

HORNBLOWER – LOST IN SPACE

Presented at the Annual General Meeting of the C.S. Forester Society

Paris, France – October 2024

By Ronald W. Meister

You will recall that Nicolas sent a message to the Society on March 31, announcing the startling discovery of a previously unknown novel by C.S. Forester. He told us it was found at a book sale in Philadelphia, in the American colonies. This discovery was even more startling than Lawrie Brewer's acquisition of the manuscript of *The Pursued* fifteen years ago. But then, when March turned into April, Nicolas sent us another message saying the original announcement was an April Fool's joke.

But that is not the end of the story. Mais non, mes amis. You must pay close attention to the dates. Nicolas's original message was sent in March – which is not the proper date for an April Fool's joke. It was his *second* message that was sent in April, which shows just how clever Nicolas is. Because, on further research I have discovered that, for reasons known only to him, it was the *second* message that was the April Fool's joke, as Nicolas for his own reasons suddenly tried to keep the discovery of this valuable "lost" novel a secret.

Fortunately for all of us, not only have I discovered this attempted deception; but – yes – I have found the manuscript itself!

Here is the real story behind the discovery of the manuscript:

As we know, Forester was extraordinarily secretive about parts of his early life. When he wrote *The Hornblower Companion*, he told only part of his life story. And only on his death was there discovered, in his safe-deposit box, the manuscript of his early life, *Long Before Forty*, which itself is incomplete.

The manuscript Nicolas found can be traced to a missing chapter from *Long Before Forty*, which Forester's publishers omitted from the published version because it didn't fit the narrative of his life.

In that missing chapter, Forester elaborated on his failures as a medical student, and his depression hanging around in cheap ethnic restaurants in Seven Dials, which were the only places in London he could afford. One night, he was having a poor dinner of red cabbage and paprikosh in a Hungarian restaurant. His sympathetic waitress, Elizabeth, seeking to cheer him up, tried to sneak a cherry strudel to him in her apron. When the proprietor intercepted her and demanded to know what she had brought, she lied, "Only papers, sir." "Show me," he said. And she showed him – and her apron was filled with the manuscript of a novel.

Forester later wrote the saintly Elizabeth into one of his stories. You know which one.

Nicolas was truthful at least in regard to the title of the book. It is indeed *Lost in Space*. But – and this is the most exciting part – the story is not just a Forester story: it is in fact a lost Hornblower story. Unfortunately, it is not complete. Much of it is merely a plot outline. But some of it has tantalizing details that allow it to take its rightful place as part of the Hornblower canon.

We can tell from the outline that the story begins in 1804 with the outbreak of war between Britain and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, after Britain's unsuccessful attempt to blockade Naples was thwarted by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius. King Ferdinand II of the Two Sicilies sent his flagship, the former *Atropos*, now renamed the *Pasta Volante* (the "Flying Spaghetti"), under Commodore John Jones, to engage Britain's depleted Mediterranean fleet. Commodore Jones's ragtag crew, which was recruited from the sweepings of the fleshpots, jails, and tavernas of Palermo, was made up of a smattering of exiled Britons, including Ignatius Barry McCool, the twin brother of the hanged Irish

rebel; and the smuggler Bonner, who was later to surface in Jamaica; and the disgraced former British lieutenant Augustine Chadwick; and former Captain Hugh Pigot, who had miraculously escaped after being thrown overboard by the crew of the *Hermione*.

While these events were underway, Hornblower was on leave in Minorca, where he was carrying on a torrid affair with Lady Hamilton. Word was quickly dispatched to him to commandeer the only available British vessel, the *Castilla*, and man it from the British community in Port Mahon. Fortunately, several British vessels had been wrecked on the Cloudesley Shovell reef outside the harbor, so a skeleton crew could be assembled. They included, as first lieutenant, Anthony Bracegirdle, who had been sacked as aide-de-camp to Lord Saint Vincent for inattentiveness in guarding Nelson's coffin. The other lieutenants were John Jones the Eighth and John Jones the Tenth. The crew members included the unemployed superannuated Midshipman John Simpson; young Johnnie Bristow of Southsea, who had recently recovered from the mumps; Midshipman Harvey Mound, and two brothers, Seitz and Bunau, who were together referred to as the Duke's Freres. Also on board were three cats abandoned by the *Castilla's* former cook, named Wensleydale, Caerphilly, and Red Cheshire.

Hornblower was short of funds to fit out the *Castilla*, so he was forced to pawn his most beloved possessions: a store of black currant jam; and the rapier of ten guineas value awarded him by the Patriotic Fund for rescuing pigs from North Africa; and five volumes of Gibbon. On the night before he sailed, Hornblower had a discreet assignation with his innkeeper's daughter.

The *Castilla* quickly set sail to intercept the *Pasta Volante*. It was in need of water to fill its casks, so it stopped briefly in Elba, where Hornblower conducted a whirlwind affair with his old friend, the actress Kitty Cobham, who was then on a grand tour of the island's hot spots.

While en route to intercept Jones, Hornblower and his crew engaged in a series of adventures that are outlined in the manuscript. Off of Corsica, they passed through the canal of Jenkins' Weir, where they lost an oar, known thereafter as the Oar of Jenkins' Weir. They spoke the Swedish vessel *Tre Kroner* with its disreputable crew, and three other ships named *Castilla*. They also came across a badly lost vessel from Haiti, whose master, Wolfe Tone Deaf, failed to recognize the Toussaint Overture played in salute by the ship's sole bandsman, Hudnutt.

Continuing to search for Commodore Jones, Hornblower became Lost in the vast Space of the Mediterranean, hence the title of the book. As depicted on the cover, he was short of ammunition, food, and water.

To take the crew's minds off their desperate situation, Hornblower kept them exercised by competitive games, including speed keelhauling, rat baiting, and, most hilarious, translating the Navy regulations into Latin.

Hornblower eventually spotted the *Pasta Volante* on the horizon near Greece, but due to light winds, could not come up to her until dawn. Hornblower invited his three lieutenants to pass the time with him in a night of hilarious recreation, during which he read them his seven remaining volumes of Gibbon.

At dawn off Piraeus, the ships engaged in their climactic battle. It was only when the ships were within biscuit-toss that Hornblower remembered he had pawned the ship's biscuit. Fortunately, the ship had ample stores of salt beef, which they hurled at the *Pasta*. As a result, the engagement became known to history as the famous Battle of Salamis.

As the battle raged back and forth, the *Pasta* fired fusillades (or, in Italian, *fusilli*) of shells and balls (or *gnocchi*). One of the British midshipmen had his pinkie blown off by a musket shot. "God," Hornblower said, "Harvey is hit."

At the climax, Jones, who habitually confused port and starboard, mistakenly turned his rudder the wrong way and crashed onshore, turning the *Pasta* into fettucine. Hornblower quickly boarded, hauled down the *Pasta's* tricolor, and ran up the Union Jack.

Ultimately, the *Pasta* was bought into the British service and renamed the *Castilla*. Hornblower took a well-deserved leave on the island of Stromboli, off of Sicily, where he had a torrid affair with Ingrid Bergman. Afterwards, he took ship for the west of England, where he was reunited with his beloved Maria and embarked on a canal trip to London.

THE END