

# *Castle of Fire*

*by Peter Greene*

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### *Shadow and Son*

In the shadows of the buildings surrounding the London docks at Wapping, a man waited. His hands were clenched; one holding a club of hardwood, the other holding nothing but anger and hatred. He peered out to the busy streets at the many gay people rushing towards the waterfront. They were anxious to greet HMS *Danielle* and her victorious crew, the latest heroes of the realm and favorites of the city's papers. In the man's heart was not pride, nor happiness, nor approval of these new darlings of London; there was only the burning fire of revenge.

Meanwhile, drawn by a pair of fine bay horses as he traveled in his covered landau carriage to the River Thames in London, Captain Nathaniel Moore could hear the roaring of ships' guns. At times, he swore he could also hear the cheering of a crowd—or could it be the echo of the horse's hooves as they *clipped-clopped* down the cobblestone street? Certainly the guns were celebratory, not from a battle but a commemoration—the arrival of a *very* important ship.

He adjusted the collar on his dark, navy blue, wool uniform then adjusted the heavy blanket about his shoulders. The carriage was cold this time of year, however, before leaving his small but comfortable apartment, he had placed more than a few large blankets by the fire. After an hour or so in the heat, he carried them into the carriage to aid in keeping the occupants warm.

This year, 1801, would certainly go down in England's history as the coldest in a century. Staying comfortable was hard enough for a wealthy man such as himself, but what of those unfortunates—the people who lived on the streets? Over the past few years, these people had been on his mind—a certain person in particular—and the thought disturbed him greatly. How could one survive with no suitable shelter? No warmth or proper food? All those frozen nights and wet conditions huddled God knows where? How could they endure, especially the youngest ones? It would be impossible.

However, he knew of one young boy who did survive, and in a strange way, Captain Moore was extremely proud of what that boy had accomplished and was dreadfully sorry for what had befallen them both.

Across from Captain Moore sat Dr. Lane, the surgeon assigned specifically to him by the Admiralty of His Majesty's Navy. Though a great honor to have an esteemed surgeon at his beck and call, Captain Moore considered the doctor more of a nuisance than a benefit, and as if to prove the point, the doctor began speaking.

"Captain Moore," he said, breaking a long silence, "I would strongly advise taking your cane as assistance to your walk and an extra shawl, as it can be very damp and chilly on the London docks."

"Can it?" asked Moore sarcastically, as if he, a Navy man his entire life, would not know the climate of the London docks. Without hesitation, Dr. Lane continued.

"Why yes, all the salt air and cloud cover, especially at night, traps the cold and fog. It collects, dank and chilly, about the area. It's a wonder more do not become ill who live by the ocean."

"Imagine those who live *on the water* most of their lives!" said Captain Moore with a chuckle. "Yes, Doctor, it is a wonder they don't all take ill. I will follow your advice." He held his cane up for

verification of his intent. They lapsed again into silence as the carriage rolled closer to the docks.

Moore had never needed a cane, not in his thirty-nine years of life, until this past summer. As he looked through the frost-covered window of the carriage, watching people rush here and there through the cold streets, he thought about all that had happened. Was it really over three years ago that he had become the sudden and momentary captain of HMS *Helios*? The original captain had been killed early in a clash with a squadron of French ships, and Nathaniel was forced to assume command. The battle seemed to last for days, and Moore, with the crew of the *Helios*, had nearly defeated all the enemy ships—all but the largest one. The infamous French warship *Danielle*, with its seventy-four guns, was too much to handle. The *Helios* had been grievously damaged and was now afire from its scrapes with the other four rival frigates. It was all he could do to save twenty or so of his remaining crew and then surrender.

What followed was three years of captivity in a small French prison just outside of Guéret in central France. His status: war criminal. While there, he learned of the untimely passing of his dear wife and the news almost caused the death of him. It was only his desire to return home and be with his son that kept him alive. His only son, who now needed him, drove Nathaniel to escape captivity. He spent weeks making his way to the sea, then north along the coast. After many days and nights of sneaking and plodding, Nathaniel “borrowed” a small sailing boat from the shores of Calais and made his way across the English Channel. The waters were not completely calm, and a wicked wind swept him eastward, then north, to finally come ashore near Lowestoft, England, and thus to freedom.

A few weeks later, he spoke with the captain of HMS *Echo*, a sloop delivering news from the Caribbean Sea. He was told that Captain William Walker of HMS *Poseidon* had taken the French seventy-four gun *Danielle* as a prize and defeated the infamous French Captain Claude Champagne, the very same man who had captured Nathaniel years ago. Though he learned that Walker and his crew had successfully retrieved an enormous treasure, he also learned that the *Poseidon* had been sunk in the process, with many men lost. This shed fear and doubt as to the survival of his son, who was supposedly aboard.

The carriage rambled on. Even though it was early evening, the darkening streets were crowded with citizens of London, all rushing to the docks. The cold weather should have kept them away, cozy in their homes with a spot of tea and a warm blanket by the fire. However, here they were—a few thousand, Moore surmised—all rushing to the docks. It seemed the word had gotten out that the newly captured *Danielle* was arriving tonight, Christmas, and many excited people desired to see the heroes for themselves. Nathaniel was also heading for the dock and the *Danielle*, but he cared nothing for the treasure of gold. He went to find his son.

A voice from above, the coachman, called down to Captain Moore and the doctor: “We ‘ave arrived, gen’elmen! London Docks. Pier number four, as ordered!”

Nathaniel turned to the doctor, who looked less than happy to leave the warmth of the carriage to stand in the cold.

“Doctor Lane, no use for us both to catch a chill. Please, remain here and I will go on by myself. Just a short stretch of the legs.”

“By all means,” said the doctor without hesitation. “Good to exercise the legs.”

Nathaniel smiled briefly, collected his cane and hat, then opened the carriage door and stepped into the busy crowd. Closing the door, he took a deep breath of the cool salt air and smiled. Yes, as dangerous as the doctor believed the damp air could be, the docks, the ocean, the ships and all their sights, sounds, and smells invigorated him. It was one of his greatest loves, being in His Majesty’s Navy and sailing the open sea. The only greater love was his long-lost son, Jonathan Moore.

The crowd moved on ahead of Nathaniel and he was happy to allow them to pass. It was still a struggle, the leg not quite behaving as it should. In fact, he had to pause from time to time just to rest. He slowly made his way closer to the docks, passing a few stores with their Christmas wares on display in the windows. Then, after he had taken a brief rest, the last of the crowd disappeared around the corner ahead, leaving him alone. He could now only hear the cheers of the crowd in the distance and his own footsteps echoing against the cobblestones.

As he neared the last corner before the docks, he saw something move in the shadows. Cautiously

drawing closer, he saw a shape move into the half-light. It was crouched like a beast—but it soon became clear that it was a man, a short one, with his face covered by a scarf and a hood low over his brow. Abruptly, the man rushed at Nathaniel, raising a club over his head as he ran.

“Take this!” the man yelled in a high-pitched voice as he brought the club down to smite him.

Startled, Nathaniel reacted with pure fighting instinct. Using his cane as a sword, he quickly warded off the blow. He extended his foot so as to trip his attacker, who fell crashing to the ground, club flying from his hand and clanking harmlessly on the street. Quickly, Nathaniel struck the man across the face with his cane, causing the attacker to cry out in pain. For an instant, Nathaniel could see the man’s features: he was young, with dark eyes and a stern look above a square chin. He had straight, dark-brown hair, gathered in a pony-tail. A welt was rising above his left eye where the cane had struck him. The young man quickly came to his feet and stood, adjusting the scarf and hood to cover his face once again.

“What is all this?” demanded Nathaniel.

“Curse you!” the young man yelled, then turned and ran away.

Nathaniel was slightly flustered, but unhurt. Spending a moment to calm himself with a deep breath, he straightened his uniform and retrieved his hat from the ground. It was now wet and slightly crushed, but a few brushes with his hand made it presentable, at least in the dark. Taking a final look around, he continued onward to the ship.

After a minute or two more, he heard the crowd cheering loudly with many a *huzzah* voiced by the Navy men, lords, and ladies that must have been crowding the waterfront. Nathaniel realized he must hurry, or he would miss them.

Finally he reached the pier and stood at the entrance of the main berth, holding his breath. Yes, there was a great ship moored there, a seventy-four gunner that he recognized very well. The *Danielle* had obviously been repaired and was smartly painted with a gold stripe down her side. Wasn’t the *Poseidon* also gold-striped? A fine tribute to her!

The crowd was already thinning; people were returning to their homes, and soon a number of them were moving past him as they made their way. Some recognized him, mostly Navy men and their families, and this caused Nathaniel to stop and return more than a few salutes. He considered each person as they passed, hoping to see if any resembled his son. Searching, searching, searching for a face he could not possibly remember. The last time he had seen Jonathan, his son was barely six years old.

How would he have changed? Nathaniel thought. What would he be wearing? Maybe I should first locate Walker and ask him where Jonathan might be. Wait! There! A face in the crowd! A boy of eleven or twelve? He is wearing a crewman’s garb – black trousers, a heavy wool coat and a tasseled hat. Could it be? Certainly Jonathan would become a ship’s hand and a member of the crew. But no, this boy is now hugging and kissing a woman who could only be his mother.

“Little Paulie Garvey! Oh to hold my boy in my arms again!” the woman shouted.

“Aw, Mum! The men are looking!” the young seaman said, embarrassed.

Nathaniel continued searching the crowd, however, there were very few young men in the crew. After a few moments, he did see one handsome youngster, a midshipman to be sure, standing among his friends at the end of the pier with a solemn look on his face.

Jonathan could not be a midshipman, Nathaniel reasoned. That would be highly irregular. No, he would be a crew member and dressed as such.

He rested on his cane for a moment, then regarded the midshipman again. He was taller than he originally had supposed, especially compared to the young seaman who stood by his side.

But wait. Isn’t that Steward? Next to the midshipman? Steward, my crotchety old bosun from the *Troy*? We were marooned together! It seems like a lifetime ago! And next to him, the young Lieutenant Harrison of the *Helios*? I set them both aboard the jolly boat before I surrendered! And there, behind them. That tall Marine Captain appears to be . . . Gorman. Why the saints be blessed! There is William! William Walker!

Nathaniel then caught the eyes of Steward, who briefly smiled and clasped his hands to the midshipman’s head. He firmly pointed the boy’s gaze directly at Nathaniel.

“My God,” Nathaniel called out softly, “Could that midshipman be Jonathan? But how . . .”

Through the string of festive lanterns lining the pier, he gazed in wonder at the young midshipman. The uniform looked new and the boy stood tall and straight. Nathaniel took a few steps towards him, trying to get a better look. If it were Jonathan, then what a handsome young man he had become. A few more steps and their eyes met. In a flash, Nathaniel knew. Memories came flooding back to him like a rush of fire—seeing the boy only seconds after he was born, crying loud and strong, cradling both Jonathan and his mother in his arms as they entered their first home in Hampstead, walking the beach on the Isle of Wight, searching for shells, and kissing him goodbye as he rode off on that bright August day to his ill-fated command of HMS *Troy*. But most of all he remembered tucking him into his bed and whispering “I love you” as the child drifted off to sleep.

Nathaniel now noticed that all the men next to Jonathan were also watching him approach. There were smiles on their faces.

“Attention!” ordered Captain Walker. The officers and Steward suddenly snapped to, one and all, and gave Captain Nathaniel Moore a smart salute.

After a moment, Steward put his arm around Jonathan and bent slightly to speak in his ear.

Jonathan looked back at his father and, with tears of joy welling in his eyes, he started running—running to him as fast as he could across the short distance, though it seemed to Nathaniel as if it were miles and miles.

Then, Jonathan stopped short. He stared into Nathaniel’s eyes, now just a few feet away.

“Jonathan?” said his father. “Jonathan. Oh, just look at you! A—a midshipman? Oh my . . . my, what have I missed? Can you . . .? Do you remember me?”

And Jonathan took the last few steps as fast as he could, into the arms of his father.

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“It seems that since we have been away,” said Captain William Walker, “the Admiralty has lost all sense if it ever had any. Word is out that you have been promoted to Admiral, my dear Nathaniel.”

Nathaniel, still embracing his son Jonathan, smiled and nodded. “It has not been approved. I am awaiting confirmation from Whitehall. To be sure, it is an insane world, but somehow, a just one. What a Christmas present you have brought me, William! Oh, Jonathan! What tales we have to tell! When I last saw you, well, you were barely to my hip and now you are almost fully grown.”

“It is truly a great Christmas, a better one than I have ever seen!” Jonathan said, hugging his father tightly. “I do remember you, Father, clearly as if it were only yesterday. And I have so many questions! First of all, when did—”

“Pardon me, Midshipman Moore,” Walker interrupted. “I would suggest holding on to tales and questions until we are all warm by a fire. Shall we return to my home? I am sure Mrs. Walker and her sister will have a grand feast for us and a few gifts besides! After some ale and dessert, let us all sit down and warmly reminisce. Is that agreeable?”

“As for me,” said Koonts, the *Danielle’s* purser and trusted friend of the Captain, “I thank you for the invitation, though I must decline. My own wife is waiting for me and, though her cooking is only slightly better than Steward’s, I am looking forward to her smile.”

“Would not ‘ave expected that comment from you, Mr. Koonts,” said Steward.

“He has taken my excuse,” said Harrison, not missing a beat. “However, I must decline as well. Please give Mrs. Walker my apologies. My own family would be quite disappointed if I didn’t appear. I met my brother just moments ago, and he has rushed home to tell them all I am safe and on the way. Besides, I am sure there will be enough embellishments on the story from Steward and the boys that my color will not be needed.”

Gorman, the enigmatic Marine Captain assigned to no ship in particular and also strongly rumored to be a spy for His Majesty, declined as well, as did First Lieutenant Langley, with heartfelt apologies, as they both had families. Even Claise, the hand acquired the same day as Jonathan and Sean, said he had a sister who would like to see him.

“Then you are all dismissed,” said Walker, “and a very merry Christmas to you all!”

After a quick round of salutes, all went on their way. As Walker, Steward, and the Moores slowly made their way to the carriage, Jonathan suddenly stopped and turned around.

“Oh my!” he said, scanning the area, “Where is Sean?” Almost panic-stricken, he started running back to the *Danielle*, calling his friend’s name.

“Who is Sean?” asked Nathaniel.

“Sean Flagon? Well, Nate, that will be a hard one to explain. Let’s just say that he and Jonathan are the best of friends. It is almost impossible to separate them.”

“Aye,” said Steward, “A little daft at times, but by-the-by, a good egg and quite a fine swordsman if I must say so myself. Great tutelage, don’t ya know.”

“They met aboard the *Poseidon*?” asked Nathaniel.

“No. On the streets of London. Sean Flagon, you will learn, is quite a character, but all of it is right and good. You might as well get used to the fact that you most likely will have *two* sons. They are a matched pair,” Walker concluded, laughing heartily.

“We best go after them, then!” laughed Nathaniel.

Jonathan searched frantically about the *Danielle* for Sean, then turned his attention to the nearby docks. There, he caught a glimpse of someone walking ahead, looking down at the street.

“Sean!” he called, “Where are you going? Sean!”

Jonathan ran as fast as he could, now and then looking back to make sure his father could still see him. He paused to wave, feeling uncomfortable to be even this short distance away from his father. After receiving a wave in return, he ran on.

“Sean! Stop!” he said, and the boy turned and faced him, tears rolling down his face.

“Sean, what is the matter? Where are you going?” asked Jonathan.

Between snuffles, Sean finally got a few words out.

“That’s exactly the problem, Jonny,” he blubbered. “I—I don’t know where I am going. I’m not sure where my family is and . . . I thought I would just go back to the streets. Maybe your old alley and box is available.”

Jonathan smiled a bit and embraced his friend. After a moment Captain Walker and Nathaniel caught up to them.

“Sean,” said Jonathan, “what a stubborn and silly Irishman you are! I am sure the Captain’s invitation included you!”

“By all means, Flagon!” Walker said in a proper and captain-like way. “Are you going to disobey a direct order? Now stop your sniffing, act like a man, and join us for some dinner—and a warm bed and bath besides!”

Sean stood straight and stiff, nodding between snuffles as the Captain addressed him firmly.

They resumed their way back to the main street and boarded their carriages. The Moores and Sean joined Doctor Lane in Captain Moore’s carriage. Steward accompanied the Captain in his fine coach that had finally arrived. In a line, they rode directly to Golden Circle, one of the better parts of London, and Captain Walker’s home.

Jonathan could not help staring at his father, and his father also could not keep his eyes off his son. Now and again, they would embrace, even grabbing Sean as well, and after a few seconds they would laugh aloud, seemingly for no reason, but all knew the reason for their great joy.

“This story could have turned out considerably worse, I must say!” said Nathaniel. “To think that after all those years I almost lost you, or you might have even died. I thought of it every day. Death can be cheated, as I know too well, but the luck that I seem to have is quite astounding. I tried as hard as a man could to make my way back to you, Jonathan. It took considerably longer than I would have wished. I am truly sorry.”

Jonathan looked into his father’s teary eyes and smiled a bit.

“It couldn’t be helped, Father. I understand. And I was lucky as well, to make it back to you.”

“Aye, luck!” said Sean. “Being Irish, I know about luck. Though it always seems that the smarter and more determined you are, the more luck you have!”

This broke the somber mood and sent the whole carriage laughing once again, even the seemingly

humorless Doctor Lane.

“Father,” said Jonathan, “How did you escape? How did you make your way back to London?”

“As odd as it sounds, a few French Naval captains that visited me took pity on my situation and delivered mail and the like on my behalf. Some of my friends in the Navy knew of my capture and were able to send money to neutral parties—mostly Swiss bankers. The guards were more poor than honest, so after I collected a small fortune, I paid them to look the other way.”

“Dear me!” was all Jonathan could say.

“I think we all will have to tell our tales over dinner,” said Captain Moore. “I am curious as to how a boy survives for five years on the streets—and why you ran away from your aunt.”

Jonathan wondered where to start. He barely remembered the Boddens, and there was so much to tell!

“They were not exactly a pleasant couple to be around, Father. They treated me harshly as I remember, and they barely fed me. I wasn’t allowed to leave the home. At times, I—I even heard them talking about ways to do away with me.”

“Dear Lord!” exclaimed the doctor.

“Jonathan,” his father said solemnly, “I am so sorry!”

“It’s not your fault, sir,” Jonathan said quietly.

“Though it is my *responsibility!*” Nathaniel exclaimed, exposing his anger towards the Boddens. “I will make them pay for the way they treated you!”

“And I will help you!” exclaimed Sean, caught up in the moment. Again the carriage exploded in laughter, even from Sean.

It was a long ride, though all were comfortable in the carriage, wrapped in blankets. They exchanged a few tales, all vowing to save the adventurous ones for Captain Walker’s table. Doctor Lane took his leave of them as they dropped him at his front door. The carriage rambled on. After a few more minutes, they were at the home of the honorable and now famous Captain William Walker.

The stately home sat amid manicured shrubbery, flowers, and a series of beautiful wrought-iron fences. It was made of red brick, with tall, thin windows and white Roman columns. A beautiful stepped walk led them to the front door.

“May I knock the knocker?” asked Sean. “Just look at it! I’ll bet it weighs as much as an eighteen-pound ball!”

The knocker was golden and fashioned as a lion’s head. Sean lifted it, having to stand on his toes, and dropped it quickly three times. *Boom-Boom-Boom!* it sounded, causing the boys to jump back in surprise.

“I think you broke the house!” Jonathan laughed.

“It reminds me of the *Poseidon*’s guns the first time I fired them!” added Sean.

“Let’s all hope that Captain Walker is not angry with us for almost breaking down his door! He does have a temper. Always has,” laughed Nathaniel.

“We have witnessed it first hand as well!” said Jonathan and Sean knowingly.

After a moment or two, the knob turned and the door slowly opened. Bright light spilled out of the house and onto the stoop as an escaping blast of warm air embraced them. In the doorway before them stood an angel, or so it seemed.

The boys gazed in wonder at a beautiful woman with golden hair, deep green eyes, and high cheekbones. She wore a slender, white dress with silver trimming and a white woolen shawl about her shoulders. She smiled at them.

“Welcome. Please do come in.” she said, with a lyrical voice.

Sean snatched his cap off his head and began bowing.

“Are you an angel?” asked Jonathan, astonished.

“Jonathan!” his father said, shocked and embarrassed by his son’s comment. The woman simply blushed and laughed.

“I am Miss Barbara Thompson, young sirs. I am Mrs. Walker’s sister,” she replied to the boys,

ushering them all inside and closing the door.

“Excuse my son’s outburst, Miss Thompson. Though, you truly are a sight for sore eyes, as you have always been.”

“Why Captain Moore, thank you so much! You make a girl blush. It is a pleasure to see you again.”

Nathaniel took her hand and kissed it. “May I introduce my son, Midshipman Jonathan Moore, and his best friend, able seaman Sean Flagon, Esquire, both of HMS *Danielle*.”

“The famous *Danielle*? Then it is truly an honor and privilege to meet you both,” Miss Thompson said.

“I can understand his mistaking you for an angel,” said Sean. “Especially since the only faces we are used to seeing look like Steward! Pimply and hairy!”

Just then Steward appeared, clean and dressed, however, not any more handsome than he ever was aboard the ship.

“Funny that Mr. Harrison is not ‘ere, yet the insults never stop!” he blurted out. “Yer coat, Captain. Boys, yers as well.”

It was explained by Miss Thompson that Steward attended as butler and all-around servant to Captain Walker when he was ashore. It was a tradition in the Royal Navy.

“I hope he isn’t cooking,” whispered Sean to Jonathan, who as usual, told his friend to hush.

“Captain Walker is waiting for you in the study,” Miss Thompson said as she led Nathaniel and the boys down a hallway decorated with pictures of battleships and important-looking people. There was a rug running the length of the hallway, and now and again, a table with crystal glass or exotic-looking vases. It was clear to Jonathan that Captain Walker was quite wealthy, most likely from his exploits as a naval captain. At the end of the hallway, a door on the right opened to a study. There, sitting in a tall easy chair by a crackling fire, was Captain Walker. He was already dressed like a gentleman, in a house coat, enjoying a dark-colored drink in a fancy rounded glass. All about him were other chairs, all looking more comfortable than anything Jonathan had ever seen. He wanted to run and jump into one, kick off his shoes and take a warm nap.

“Ah! Nathaniel!” Walker said, not getting up, “I see Barbara has let you in. I heard the door-knock—seemed like the whole place was coming down. Must have been Flagon at the knocker.” Jonathan and Sean looked at each other with surprise, both wondering how he knew.

“Mrs. Walker is in the kitchen supervising the dinner—a pheasant or two as I understand, with sweet potatoes, rice from the Orient—how she ever gets it is a wonder—and a ham as well. Ah, good to give up ship’s fare!”

“A bath for the boys?” asked Miss Thompson suddenly.

“By all means!” said the Captain, finally rising and walking to a small cabinet. As he spoke he poured another glass full of the dark liquid and handed it to Nathaniel. “Boys, no offense, but we have drawn two large tubs with piping hot water and scrub brushes and soap and even heated towels by the upstairs fireplace. Give your uniforms to Steward and he will freshen them up. Be quick with it, you wouldn’t want to miss dinner, would you?”

“No sir!” said Jonathan and Sean, snapping to attention. They followed Miss Thompson out quickly and disappeared upstairs to a welcomed bath.

“It seems, William, that my son is quite well-mannered and follows orders. I must thank you for all you have done for him and for me. Honestly, William, I am forever in your debt.”

“You were already in my debt before, Nathaniel,” Walker said, laughing. “Let us not forget that it was *my* money that got you out of prison.”

“True,” said Nathaniel. “And I am sure that my accountant has paid you back with interest. Probably at an inflated rate.”

“Probably? I am sure of it!” chuckled Walker, “Yet still, let’s not forget that time in ‘89—that unfortunate instance with Captain Billings aboard the *Fawn*? Wasn’t it I who took his wrath instead of you?”

“Ah, yes,” Nathaniel said, smiling. “As I remember, it was *your* idea to take the jolly boat ashore and get those strange liquors from the natives, not mine. It was simply my misfortune to follow your

advice and be caught. Your choice to insist that I was only following your orders was not my doing, though that was the least you could do for me. That could have been my career!”

Walker laughed aloud once again and motioned for Nathaniel to join him by the fire.

“I was a young Lieutenant then,” Walker said. “And you were almost one yourself. It was only a matter of time before we both were out from under Billings and on our own ships. Those were the days. All of the adventure—”

“—and none of the responsibility!” they both said together, laughing.

“It is good to see you, Nate. Welcome home!” Walker said and raised his glass.

They sat for a moment, enjoying their drinks and staring into the warm fire. Silently, they both pondered how life had been good, allowing them to continue their adventures. These two friends had led similar lives and had similar success. Knowing each other since their school days, they entered the Navy together as midshipmen, first serving aboard HMS *Achilles*. Later, within months of each other, they had obtained their own ship’s command. Many of their fellow officers were not so fortunate, having given their lives for the crown, but these two had been lucky and were grateful to be alive. Both had seen their share of wonder and misfortune. They had been side by side in battle, facing death and victory, sadness and joy. Theirs was a friendship forged in adventure and service to the Crown. They were like brothers, yet closer, bonded by experience and love—a union stronger than blood.

“There are a few questions I would ask you, William,” said Nathaniel after a few moments, “before the boys join us for tales and embellishments.”

“This one does not need an ounce of embellishment,” said Walker, reflecting. “It is quite amazing and unbelievable as any truth that can be told. Sometimes I don’t even believe it—and *I was there*.”

“I eagerly look forward to the detailed telling; however, I cannot wait to know . . . how did Jonathan become a midshipman? It is highly irregular, don’t you think?”

“For those details, you will have to wait until dinner,” Walker said, “but I know what you are asking: did he earn it? Well, I can say, Nate, that neither of us had anywhere near your boy’s intelligence, courage, cunning, or just plain industry. He *was* the mission, Nate, in more ways than one. Best midshipman I have ever seen. It was a lucky day for you and for England that he was aboard. Flagon, too. Both those boys will go far in the Navy, I would bet my life on it!”

Nathaniel sat, speechless, closing his eyes.

“Now,” Walker continued, “it was Steward who found him after questioning the Boddens, as you probably know. And I can tell you that Steward scared the living daylight out of them! I wouldn’t be surprised if they haven’t picked up and left for the colonies by now!”

“Where did he find him?” Nathaniel asked, sipping his warm brandy.

“He found both Jonathan and Sean by Piccadilly. I gave instructions that any seemingly orphaned boy looking to be eleven or twelve years old was to be brought in off the street and directly to the *Poseidon*. Seems Jonathan was living in an alley and—”

“An alley?” exclaimed Nathaniel.

“Now calm down, Nate. Yes, an alley. In a wooden box, to be precise. Gallotta, a hand of mine, found him first. Got a kick to the nose and chest for his trouble, and Jonathan escaped him. It was Steward that eventually cornered the boy and discovered that he was our prize. His friend, Sean, was found first and said he knew a Jonathan Moore, so, well, we took him as well, just to be sure.”

“Not usually proper for a press gang to take youngsters, is it?” Nathaniel asked, knowing the answer.

“Yes, yes, but who would complain? Their parents? We were sure we could bend the rules a bit. Nate, you will surely not believe what happened on this mission. And your boy was the one behind it all. And wait until he tells you about Champagne.”

Nathaniel was shocked into silence. Jonathan met Champagne? How could that be? What twisted plot could have brought those two face-to-face?

“Then it is time we eat and get all the answers!”