

## Chapter One

John Pearce, standing on the quarterdeck of HMS *Weazel*, could see the faint outline of Mont Faron, rising over two thousand feet behind the port of Toulon, but it was, despite the best efforts of Neame, the ship's master, coming no closer. A *tramontane*, howling down from the Alps into the Gulf of Lions, meant it was impossible to make any headway going north-north-east, and that was before it had acted upon the sea to turn this part of the Mediterranean into a maelstrom of wind-whipped water. The oilskins he was wearing were supposed to keep him dry, but every time a wave broke over the bows, sending back a cascade of furious white spume, it seemed at least a gallon found its way into those gaps between skin and garment, so that his clothes beneath were as wet as if he had been clad in them alone, and some of the salt had soaked the bandage on his arm, where a

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musket ball had grazed it, making the wound sting like the devil.

His presence on the deck was purely for show; John Pearce might be a lieutenant in King George's Navy, and in temporary command of the ship, but he knew he was not fit to be in charge of a vessel in this kind of weather. He lacked the necessary experience, having come by his rank through a royal command rather than the years of experience normally required to pass for his position. But given such a hearty blow, and the fact that there was some slight risk to the ship, he felt it necessary to adopt the position a proper captain would occupy; on deck, getting soaked, looking keenly ahead through salt-encrusted eyes, giving an impression of magisterial calm and an utter confidence that was totally at odds with his true feelings.

Occasionally, as also befitted his station, he would glance over to see how his consort, under the command of the young midshipman, Mr Harbin, was faring. The *Mariette*, captured after a hot action in a Corsican bay, was ploughing into the seas with as little effect as his own vessel, and the sight of her rearing and bucking, the tip of her bowsprit hitting wave after wave, the surge of the water from each coursing along her decks, was a mirror image of what was happening beneath his own widely spread feet. From her side a steady jet of water was blown asunder as the men below

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worked the pumps to discharge that which no amount of tarpaulins stretched tight across hatches could keep out. Likewise, the close-reefed topsails mirrored that above his head, with just a scrap of sail showing on both main and jib to allow the ship to hold itself into the gale.

‘It be a bugger this wind,’ yelled Neame, his mouth pressed close to the gap between the foul weather hat and John Pearce’s ear. ‘Can last for days, can a *tramontane*, and at its worst many a ship has foundered.’

The temptation to respond with an ironic, ‘Thank you for that,’ died on Pearce’s lips. Neame he had to trust, he being the best man aboard to keep him and his crew from perdition, the man who could get them safely to the snug anchorage below that ring of mountains he saw ahead, one that Neame had informed him was impervious to the wind they were facing, and only at risk from a really heavy *levanter*.

*Levanter, Mistral, Sirocco, Tramontane.* These had, only months before, been words of mystery to John Pearce, north, south, east and west winds that – and he struggled from time to time to remember which was which – had come to dominate his thinking, when he was not concerned with the possibility of taking the vessel, a command he had inherited along with their recent capture, into battle. Above his head there was a man lashed to

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the mainmast cap, swaying through an arc of some thirty feet, eyes peeled on the disturbed horizon for any sign of an enemy vessel.

Safety lay ahead with the British fleet laying in the roadstead off Toulon. Lord Hood, the C-in-C, had taken over the town and harbour, as well as the French fleet, with the active connivance of the majority of the citizenry and leading elements of the French Navy – but that did not mean here, in the offing, some unknown enemy might not lurk, a frigate perhaps keeping watch, for there were known to be several enemy warships that had been at sea when Toulon surrendered. Seeing two vessels of a much lighter draught, one of them with the British ensign flying above a tricolour, evidence of a taken prize, they could perhaps risk an opportunity to make an easy capture.

‘All hands to wear ship,’ shouted Neame, his trumpet aimed at the sodden companionway that led below. It was an unenthusiastic crew that tumbled up onto the deck, but they went to their stations without orders, as Neame yelled once more in his commanding officer’s ear. ‘I feel an easing, sir.’

Pearce was startled and surprised, but he nodded in what he considered the required fashion; if Neame had detected something he had signally failed to interpret, he was not about to argue with him. Yet was he right, was the screaming note, as

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the wind whistled through the rigging, just a little less oppressive? His mind had wandered, his concentration slipped, and Pearce silently cursed himself for it; he had been thinking of what lay ahead – of the revenge he would take on Ralph Barclay, a man he considered a bitter enemy – rather than what was happening here and now. A lack of concentration was something which no end of people had told him could be fatal, the sea being an unforgiving element for a mind not focused.

‘Lord Hood wishes HMS *Brilliant* to be kept in the inner harbour, Captain Barclay, that is all I can tell you.’

Vice Admiral Sir William Hotham helped himself to a slice of melon from the plate before him, a handkerchief at the ready to catch the juice which escaped from the corner of his mouth, the whole act of eating such a ripe piece of fruit made more risky by the way HMS *Britannia*, despite her twin anchors and the protection of the mountains which cut off the worst of the wind, was pitching and rolling on a heavy sea. Ralph Barclay, in hearing what had just been said, was incensed but it would never do to show any dissent to a man on whom he depended for so much.

‘I am obliged to ask, sir, what purpose can a frigate serve in such a situation?’

‘We cannot...’ Hotham paused and wiped his

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lips. 'We cannot get one of our own capital ships into the inner harbour, it would smack to our recently acquired allies of distrust.'

'Well-placed distrust, sir, if I may say.'

Hotham nodded and forked another piece of melon, which he held away from him as he answered. 'I agree. The French are our allies only in so long as it suits their purpose. A swing in the wind of their damned revolution and we will be fighting them again.'

'It would have been best, sir, to have seized every one of their ships, never mind that they raised the royal standard.'

It had been a shrewd ploy by Baron d'Imbert, the most active senior officer of the French fleet, once negotiations to take over the port had been concluded, to raise the royal standard, the Bourbon *fleur de lys*, thus claiming to be fighting the Revolution, supporting the true, if displaced, government of France.

Hotham frowned and waved his fruit on the end of his fork. 'I fear Lord Hood's promise to hold them in trust for a Bourbon Restoration places us in restraint. We cannot seize vessels that we acknowledge are the property of others.'

'Perhaps,' Ralph Barclay essayed, in a voice lacking certainty, 'Lord Hood allowed sentiment to cloud his judgement.'

Ralph Barclay considered the care he was

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exercising well placed. Hotham and Hood did not get on, in fact they saw eye to eye on practically nothing, but that did not mean that a mere frigate captain could damn one admiral in the presence of another, men of such rank being a fickle and touchy bunch.

Hotham shook his head slowly, in that way which denoted a lack of firm opinion. 'It can only be that, for it is certainly not in the interests of the Navy or our country. Yet it may be that he has seen his error, not admitted it you understand, but seen it, and he had decided to take some necessary precautions.' The melon disappeared, which necessitated a pause while it was consumed. 'We have, in HMS *Brilliant*, the only armed vessel in a position to dominate the Ministry of Marine, the French Arsenal, and the better sections of the town. The wealthy citizens of the *Quartier St Roch* will not wish to see their properties demolished by cannon fire, which may do more to cement their loyalties to us than the armies besieging the port. Likewise, any sign of plotting in the French naval headquarters and we can reduce it to rubble.'

Ralph Barclay paid great attention to what had just been said, dissecting it for any sign of censure; his frigate was in that inner harbour because it had been captured prior to arrival of the main fleet, though Hotham had defended him stoutly for that in the face of a senior officer who felt that the

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captain of HMS *Brilliant* had acted in a rash manner. Then of course there was the other matter.

‘Does this have anything to do, sir, with those base allegations made against me by that upstart Pearce?’

Another piece of melon made it to Hotham’s mouth, and it was with a rather moist tone that Hotham replied. ‘I see you do not grace him with his rank.’

‘Given that both he and his rank are an abomination, I cannot bring myself to do so, even if it was awarded at the King’s pleasure. And the fact Lord Hood saw fit to trust him with an important mission when it came to taking over the port beggars belief.’

The wipe with the handkerchief that followed was swift and irate; Hotham had somehow been reminded of his own position as second-in-command to a man who made it plain he had scant regards for his abilities, who had not bothered to keep him fully informed of his negotiations with the French Navy and the citizenry of Toulon, or that he had sent a French speaking emissary ashore. Indeed, at the height of those talks, a lowly creature like John Pearce, Hood’s representative, had been more au fait with things than he had himself.

‘Lord Hood may have other reasons for the orders I have just relayed regarding your ship, but as you know, Captain Barclay, he does not always grace me with the inner workings of his mind.’

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‘I am forced to enquire, sir, has he pronounced on this ridiculous notion of my facing a court martial?’

The silence that followed played hard on Ralph Barclay’s nerves. Could Hotham be toying with him; the man was famous for taking his time in making any statement, even slower in decision, which made risible his nickname of ‘Hotspur’. Also, there was the worry about the balance of their relationship. Hotham had been in receipt of certain favours from the man before him, and, in return, had given an assurance – though nothing was ever openly stated – that in future he would see Captain Ralph Barclay, given his previous patron was dead, as a supporter of his flag and position.

Such a thing was very necessary to both men; no admiral could count himself a success without a number of officers committed to his flag. In turn, the admiral would see to it that those men were rewarded with opportunities or commands. As a C-in-C, that was relatively easy, as a subordinate admiral it was much harder. Lord Hood held all the cards in this command when it came to advancement; officers like Elphinstone, Nelson and Linzee, clients of Hood, had already been favoured. Hotham would get enough scraps to hand to his client officers to keep him from open complaint, but nothing substantial would come his way as long as Hood held the whip hand.

‘My enquiry on that score, at our last meeting,

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was tentative, Barclay, but I fear that Hood is inclined to accede to Pearce's demand.'

The lie that followed, and the calm way in which it was expressed, took some effort, but it came out well enough. 'Then I shall just have to face it, sir, with a clear conscience. What can I possibly have to be concerned about? But I fear the strain on poor Mrs Barclay...'

Hotham spoke quickly for once, interrupting. 'Damn me, Barclay, I did not ask after your wife. Remiss of me. How is the good lady?'

'Toiling away at the hospital, sir, saint that she is.'

'Saint indeed,' replied Hotham, though the wistful look in his eye had nothing to do with sainthood. Emily Barclay was a beauty twenty years her husband's junior; there was not an officer in the fleet, of any rank or age, who did not harbour thoughts regarding her, not that anyone would do or say anything that could be construed as dalliance. Codes of behaviour were strict in that regard.

'Do pass on my compliments,' said Hotham, 'and assure her that I will speak again with Lord Hood on the matter.'