded it seemed to be well to starboard.

"What the hell?" said White.

The direction of sound in a fog was always misleading—fog banks sometimes echoed back sound as effectively as a cliff face. The Augusta's own bell rang long and harshly, and the Cormorant's reply could only just be heard. Hornblower tried to remember all he knew about Melville of the Cormorant. Young, dashing, ambitious, he had been posted as captain after a bold cutting-out affair somewhere on the Biscay coast. But it was doubtful if his qualities were such as to enable him to perform the difficult task of keeping touch with a consort in a fog. Again the Augusta's bell rang, and this time he could hear no reply at all.

Dr. Manifold was on deck now, and approaching the sacred presence of the captain—the command of the royal yacht exposed him to these plagues, and Hornblower felt he would gladly exchange it for that of the crankiest ship of the line in the Channel fleet.

"That noise disturbs my patient, sir," said Manifold.

"I am sorry, but it is a necessary noise," answered Hornblower.

"I insist on its stopping."

"There is only one man on board here," answered Hornblower, his exasperation boiling over, "who can insist on

anything. And he insists that you go below, sir."

"I beg your pardon, sir."

"If I have to repeat myself, sir," said Hornblower, "I will call a couple of hands to carry out what I say."

"You are a boor, sir. I have the ear of a cabinet minister, and by George, sir, I'll—"

Dr. Manifold cut his speech short as Hornblower turned to the midshipman of the quarter-deck with the evident intention of carrying out his threat. He bolted down the companion as nearly like a rabbit as his portly dignity permitted.

"Pass the word for my steward," said Hornblower as he had intended doing and, when the man came on deck, "Bring me a chair and a pea jacket."

Hornblower spent the night in the hammock chair, wrapped up in the thick coat—he was unwilling to leave the deck while this fog persisted. It was a weary vigil, and whenever he dozed off, he was awakened with a start by the clamor of the fog bell. At the end of the night, White was standing beside him.

"It must be dawn by now, sir," said White. "But I can't say it looks any different."

The fog was as thick as ever—the main yard was invisible from the deck.

"Listen!" said Hornblower, sitting up tensely. His ear had caught the faintest of sounds somewhere astern—its acute

analysis told him of the wash of water, the creaking of timber, the rattle of cordage, all blended and reduced in volume so as to tell him of the presence of a ship somewhere in the near distance. Then they both heard, plainly and distinctly, a voice in the fog say, "Call the watch."

"They're speaking English," said White. "That's Cormorant, then, thank God."

"Go and stop the fog bell, quick," snapped Hornblower, and White was impressed enough by the urgency of his tone to run to do his queer bidding without question, while Hornblower still listened.

"Keep the hands quiet!" said Hornblower on White's return. "I don't want a sound on board."

There had been something odd about the pronunciation of that word "watch." The vowel was broadened in a fashion no English officer would employ. Hornblower did not believe that it was the Cormorant that lay astern there.

"Send a hand to the chains with the lead," said the voice in the fog.

"Queer," whispered White; the explanation still had not dawned upon him—he was not as quick-witted as his captain.

Hornblower walked aft and stared through the mist over the taffrail. There was just the faintest thickening there, the merest, most inconsiderable nucleus to the fog—a ship was crossing their wake from starboard to port not twenty yards away, and unsuspecting. Hornblower watched until the nucleus had lost

itself again in the fog over the port quarter.

"Mr. White," he said, "I'm going to haul my wind. Port your helm, quartermaster."

The Augusta swung round and headed on a course exactly opposite to that of the other ship. Hornblower could be confident that the distance between the two was widening steadily, though slowly; there was only the faintest of breaths of air to push the Augusta through the water.

Here came the king, up bright and early, on this misty morning, attendants with him. Hornblower grudged the moments of distraction from his duty of staring into the fog. King George straddled on the slightly heaving deck like an old sailor—one way and another he must have spent a great deal of time at sea.

"Morning," said the king.

"Good morning, sir," said Hornblower.

"Foggy day, what? Thick weather, what? What?"

There was a lucidity about his manner that had been totally wanting yesterday; perhaps his day at sea had really done him good. A gleam of light came through the fog, and suddenly there was sky to be seen overhead.

"There's Cormorant, sir," said White. "No, by gad, she's not."

A mile astern a ship was to be seen, headed on an opposite

course; with every second her outline became clearer and sharper. As they watched she wove around in pursuit of them, revealing herself as heavily sparred and well-armed, with twelve gun-ports a side. She was hastily setting all sail—the white pyramids of canvas grew as if by magic in a fashion that would have been creditable in a king's ship.

"Set all sail, Mr. White. Smartly now, men."

"Pretty, pretty," said the king, smiling in the sunshine; whether he was alluding to the ordered bustle of setting sail or to the appearance of the pursuing ship was not apparent.

The *Augusta* had all sail set as soon as the other ship, and Mr. White was paying careful attention to their trim as she ate her way close-hauled to windward. It was some time before he could spare a moment to stare through his glass at the other vessel.

"A Yankee, by gad!" he exclaimed, as the red and white bars of the flag she hoisted danced into the field of his glass.

"Hoist our colors, Mr. White. But not the royal standard."

There was no purpose in telling the American what a prize was being dangled under his nose. Hornblower peered through his glass at her. If she managed to work up within close range there was no hope for it—he would have to surrender, as the *Augusta's* six-pounder popguns would stand no chance against the other's heavy metal. And then? Hornblower's imagination boggled at the thought of what would happen next. What would the Americans do with a captive king—the king against whom they had fought for so many weary years a generation

ago? He tried to picture the effect of the news in New York or Boston.

He was so interested in the idea that he quite forgot that he, himself, and his career were in jeopardy. American boats would swarm out to the Narrows to meet them; there would be jubilation and excitement. And then—and then—there was a tradition of hospitality and kindness across the ocean. Faults on both sides had brought about this war, faults that might easily be forgotten when America tried—as she surely would—to make the poor old king as comfortable as possible. The unnecessary war might end in a wholly desirable peace.

For one insane moment Hornblower was almost tempted to risk it, and he was positively shocked with himself when he realized the depths of the treason with which he was dallying. It was his duty to escape with the *Augusta* if he could; for that matter she would be a captive by now if his quick brain had not steered her toward safety the moment he had first heard that American voice through the fog. There was a bank of fog up there to windward; once let the *Augusta* bury herself therein and she stood a chance of safety. That fool Melville in the *Cormorant* was apparently quite lost.

A puff of smoke from the American's bows, and a fountain of water a hundred yards on the starboard quarter.

"Take him below," said Hornblower curtly to the lord in waiting, with a gesture at the king.

"No!" said the king with a stamp of his foot, and Hornblower had no time for further argument.

"Clear away that nine-pounder," he said—the long nine on the quarter-deck might perhaps shoot away a spar and save them.

Another puff of smoke from the American, and this time there was a sudden howl overhead like devils in torment. She was firing with dismantling shot—lengths of chain joined to a common center, rolled in a ball and fired from a gun. In the course of the projectile's trajectory the chains swung out and circled screaming in the air, spelling destruction to any rigging they might hit.

"Come on with that gun, there! Have you all got wooden legs?" Hornblower called.

The men threw their weight on the train tackles and ran it out. The gun captain crouched over the sights. As he did so, the American allowed her head to fall away from the wind; she showed her side, and when every gun port was in view, she suddenly enveloped herself in the smoke of a full broadside. It sounded like some devils' orchestra as the air filled with the din of the dismantling shot screaming all about them.

Hornblower looked anxiously upward and was astonished to see how little damage had been done; then he remembered the same astonishment in other battles. The sea was so large, the target so small by comparison—a miss was so easy, a hit so difficult. A halliard had been cut—White had already started a hand up the rigging to splice it—and a long tear appeared in the main-topsail. And the American had lost a hundred yards by yawing out of her course to deliver that broadside.

The bang of the stern chaser beside him caught him off his

guard and almost startled him out of his wits—he hoped no one noticed the nervous jump which nearly lifted him from the deck. No one could see where the shot fell—at least the American showed no sign of damage. The king was standing breathing in the smell of the powder smoke that eddied round him. He was clearly enjoying himself; mad or no, he was full of the traditional courage of his family. There was no sense in repeating the order to take him below in that case, for the flimsy sides of the royal yacht would be of small avail in keeping out twelve-pounder balls.

The American was yawing again. Hornblower watched, fascinated as gun after gun of her broadside crept into view. Then came the gust of smoke and the howl of the projectiles, and an immense clatter aloft as everything seemed to go at once. The main-topsail yard lurched lopsided, its slings shot away. The fore-topmast was gone altogether, and hanging overside. Ropes were parted everywhere, and the little *Augusta* lay crippled. She was hardly able to move through the water, and the American could overhaul her at her leisure now. There could be no question of making a hopeless fight of it, not with the king on board. All he could do was to try to prolong the chase by keeping the *Augusta* moving as long as possible.

"Clear that raffle away, Mr. White," he said loudly and cheerfully for the benefit of the crew. "Fo'c'sle, there! Cut that wreckage clear! What are you thinking about?"

The men were leaping to their tasks, but the American was coming up, hand over hand, behind. She had lost ground to leeward through yawing, and now she was going about so as to get up to windward of the chase. Her other broadside would

bear soon. Hornblower decided that when it did he would have to surrender. He found himself wondering again how the king would enjoy a visit to Boston or Philadelphia, and then shook off these idle thoughts to supervise again the work of clearing the wreckage.

And as he did so he caught a glimpse of a faint blot in the fog bank ahead. Something was looming out of it, growing sharper every second. He saw the headsails of a ship; so definite was the fog bank that the headsails were illumined by the sunshine before the after-sails were visible. He knew her—she was the Cormorant tardily retracing her course in search of her precious convoy. He cheered wildly and involuntarily, and the surprised crew, looking in the direction in which he pointed, cheered with him.

The Cormorant came flying down to them, with every sail set, but as they watched they saw her upper yards thick with men as she got in her royals ready for action. They gave her another cheer as she went by; the American was clawing up to windward trying to get the weather gauge in the approaching duel with this formidable opponent. But the fog bank had reached the Augusta by now. One or two little wreaths of mist drifted across her deck, and then she plunged deep into it, and the battle they were leaving behind was hidden from view. Hornblower heard the two opening broadsides, each one sharp and distinct—sure proof in either case of a well-disciplined crew. And then the firing changed to a long, continuous roll of artillery.

Without the king on board, Hornblower would have turned his ship about, crippled as she was, to join in the fight, but he

knew his duty. He was about to shout an order to Mr. White, when his attention was attracted by the approach of the king.

"A good boy," said His Majesty. "Good boys get guineas."

The smile on the foolish face was quite winning and charming; the king brought his hand out of the royal fob pocket and put something into Hornblower's hand. It was not a guinea. That desirable and elegant coin had disappeared from circulation altogether now that England was in arms against all the world. The coin epitomized the financial straits through which England was struggling; it was a Spanish silver dollar, with, struck into it, the profile of the king who had just presented it to Hornblower—a queer legal currency for the wealthiest nation in the world.

"Thank you, sir," said Hornblower, doffing his hat and bowing low as the spirit of the moment dictated.

They were through the fog bank now and the sun was shining on them again, lighting up the face of the king. Far astern the long roll of artillery came to a sudden end. Perhaps one ship or the other had hauled down her colors. Perhaps at this moment the boarders were fighting hand to hand on the littered decks. Perhaps, after all, thought Hornblower, it might have been better if the Cormorant had not arrived in time for the battle. Some lives would have been saved—many more, perhaps, if peace had resulted from an enforced visit of the king to the United States. He tried once more to picture the king landing at the Battery, but even his imagination boggled at that.

[The end of *Hornblower and His Majesty* by C. S. Forester]