

## I

ON the particular night when Corrie and her brother Jim were caught by the press gang and rowed out to His Britannic Majesty's frigate *Swift*, stars danced on the backs of the swells like fireflies while a great bronze moon rose in the east.

Corrie's heart sang as she looked at that rising moon, for it seemed to her a good omen, and she was young enough to crave adventure for adventure's sake, and to rejoice in the unexpected turn of events. Records having been mysteriously erased, we cannot vouchsafe for her age, we know only that she was young enough to pass for a boy. Sad to relate, her brother, having been hit on the head while resisting the press, enjoyed neither the stars nor the moon that night, and Corrie was anxious for him to recover from the blow he had taken so that she and he might discuss the remarkable events that had overtaken them, and consider together, sister and brother, their prospects in the navy.

When a great black cloud came out of nowhere, when a sudden squall descended on the ship's launch, when a crash of thunder reverberated around the natural amphitheater of St. John's harbor, and a bright white flash of light lit up the warship, Corrie clapped her hands with joy. It was like a theater when the curtain rises and you see for the first time the scenery and the actors. It was for her the most dramatic and satisfactory beginning to a career in the Royal Navy that she could possibly imagine. She was beside herself. She was ecstatic.

Corrie followed the sailor carrying the limp body of her brother down a companionway into the bowels of the ship, and entered a world of men, reeking of the unwashed. She was thrilled. She loved the smell of unwashed men. She ducked her head. The only way to move around down here on the gun deck was to walk bent at the waist like a Cornish tin miner, and she estimated the deck head clearance to be about five feet. She saw dim shapes swinging in unison with the restless and unceasing rocking of the ship upon the soft billows of the harbor, and heard the snores of sleeping sailors.

Enjoying every moment of her adventure, she threaded her way among rows of hammocks, and past great black cast iron guns. She was astonished to hear a pig grunt and then the heavy breathing of some larger animal, followed by the restless stamping of a third. Pressing on, she smelled cowpats and the warm breath of cows. A rooster startled her with a loud crowing. There was a panicky scrabble of hens and a flying feather tickled her cheek.

'How is he?' she asked anxiously, as the sailor laid floppy Jim down on the deck.

'Coming round, don't you worry. He'll be himself soon enough,' said the sailor, and then the seamen went about his duties and left her alone with her brother.

'Jim, can you hear me?'

'Headache,' Jim replied thickly.

She watched curiously as her brother felt about with his fingertips. He seemed puzzled by the oak deck and the bits of straw he found there.

‘Where?’ he croaked. His voice sounded like a frog. There was blood on his lips. Poor Jim. She could hardly wait to tell him what had happened. He was going to be so excited.

‘In the *Swift*,’ she said. ‘Our dream has come true. Isn’t that wonderful? This is our ship in the apple tree, come to life. Instead of binging apples we’ll be firing real guns.’

Her brother explored the bump on his skull gingerly with his fingertips. ‘I must have come a cropper.’

‘The seaman hit you. Don’t you remember?’

‘Can’t see.’

‘Don’t worry. I can fix your eyes. Just wait until you see where they have put us. We’re in the manger with the ship’s animals!’ She took her handkerchief from her pocket, spat on it, and went to work cleaning some of the blood from her brother’s face. His eyelids were gummed together, so she freed them.

‘You had better tell them to put you ashore,’ said Jim, looking up at her with concern now that he had eyes again, and could think straight.

She shook her head. ‘Are you joking? I wouldn’t miss this for the world. How soon do you think they’ll promote us? I want to be an Admiral as soon as possible. I want to lead whole fleets of ships of the line into battle. I want to fly my own flag. I want to find our parents.’

‘You’re going to stay?’ her brother said, alarmed, and tried to sit up.

She pushed him back down again and put a finger

to her lips. 'Ssh!' she hissed at him. She could hear other pressed men nearby and did not want them to hear her brother say anything about her being a girl.

'God's teeth!' said her brother, staring at her wildly. 'Be serious, Corrie. You can't possibly join the navy. You know why. Don't even think about it. Leave now, while you still can. Go and find the First Lieutenant. Tell him the press gang made a mistake. Go on. I'll be all right. I swear. Get moving, Corrie! I'm serious. You might be killed.'

'I'm not going anywhere. We're in this together. If we die we'll die gloriously, and we'll take piles of Frenchmen with us to our graves. You'll see. It's going to be tons of fun, and the fun is starting right now. I wouldn't miss it for the world. And we'll see the world. The Royal Navy has stations everywhere, not just here in St. John's but all over the world. Think, Jim. We'll see Malta. We'll see Valparaíso. We'll capture Chinese junks and Arab dhows. We'll have oodles of prize money. We'll buy Mrs. Demeter a new edition of the *Odyssey*.'

Somebody close beside them groaned.

'I'm feeling awful poorly,' the fellow said. He, too, had taken a blow to the head. The press gang had been ruthless.

'What's your name?' asked Jim.

'Campbell.'

'Harriman,' said Jim, and shook hands with the man.

'They'll work us to death from Monday to Saturday, and flog us on Sundays,' said Campbell

gloomily, speaking with an accent that made Corrie suspect that he had been born in Edinburgh.

At that moment, something extraordinary and unexpected happened that stirred Corrie deeply, though she was not sure why it moved her so. A lady dressed in white floated by in a rustle of petticoats, a lace trimmed hat tied under her chin with a bow of satin. The lady said not a word in passing and vanished without ceremony into the dark shadows of the fore cockpit. She was perhaps an apparition, or a goddess. Corrie was as thrilled by the sight of this lady as she had been by the sight of the bronze moon. This splendidly attired vision in white was a herald of all Corrie hoped for. Everything about her suggested that she belonged in the *Swift*, and was going about her regular business, whatever the regular business of a goddess might be. In the *Odyssey*, Pallas Athena took on various guises, sometimes young and sometimes old.

*There are women living in a King's ship, then? I have long suspected this, and here is the first evidence. I bubble with hope. There may be a place for me, here. My brother may be wrong to urge me to go ashore before we sail.*

Corrie had read a great deal about the navy, her father being a serving officer, but nowhere in any of her father's books had there been more than a passing hint that there might be women serving alongside men in warships. Jim had read those books, too, but she did not think her brother had paid much attention to the occasional references to women, any more than he had