

A Ship of the Line

C. S. Forester



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A SHIP OF THE LINE

C. S. Forester was born in Cairo in 1899, where his father was stationed as a government official. He studied medicine at Guy's Hospital, and after leaving Guy's without a degree he turned to writing as a career. His first success was *Payment Deferred*, a novel written at the age of twenty-four and later dramatized and filmed with Charles Laughton in the leading role. In 1932 Forester was offered a Hollywood contract, and from then until 1939 he spent thirteen weeks of every year in America. On the outbreak of war he entered the Ministry of Information and later he sailed with the Royal Navy to collect the material for *The Ship*. He then made a voyage to the Bering Sea to gather material for a similar book on the United States Navy, and it was during this trip that he was stricken with arteriosclerosis, a disease which left him crippled. However, he continued to write and in Captain Hornblower created the most renowned sailor in contemporary fiction. He died in 1966.

Other books by C. S. Forester

*Payment Deferred**
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*Death to the French**
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Horatio Hornblower
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The 'Annie Marble' in Germany
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(with C. E. Bechofer Roberts)
Marionettes at Home
The Naval War of 1812
Hunting the Bismarck

*Already published as Penguins

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CHAPTER ONE

CAPTAIN HORATIO HORNBLOWER was reading a smudgy proof which the printers had just sent round to his lodgings.

‘To all Young men of *Spirit*,’ he said. ‘Seamen, Landsmen, and Boys, who wish to strike a Blow for Freedom and to cause the Corsican Tyrant to wish that he had never dared the Wrath of these British Isles. His Majesty’s Ship *Sutherland* of two decks and seventy-four guns is at present commissioning at Plymouth, and a few *Vacancies* still exist to complete her Crew. Captain *Horatio Hornblower* in command has lately returned from a Cruize in the *South Sea* during which in command of the Frigate *Lydia* of thirty-six guns, he engaged and *sank* the Spanish vessel *Natividad* of two decks and more than *twice the force*. The Officers, Petty Officers, and men of the *Lydia* have all joined him in the *Sutherland*. What Heart of Oak can resist this Appeal to Join this Band of Heroes and Share with them the new Glories which await them? Who will teach Monsieur *Jean Crapaud* that the Seas are *Britannia’s* where no Frog-eating *Frenchman* can show his Face? Who wishes for a Hatful of Golden Louis d’or for *Prize Money*? There will be *Fiddlers* and *Dancing* every evening, and Provisions at *sixteen* ounces to the Pound, the Best of Beef, and Best of Bread, and *Grog* at midday every Day of the Week and *Sundays*, all in addition to the *Pay* under the *Warrant* of His Most Gracious Majesty King *George!* In the *Place* where this notice is read can be found an Officer of His Majesty’s Ship *Sutherland* who will enlist any *Willing Hearts* who Thirst for Glory.’

Captain Hornblower struggled against hopelessness as he read the proof. Appeals of this sort were to be read in dozens in every market town. It hardly seemed likely that he could attract recruits to a humdrum ship of the line when dashing frigate

captains of twice his reputation were scouring the country and able to produce figures of prize money actually won in previous voyages. To send four lieutenants, each with half a dozen men, round the southern counties to gather recruits in accordance with this poster was going to cost him practically all the pay he had accumulated last commission, and he feared lest it should be money thrown away.

Yet something had to be done. The *Lydia* had supplied him with two hundred able-bodied seamen (his placard said nothing of the fact that they had been compulsorily transferred without a chance of setting foot on English soil after a commission of two years' duration) but to complete his crew he needed another fifty seamen and two hundred landmen and boys. The guardship had found him none at all. Failure to complete his crew might mean the loss of his command, and from that would result unemployment and half pay – eight shillings a day – for the rest of his life. He could form no estimate at all of how much favour he was regarded with at the Admiralty, and in the absence of data it was natural to him to believe that his employment hung precariously in the balance.

Anxiety and strain brought oaths to his lips as he tapped on the proof with his pencil – silly blasphemies of whose senselessness he was quite well aware even as he mouthed them. But he was careful to speak softly; Maria was resting in the bedroom through the double doors behind him, and he did not want to rouse her. Maria (although it was too early to be certain) believed herself to be pregnant, and Hornblower was sated with her cloying tenderness. His irritation increased at the thought of it; he hated the land, the necessity of recruiting, the stuffy sitting-room, the loss of the independence he had enjoyed during the months of his last commission. Irritably he took his hat and stole quietly out. The printer's messenger was waiting, hat in hand, in the hall. To him Hornblower abruptly handed back the proof with a curt order for one gross of placards to be struck off, and then he made his way into the noisy streets.

The tollkeeper at the Halfpenny Gate Bridge at sight of his uniform let him through without payment; a dozen watermen at the ferry knew him as the captain of the *Sutherland* and

competed to catch his eye – they could expect an ample fee for rowing a Captain to his ship up the long length of the Hamoaze. Hornblower took his seat in a pair-oared wherry; it gave him some satisfaction to say no word at all as they shoved off and began the long pull through the tangle of shipping. Stroke oar shifted his quid and was about to utter some commonplace or other to his passenger, but at sight of his black brow and ill-tempered frown he thought better of it and changed his opening word to a self-conscious cough – Hornblower, acutely aware of the by-play although he had spared the man no open glance, lost some of his ill-temper as a result. He noticed the play of muscles in the brown forearms as the man strained at his oar; there was tattooing on the wrist, and a thin gold ring gleamed in the man's left ear. He must have been a seaman before he became a waterman – Hornblower longed inexpressibly to have him haled on board when they should reach the *Sutherland*; if he could only lay his hands on a few dozen prime seamen his anxiety would be at an end. But the fellow of course would have a certificate of exemption, else he would never be able to ply his trade here in a part where a quarter of the British Navy came seeking for men.

The victualling yard and the dockyard as they rowed past were swarming with men, too, all of them able bodied, and half of them seamen – shipwrights and riggers – at whom Hornblower stared as longingly and as helplessly as a cat at goldfish in a bowl. The rope walk and the mast house, the sheer hulk and the smoking chimneys of the biscuit bakery went slowly by. There was the *Sutherland*, riding to her moorings off Bull Point; Hornblower, as he gazed at her across the choppy water, was conscious of a queer admixture of conservative dislike in the natural pride which he felt in his new command. Her round bow looked odd at a time when every British-built ship of the line had the beakhead to which his eye had long grown accustomed; her lines were ungainly and told their tale (as Hornblower noticed every time he looked at her) of more desirable qualities sacrificed for shallow draught. Everything about her – save for the lower masts which were of English origin – proved that she was Dutch built, planned to negotiate the mudbanks

and shallow estuaries of the Dutch coast. The *Sutherland*, in fact, had once been the Dutch 74 *Eendracht*, captured off the Texel and, now re-armed, the ugliest and least desirable two-decker in the Navy List.

God help him, thought Hornblower, eyeing her with a distaste accentuated by his lack of men to man her, if ever he should find himself trying to claw off a lee shore in her. She would drift off to leeward like a cocked-hat paper boat. And at the subsequent court-martial nobody would believe a word of the evidence regarding her unweatherly qualities.

'Easy!' he snapped at the wherrymen, and the oars ceased to grind in the rowlocks as the men rested; the sound of the waves slapping the side of the boat became suddenly more apparent.

As they drifted over the dancing water Hornblower continued his discontented examination. She was newly painted, but in as niggardly a fashion as the dockyard authorities could manage – the dull yellow and black was unrelieved by any white or red. A wealthy captain and first lieutenant would have supplied the deficiency out of their own pockets, and would have shown a lick of gold leaf here and there, but Hornblower had no money to spare for gold leaf, and he knew that Bush, who kept four sisters and a mother on his pay, had none either – not even though his professional future depended in some part on the appearance of the *Sutherland*. Some captains would by hook or by crook have cozened more paint – gold leaf, too, for that matter – out of the dockyard, as Hornblower ruefully told himself. But he was not good at cozening; not the prospect of all the gold leaf in the world could lead him to slap a dockyard clerk on the back and win his favour with flattery and false bonhomie; not that his conscience would stop him, but his self-consciousness would.

Someone on deck spied him now. He could hear the pipes twittering as preparations were made to receive him. Let 'em wait a bit longer; he was not going to be hurried today. The *Sutherland*, riding high without her stores in her, was showing a wide streak of her copper. That copper was new, thank God. Before the wind the ugly old ship might show a pretty turn of speed. As the wind swung her across the tide she revealed her

run to him. Looking over her lines, Hornblower occupied his mind with estimates of how to get the best performance out of her. Twenty-two years of sea-going experience helped him. Before his mind's eye he called up a composite diagram of all the forces that would be at work on her at sea – the pressure of the wind on her sails, the rudder balancing the headsails, the lateral resistance of the keel, the friction of the skin, the impact of waves against her bows. Hornblower sketched out a preliminary trial arrangement, deciding just how (until practical tests gave him more data) he would have the masts raked and the ship trimmed. But next moment he remembered bitterly that at present he had no crew to man her, and that unless he could find one all these plans would be useless.

‘Give way,’ he growled to the wherry men, and they threw their weight on the oars again.

‘Easy, Jake,’ said bow oar to stroke, looking over his shoulder.

The wherry swung round under the *Sutherland*'s stern – trust those men to know how a boat should be laid alongside a ship of war – giving Hornblower a sight of the stern gallery which constituted to Hornblower one of the most attractive points about the ship. He was glad that the dockyard had not done away with it, as they had done in so many ships of the line. Up in that gallery he would be able to enjoy wind and sea and sun, in a privacy unattainable on deck. He would have a hammock chair made for use there. He could even take his exercise there, with no man's eye upon him – the gallery was eighteen feet long, and he would only have to stoop a little under the overhanging cove. Hornblower yearned inexpressibly for the time when he would be out at sea, away from all the harassing troubles of the land, walking his stern gallery in the solitude in which alone he could relax nowadays. Yet without a crew all this blissful prospect was withheld from him indefinitely. He must find men somewhere.

He felt in his pockets for silver to pay the boatmen, and although silver was woefully short his self-consciousness drove him into overpaying the men in the fashion he attributed to his fellow captains of ships of the line.

‘Thank ’ee, sir. Thank ’ee,’ said the stroke oar, knuckling his forehead.

Hornblower went up the ladder and came in through the entry port with its drab paint where in the Dutchmen’s time gilding had blazed bravely. The pipes of the boatswain’s mates twittered wildly, the marine guard presented arms, the sideboys stood rigidly at attention. Gray, master’s mate – lieutenants kept no watch in harbour – was officer of the watch and saluted as Hornblower touched his hat to the quarterdeck. Hornblower did not condescend to speak to him, although Gray was a favourite of his; the rigid guard he kept on himself for fear of unnecessary loquacity forbade. Instead he looked round him silently.

The decks were tangled with gear as the work of rigging the ship proceeded, but the tangle, as Hornblower was careful to note, carried under its surface the framework of orderliness. The coils of rope, the groups at work on the deck, the sail-maker’s party sewing at a topsail on the forecastle, gave an impression of confusion, but it was disciplined confusion. The severe orders which he had issued to his officers had borne fruit. The crew of the *Lydia* when they had heard that they were to be transferred bodily to the *Sutherland* without even a day on shore, had nearly mutinied. They were in hand again now.

‘Master-at-arms wishes to report, sir,’ said Gray.

‘Send for him, then,’ answered Hornblower.

The master-at-arms was the warrant officer responsible for enforcing discipline, and was a man new to Hornblower, named Price. Hornblower concluded that he had allegations of indiscipline to lodge, and he sighed even while he set his face in an expression of merciless rigidity. Probably it would be a matter of flogging, and he hated the thought of the blood and the agony. But, at the beginning of a commission like this, with a restive crew under his orders, he must not hesitate to flog if necessary – to have the skin and flesh stripped from the offenders’ backbones.

Price was coming along the gangway now at the head of the strangest procession. Two by two behind him came a column of thirty men, each one handcuffed to his neighbour, save for

the last two who clanked drearily along with leg irons at their ankles. Nearly all of them were in rags, and the rags had no sort of nautical flavour about them at all. The rags of a great many of them were sacking, some had corduroy, and Hornblower, peering closer, saw that one wore the wrecks of a pair of moleskin breeches. Yet another wore the remains of what had once been a respectable black broadcloth suit – white skin showed through a rent in the shoulder. All of them had stubbly beards, black, brown, golden, and grey, and those who were not bald had great mops of tangled hair. The two ship's corporals brought up the rear.

'Alt,' ordered Price. 'Orf 'ats.'

The procession shuffled to a halt, and the men stood sullenly on the quarterdeck. Some of them kept their eyes on the deck, while the others gaped sheepishly round them.

'What the devil's all this?' demanded Hornblower sharply.

'New 'ands, sir,' said Price. 'I signed a receipt to the sodgers what brought 'em, sir.'

'Where did they bring them from?' rasped Hornblower.

'Exeter Assizes, sir,' said Price, producing a list. 'Poachers, four of 'em. Waites, that's 'im in the moleskin breeches, sir, 'e was found guilty of sheepstealing. That 'un in black, 'is crime's bigamy, sir – 'e was a brewer's manager before this 'appened to 'im. The others is larceny mostly, sir, 'cept for them two in front what's in for rick burning and t'other two in irons. Robbery with violence is what they done.'

'Ha – h'm,' said Hornblower, wordless for the moment. The new hands blinked at him, some with hope in their eyes, some with hatred, some with indifference. They had chosen service at sea rather than the gallows, or transportation, or the gaol. Months in prison awaiting trial accounted for their dilapidated appearance. Here was a fine addition to the ship's company, thought Hornblower, bitterly – budding mutineers, sullen skulkers, half-witted yokels. But hands they were and he must make the best of them. They were frightened, sullen, resentful. It would be worth trying to win their affection. His naturally humanitarian instincts dictated the course he decided to pursue after a moment's quick thinking.

‘Why are they still handcuffed?’ he demanded, loud enough for them all to hear ‘Release them at once.’

‘Begging your pardon, sir,’ apologized Price. ‘I didn’t want to without orders, sir, seeing what they are and ’ow they come ’ere.’

‘That’s nothing to do with it,’ snapped Hornblower. ‘They’re enlisted in the King’s service now. And I’ll have no man in irons in *my* ship unless he’s given *me* cause to order it.’

Hornblower kept his gaze from wavering towards the new hands, and steadily addressed his declamation to Price – it was more effective delivered that way, he knew, even while he despised himself for using such rhetorical tricks.

‘I never want to see new hands in charge of the master-at-arms again,’ he continued, hotly. ‘They are recruits in an honourable service, with an honourable future before them. I’ll thank you to see to it another time. Now find one of the purser’s mates and see that each of these men is properly dressed in accordance with my orders.’

Normally it might be harmful to discipline to rate a subordinate officer in front of the men, but in the case of the master-at-arms Hornblower knew that little damage was being done. The men would come to hate the master-at-arms anyway sooner or later – his privileges of rank and pay were given him so that he might be a whipping boy for the crew’s discontent. Hornblower could drop the rasp in his voice and address the hands directly, now.

‘A man who does his duty as best he can,’ he said, kindly, ‘has nothing to fear in this ship, and everything to hope for. Now I want to see how smart you can look in your new clothes, and with the dirt of the place you have come from washed off you. Dismiss.’

He had won over some of the poor fools, at least, he told himself. Some of the faces which had been sullen with despair were shining with hope now, after this experience of being treated as men and not as brutes – for the first time for months, if not the first time in their lives. He watched them off the gangway. Poor devils; in Hornblower’s opinion they had made a bad bargain in exchanging the gaol for the navy. But at least

they represented thirty out of the two hundred and fifty additional human bodies which he needed to drag at ropes and to heave at capstan bars so as to take this old *Sutherland* out to sea.

Lieutenant Bush came hastening on to the quarterdeck, and touched his hat to his captain. The stern swarthy face with its incongruous blue eyes broke into a smile just as incongruous. It gave Hornblower a queer twinge, almost of conscience, to see the evident pleasure which Bush experienced at sight of him. It was odd to know that he was admired – it might even be said that he was loved – by this very capable sailor, this splendid disciplinarian and fearless fighter who boasted so many of the good qualities in which Hornblower felt himself to be lacking.

‘Good morning, Bush,’ he said. ‘Have you seen the new draft?’

‘No, sir. I was rowing guard for the middle watch and I’ve only just turned out. Where do they hail from, sir?’

Hornblower told him, and Bush rubbed his hands with pleasure.

‘Thirty!’ he said. ‘That’s rare. I never hoped for more than a dozen from Exeter assizes. And Bodmin assizes open today. Please God we get another thirty there.’

‘We won’t get topmen from Bodmin assizes,’ said Hornblower, comforted beyond measure at the equanimity with which Bush regarded the introduction of gaolbirds into the *Sutherland*’s crew.

‘No, sir. But the West India convoy’s due this week. The guards ought to nab two hundred there. We’ll get twenty if we get our rights.’

‘M’m,’ said Hornblower, and turned away uneasily. He was not the sort of captain – neither the distinguished kind nor the wheedling kind – who could be sure of favours from the Port Admiral. ‘I must look round below.’

That changed the subject effectively enough.

‘The women are restless,’ said Bush. ‘I’d better come, too, sir, if you don’t object.’

The lower gun deck offered a strange spectacle, lit vaguely by

the light which came through half a dozen open gun ports. There were fifty women there. Three or four were still in their hammocks, lying on their sides looking out on the others. Some were sitting in groups on the deck, chattering loud-voiced. One or two were chaffing for food through the gun ports with the occupants of shore boats floating just outside; the netting which impeded desertion had a broad enough mesh to allow a hand to pass through. Two more, each backed by a supporting group, were quarrelling violently. They were in odd contrast – one was tall and dark, so tall as to have to crouch round-shouldered under the five-foot deck beams, while the other, short, broad, and fair, was standing up boldly before her menacing advance.

‘That’s what I said,’ she maintained stoutly. ‘And I’ll say it again. I ain’t afeared o’ *you*, Mrs Dawson, as you call yourself.’

‘A-ah,’ screamed the dark one at this crowning insult. She swooped forward, and with greedy hands she seized the other by the hair, shaking her head from side to side as if she would soon shake it off. In return her face was scratched and her shins were kicked by her stout-hearted opponent. They whirled round in a flurry of petticoats, when one of the women in the hammocks screamed a warning to them.

‘Stop it, you mad bitches! ’Ere’s the cap’n.’

They fell apart, panting and tousled. Every eye was turned towards Hornblower as he walked forward in the patchy light, his head bowed under the deck above.

‘The next woman fighting will be put ashore instantly,’ growled Hornblower.

The dark woman swept her hair from her eyes and sniffed with disdain.

‘You needn’t put *me* ashore, Cap’n,’ she said. ‘I’m goin’. There ain’t a farden to be had out o’ this starvation ship.’

She was apparently expressing a sentiment which was shared by a good many of the women, for the speech was followed by a little buzz of approval.

‘Ain’t the men *never* goin’ to get their pay notes?’ piped up the woman in the hammock.

‘Enough o’ that,’ roared Bush, suddenly. He pushed forward anxious to save his captain from the insults to which he was exposed, thanks to a government which left its men still unpaid after a month in port. ‘You there, what are you doing in your hammock after eight bells?’

But this attempt to assume a counter offensive met with disaster.

‘I’ll come out if you like, Mr Lieutenant,’ she said, flicking off her blanket and sliding to the deck. ‘I parted with my gown to buy my Tom a sausage, and my petticoat’s bought him a soop o’ West Country ale. Would you have me on deck in my shift, Mr Lieutenant?’

A titter went round the deck.

‘Get back and be decent,’ spluttered Bush, on fire with embarrassment.

Hornblower was laughing, too – perhaps it was because he was married that the sight of a half-naked woman alarmed him not nearly as much as it did his first lieutenant.

‘Never will I be decent now,’ said the woman, swinging her legs up into the hammock and composedly draping the blanket over her, ‘until my Tom gets his pay warrant.’

‘An’ when he gets it,’ sneered the fair woman. ‘What can he do with it without shore leave? Sell it to a bumboat shark for a quarter!’

‘Fi’ pound for twenty-three months’ pay!’ added another. ‘An’ me a month gone a’ready.’

‘Avast there,’ said Bush.

Hornblower beat a retreat, abandoning – forgetting, rather – the object of his visit of inspection below. He could not face those women when the question of pay came up again. The men had been scandalously badly treated, imprisoned in the ship within sight of land, and their wives (some of them certainly were wives, although by Admiralty regulations a simple verbal declaration of the existence of a marriage was sufficient to allow them on board) had just cause of complaint. No one, not even Bush, knew that the few guineas which had been doled out among the crew represented a large part of Hornblower’s accumulated pay – all he could spare, in fact, except for

the necessary money to pay his officers' expenses when they should start on their recruiting journeys.

His vivid imagination and absurd sensitiveness between them perhaps exaggerated part of the men's hardships. The thought of the promiscuity of life below decks, where a man was allotted eighteen inches' width in which to swing his hammock, while his wife was allowed eighteen inches next to him, all in a long row, husbands, wives, and single men, appalled him. So did the thought of women having to live on the revolting lower deck food. Possibly he made insufficient allowance for the hardening effect of long habit.

He emerged through the fore hatchway on to the maindeck a little unexpectedly. Thompson, one of the captains of the fore-castle, was dealing with the new hands.

'P'raps we'll make sailors of you,' he was saying, 'and p'raps we won't. Overside with a shot at your feet, more likely, before we sight Ushant. And a waste o' good shot, too. Come on wi' that pump, there. Let's see the colour o' your hides, gaolbirds. When the cat gets at you we'll see the colour o' your backbones, too, you -'

'Enough of that, Thompson,' roared Hornblower, furious.

In accordance with his standing orders the new hands were being treated to rid them of vermin. Naked and shivering, they were grouped about the deck. Two of them were having their heads shorn down to the bare skin; a dozen of them, who had already submitted to this treatment (and looking strangely sickly and out of place with the prison pallor still on them) were being herded by Thompson towards the washdeck pump which a couple of grinning hands were working. Fright was making them shiver as much as cold - not one of them, probably, had ever had a bath before, and what with the prospect, and Thompson's bloodcurdling remarks and the strange surroundings, they were pitiful to see.

It enraged Hornblower, who somehow or other had never forgotten the misery of his early days at sea. Bullying was abhorrent to him like any other sort of wanton cruelty, and he had no sympathy whatever with the aim of so many of his brother officers, to break the spirit of the men under him. One