

A Short Story

A DAY IN 1776

TEEN & ADULT



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While outward bound, Uncle's Fore-topsail Schooner, *Sleuth*, had been swift and light over a quartering sea. Her sleek hull, high, raking masts and stout rigging sported a cloud of canvas and made our journey pleasant and brief. But now, heavily laden on a sea running high, our return was rough. For two days I had been so seasick that I couldn't function. I had lain in total misery, completely incapacitated. My stomach, bladder and bowels had been emptied long ago by the wrenching sickness. And then as suddenly as it had hit me, it was gone. I realized that I wasn't queasy. King Neptune was no longer pounding my head and twisting my innards, but had granted me a reprieve. I was actually hungry and wanted food!

Even under shortened sail, our ship heeled sharply at every gust. I was still being tossed violently about as the ship plunged and heaved in the stormy waters. But at least I was no longer providing the crew great amusement.

Earlier in his cabin below, uncle Isaac told me we would be at greatest risk in this heavy weather. Not at risk from storm or sea, he had assured me, but because we would lose our superior speed and maneuverability. Larger ships such as the British frigates patrolling the coast would have an advantage. Now I wasn't so sure, watching green water cream over our bow, hearing sharp creaking of working timber and loud groaning of strained rigging.

"Sail ho!" I watched the lookout, perched high above, cling to his precarious hold. As the ship pitched and swooped, he swung in dizzying circles. Suddenly, I had to look away or lose my dinner to the fish. I had never sailed in such wild weather; I had to admit to myself that I was useless, a little frightened - - and ashamed of it.

A slap on my back jerked me out of my misery, "Don't worry, boy," my uncle said. "You've survived seasickness and you'll get your sea legs soon." He turned; cupped his hands to his mouth and bellowed above the gale. "Where away?"

"Close-hauled on the larboard tack, sir. By the cut of her tops'ls, she's a British frigate, sir."

"Damn!" Here were Uncle's worst fears realized.

"Altering course. Must have seen us, sir. Now she's heading down wind'ard. Puttin' on sail, sir."

"Double damn!" muttered Uncle Isaac. He whirled away, grabbing my arm as he went. "Keep glued to my side." I must have hesitated, or he read my mind. "No," he snapped at me, "I'm not offering you safety. There is none." Uncle's voice lost its hard edge. "I may need you to act as a messenger. It's high risk, so take care. Come what may, I doubt your mother will ever forgive me." The ship became a turmoil of activity, as

he bawled out orders. "Clear for action. Man the braces." Sound and motion swirled about me as I stayed close to the Captain's side.

The weather was now near a gale. The sea was noticeably higher, waves crashing and hissing alongside. The sea, usually an ally to the faster schooner, now favored the frigate. But being outgunned by the English ship, our best hope was to run. Only minutes before the angry sea was my enemy, but now I stared across at a real foe. The distance between the ships was obviously closing. The frigate was steadily gaining.

For a long time it was simply a race. I could almost imagine this a sport, a contest to determine the better ship, the better crew. This illusion was abruptly shattered. "Open fire, she has, sir." I turned in time to see the telltale puff of smoke being whisked away by the gale. "Be awhile before she finds the range," uncle Isaac said.

The frigate was a beautiful yet terrifying sight as she periodically tried shots from the long nines stationed in her bow and inexorably closed on us. My guts twisted with each puff of smoke from those British guns. The waiting seemed endless. Where the shots went we didn't know, for the high waves hid any telltale jet of water. A muffled report reached us long after any ball would have. Soon, though, I knew they would strike home and the tension steadily increased.

The *Sleuth* was sailing on a beam reach, the wind three points abaft the larboard beam. "Helmsman, bear off a point." The wind shifted more astern. The frigate followed our maneuver. "Excellent!" Uncle Isaac seemed to be enjoying the whole thing. Then we heard the sound of a shot as it passed overhead between the mizen and mainmasts. "Closer," mused my uncle, apparently unperturbed. He actually had a look of anticipation, as if something pleasurable was about to happen. I, on the other

hand, had to exert all my willpower to stay at his side instead of flinging myself flat onto the deck.

Suddenly I had an urgent need to pee. A sailor had just gone to the lee rail and I joined him. He grinned. "Can't tell if I'm gettin' wet from the sea spray or my own water." I grinned back and turned to concentrate on the matter in hand. It's no easy thing in such rough seas. Then I heard a hollow thud beside me and I was immediately covered with a hot mist. The sailor was flung against the rail. His nearly headless body slid to the deck and there it seemed to collapse in upon itself like a punctured water bag. I wept as I puked. Here was the insane reality of war. A man instantly transformed into a dissolving red mass of mangled flesh. My vomiting was brief. The retching took a while longer to stop. The memory would surely stay forever.

As soiled as they were, there would be no change of clothes. Instead, I quickly stripped. Using water from a fire bucket, I sluiced off vomit, excrement and the bloody splattering from myself and my clothing. I heard no comments and I was sincerely grateful. I desperately wanted to believe it was the cold wind blowing through my wet clothes that made me shiver, that it was the chill and not my nerves that made me shake.

"Standby the starboard guns." The strain of being fired upon and having to wait inactive was nearly over. The *Sleuth* shuddered as the main topsail was thrown aback. "Put your helm a-weather." The bow swung around. "Full and by," roared Isaac. Men at the sheets brought the schooner close-hauled. The unexpected maneuver had caught the British by surprise. Here we were coming back at them with our guns elevated and ready. With her lee rail almost awash, the frigate's gun ports were closed.

“Fire as you bear.” Our starboard guns went off in quick succession as we passed. A wind that instantly whipped the bitter cannon smoke away, also carried the screams of the wounded. Our cannons had been loaded with grape shot, which had taken a heavy toll.

The *Sleuth* was quick to tack again, allowing the larboard guns to rake the frigate’s stern. I saw a British officer standing at the taffrail wince as our guns fired. The next instant he was gone along with the ship’s mizzenmast. This volley had used chain and grape in an effort to dismast the British ship. “Fine, damn fine,” muttered Uncle as he watched sails and rigging go over the side. The wreckage acted as a huge sea anchor, dramatically slowing the frigate and giving us another opportunity to fire upon our enemy.

On the starboard side the cannons were all ready loaded and being run out again. Those of the larboard battery were being swabbed and rammed with charges and shot. The planks vibrated under my feet as the guns rumbled across the deck. Even in this nasty weather the *Sleuth* was far quicker in stays than the less handy frigate. Again we passed on the opposite tack, sending shot after shot slamming into the timbers of her shattered stern. The wheel box was destroyed and her rudder useless. By the time repairs could be made to her steering, we would be well away and out of reach.

As the helm was put over, the frigate went to our leeward. Although she was helpless, we were now on her weather side. Now her guns were run out and ready. She would get in a broadside or two. It seemed an eternity as the two ships closed. We were within a few dozen yards. Time passed to a new and different rhythm. The faster things happen, the slower they seem to happen.

The frigate had been riddled with shot. Her scuppers ran red with blood. I could see where corpses had been dragged along the deck and stacked out of the way around the masts. Soon would I too be a mutilated body sprawled upon the deck with my guts strung out beside me? Then came the crushing broadside. If I had relieved myself before, it wasn't enough. My pants were soiled again. Red flashes rippled along the frigate's side as their guns vomited flame, smoke and death at me. I was instantly enveloped in the roar of shot as it crashed into *Sleuth's* side; surrounded by the scream of giant wooden splinters whizzing about and the rattling sound of smashed rigging tumbling to the deck. The acrid smell of cannon gases and blood was everywhere. Smoke surged from the enemy guns again. The main-topgallant came hurtling down and annihilation seemed certain. As if a giant hand had snatched me up, I was flung high into the air. The sudden pain was brutal, but mercifully brief and I was lost in darkness.

I awoke in a swirling mist and helplessly caught in a vast trap of mast, yards, rigging and shreds of sail. It was peaceful, almost hypnotic being rocked in that vast cradle of wood, rope and canvas. Yet something kept nagging at me. I heard Uncle's voice, as if from far away, giving orders to clear the wreckage overboard. And then it occurred to me that the swirling mist was cannon smoke and I was part of that wreckage. The fear of eminent death by drowning jolted me to get out of the tangle, but as desperately as I struggled, I could not free myself. I could hear sailors hacking away with axes despite my yells. A figure appeared high above me and as he leaned over the rail, I saw it was my uncle. In his hand he had a blade and about his waist was tied a stout line.

Effortlessly he went over the side, timing his leap perfectly to land a mere arms span from me.

I fumbled over the rail and landed on the deck just minutes later. The ship felt wrong. There was no life to her, but suddenly, as the last of the wreckage fell away, she surged forward. The *Sleuth* was again a lively lady riding the crests of the waves as she plunged ahead. I lurched a few paces before my uncle steadied me. He grinned at me and then called out "Bosun, what's the butcher's bill?" Then I looked around. The sleek ship was a shambles with carnage everywhere. How hard it is to believe in God when men you lived and worked with were suddenly butchered. One man was pinned to a bulwark by a huge wooden splinter through his chest. Another was missing most of his leg and I could see three bodies under a cannon that had been blow off its slide.

"Six dead, sir and eight wounded. Two of them'll die for sure." The Bosun looked at me and then at his captain. "We could use all able hands, sir." And so as we raced away, leaving the British frigate astern, I helped with the living, the dead and the dying.

I had always admired, perhaps even envied my uncle's physical skills. This day I became aware of his courage and leadership, too.

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