Hornblower and the Widow McCool

or, Hornblower's Temptation

by Cecil S. Forester, 1899-1966

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The Channel fleet was taking shelter at last. The roaring westerly gales had worked up to such a pitch that timber and canvas and cordage could withstand them no longer, and nineteen ships of the line and seven frigates, with Admiral Lord Bridport flying his flag in HMS VICTORY, had momentarily abandoned that watch over Brest which they had maintained for six years. Now they were rounding Berry Head and dropping anchor in the shelter of Tor Bay. A landsman, with that wind shrieking round him, might be pardoned for wondering how much shelter was to be found there, but to the weary and weather-beaten crews who had spent so long tossing in the Biscay waves and clawing away from the rocky coast of Brittany, that foam-whitened anchorage

was like paradise. Boats could even be sent in to Brixham and Torquay to return with letters and fresh water; in most of the ships, officers and men had gone for three months without either. Even on that winter day there was intense physical pleasure in opening the throat and pouring down it a draught of fresh clear water, so different from the stinking green liquid doled out under guard yesterday.

The junior lieutenant in HMS RENOWN was walking the deck muffled in his heavy pea jacket while his ship wallowed at her anchor. The piercing wind set his eyes watering, but he continually gazed through his telescope nevertheless; for, as signal lieutenant, he was responsible for the rapid reading and transmission of messages, and this was a likely moment for orders to be given regarding sick and stores, and for captains and admirals to start chattering together, for invitations to dinner to be passed back and forth, and even for news to be disseminated.

He watched a small boat claw its way towards the ship from the French prize the fleet had snapped up yesterday on its way up-Channel. Hart, master‘s mate, had been sent on board from the RENOWN, as prizemaster, miraculously making the perilous journey. Now here was Hart, with the prize safely anchored amid the fleet, returning on board to make some sort of report. That hardly seemed likely to be of interest to a signal lieutenant, but Hart appeared excited as he came on board, and hurried below with his news after reporting himself in the briefest terms to the officer of the watch. But only a very few minutes passed before the signal lieutenant found himself called upon to be most active.

It was Captain Sawyer himself who came on deck, Hart following him, to supervise the transmission of the messages. „Mr Hornblower!“

„Sir!“

„Kindly send this signal.“

It was for the admiral himself, from the captain; that part was easy; only two hoists were necessary to say „RENOWN to Flag“. And there were other technical terms which could be quickly expressed—„prize“ and „French“ and „brig“—but there were names which would have to be spelled out letter for letter. „Prize is French national brig ESPÉRANCE having on board Barry McCool.“

„Mr James!“ bellowed Hornblower. The signal midshipman was waiting at his elbow, but midshipmen should always be bellowed at, especially by a lieutenant with a very new commission.

Hornblower reeled off the numbers, and the signal went soaring up to the yardarm; the signal halyards vibrated wildly as the gale tore at the flags. Captain Sawyer waited on deck for the reply; this business must be important. Hornblower read the message again, for until that moment he had only studied it as something to be transmitted. But even on reading it he did not know why the message should be important. Until three months before, he had been a prisoner in Spanish hands for two weary years, and there were gaps in his knowledge of recent history. The name of Barry McCool meant nothing to him.

On the other hand, it seemed to mean a great deal to the admiral, for hardly had sufficient time elapsed for the message to be carried below to him than a question soared up to the VICTORY‘s yardarm.

„Flag to RENOWN.“ Hornblower read those flags as they broke and was instantly ready for the rest of the message. „Is McCool alive?“

„Reply affirmative,“ said Captain Sawyer.

And the affirmative had hardly been hoisted before the next signal was fluttering in the VICTORY.

„Have him on board at once. Court martial will assemble."

A court martial! Who on earth was this man McCool? A deserter? The recapture of a mere deserter would not be a matter for the commander-in-chief. A traitor? Strange that a traitor should be court-martialled in the fleet. But there it was. A word from the captain sent Hart scurrying overside to bring this mysterious prisoner on board, while signal after signal went up from the VICTORY convening the court martial in the RENOWN.

Hornblower was kept busy enough reading the messages; he had only a glance to spare when Hart had his prisoner and his sea chest hoisted up over the port side. A youngish man, tall and slender, his hands were tied behind him—which was why he had to be hoisted in—and he was hatless, so that his long red hair streamed in the wind. He wore a blue uniform with red facings—a French infantry uniform, apparently. The name, the uniform, and the red hair combined to give Hornblower his first insight into the situation. McCool must be an Irishman. While Hornblower had been a prisoner in Ferrol, there had been, he knew, a bloody rebellion in Ireland. Irishmen who had escaped had taken service with France in large number. This must be one of them, but it hardly explained why the admiral should take it upon himself to try him instead of handing him over to the civil authorities.

Hornblower had to wait an hour for the explanation, until, at two bells in the next watch, dinner was served in the gun room.

„There'll be a pretty little ceremony tomorrow morning," said Clive, the surgeon. He put his hand to his neck in a gesture which Hornblower thought hideous.

„I hope the effect will be salutary," said Roberts, the second lieutenant. The foot of the table, where he sat, was for the moment the head, because Buckland, the first lieutenant, was absent attending to the preparations for the court martial.

„But why should we hang him?" asked Hornblower.

Roberts rolled an eye on him.

„Deserter," he said, and then went on. „Of course, you're a newcomer. I entered him myself, into this very ship, in '98. Hart spotted him at once."

„But I thought he was a rebel?"

„A rebel as well," said Roberts. „The quickest way out of Ireland—the only way, in fact—in '98 was to join the armed forces."

„I see," said Hornblower.

„We got a hundred hands that autumn," said Smith, another lieutenant.

And no questions would be asked, thought Hornblower. His country, fighting for her life, needed seamen as a drowning man needs air, and was prepared to make them out of any raw material that presented itself.

„McCool deserted one dark night when we were becalmed off the Penmarks," explained Roberts. „Got through a lower gunport with a grating to float him. We thought he was drowned until news came through from Paris that he was there, up to his old games. He boasted of what he'd done—that's how we knew him to be O'Shaughnessy, as he called himself when we had him."

„Wolfe Tone had a French uniform," said Smith. „And they'd have strung him up if he hadn't cut his own throat first."

„Uniform only aggravates the offence when he's a deserter," said Roberts.

Hornblower had much to think about. First there was the nauseating thought that there would be an execution in the morning. Then there was this eternal Irish problem, about which the more he thought the more muddled he became. If just the bare facts were considered, there could be no problem. In the world at the moment, Ireland could choose only between the domination of England and the domination of France; no other possibility existed in a world at war. And it seemed unbelievable that anyone would wish to escape from English overlordship—absentee landlords and Catholic disabilities notwithstanding—in order to submit to the rapacity and cruelty and venality of the French republic. To risk one‘s life to effect such an exchange would be a most illogical thing to do, but logic, Hornblower concluded sadly, had no bearing upon patriotism, and the bare facts were the least considerable factors.

And in the same way the English methods were subject to criticism as well. There could be no doubt that the Irish people looked upon Wolfe Tone and Fitzgerald as martyrs, and would look upon McCool in the same light. There was nothing so effective as a few martyrdoms to ennoble and invigorate a cause.

The hanging of McCool would merely be adding fuel to the fire that England sought to extinguish. Two peoples actuated by the most urgent of motives—self-preservation and patriotism—were at grips in a struggle which could have no satisfactory ending for any lengthy time to come.

Buckland, the first lieutenant, came into the gun room with the preoccupied look commonly worn by first lieutenants with a weight of responsibility on their shoulders. He ran his glance over the assembled company, and all the junior officers, sensing that unpleasant duties were about to be allocated, did their unobtrusive best not to meet his eye. Inevitably it was the name of the most junior lieutenant which rose to Buckland‘s lips.

„Mr Hornblower,“ he said.

„Sir!“ replied Hornblower, doing his best now to keep resignation out of his voice.

„I am going to make you responsible for the prisoner.“

„Sir?“ said Hornblower, with a different intonation.

„Hart will be giving evidence at the court martial,“ explained Buckland—it was a vast condescension that he should deign to explain at all. „The master-at-arms is a fool, you know. I want McCool brought up for trial safe and sound, and I want him kept safe and sound afterwards. I‘m repeating the captain‘s own words, Mr Hornblower.“

„Aye, aye, sir,“ said Hornblower, for there was nothing else to be said.

„No Wolfe Tone tricks with McCool,“ said Smith.

Wolfe Tone had cut his own throat the night before he was due to be hanged, and had died in agony a week later.

„Ask me for anything you may need, Mr Hornblower,“ said Buckland.

„Aye, aye, sir.“

„Side boys!“ suddenly roared a voice on deck overhead, and Buckland hurried out; the approach of an officer of rank meant that the court martial was beginning to assemble.

Hornblower‘s chin was on his breast. It was a hard, unrelenting world, and he was an officer in the hardest and most unrelenting service in that world—a service in which a man could no more say *I cannot* than he could say *I dare not*.

„Bad luck, Horny," said Smith, with surprising gentleness, and there were other murmurs of sympathy from round the table.

„Obey orders, young man," said Roberts quietly.

Hornblower rose from his chair. He could not trust himself to speak, so that it was with a hurried bow that he quitted the company at the table.

„'E's 'ere, safe an' sound, Mr 'Ornblower," said the master-at-arms, halting in the darkness of the lower 'tween decks.

A marine sentry at the door moved out of the way, and the master-at-arms shone the light of his candle lantern on a keyhole in the door and inserted the key.

„I put 'im in this empty storeroom, sir," went on the master-at-arms. „'E's got two of my corporals along wit 'im."

The door opened, revealing the light of another candle lantern. The air inside the room was foul; McCool was sitting on a chest, while two of the ship's corporals sat on the deck with their backs to the bulkhead. The corporals rose at an officer's entrance, but even so, there was almost no room for the two newcomers. Hornblower cast a vigilant eye round the arrangements. There appeared to be no chance of escape or suicide. In the end, he steeled himself to meet McCool's eyes.

„I have been put in charge of you," he said.

„That is most gratifying to me, Mr—Mr—" said McCool, rising from the chest.

„Hornblower."

„I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr Hornblower."

McCool spoke in a cultured voice, with only enough of Ireland in it to betray his origin. He had tied back the red locks into a neat queue, and even in the faint candlelight his blue eyes gave strange reflections.

„Is there anything you need?" asked Hornblower.

„I could eat and I could drink," replied McCool. „Seeing that nothing has passed my lips since the ESPÉRANCE was captured."

That was yesterday. The man had had neither food nor water for more than twenty-four hours.

„I will see to it," said Hornblower. „Anything more?"

„A mattress—a cushion—something on which I can sit," said McCool. He waved a hand towards his sea chest. „I bear an honoured name, but I have no desire to bear it imprinted on my person."

The sea chest was of a rich mahogany. The lid was a thick slab of wood whose surface had been chiselled down to leave his name—B. I. McCool—standing out in high relief.

„I'll send you in a mattress too," said Hornblower.

A lieutenant in uniform appeared at the door.

„I'm Payne, on the admiral's staff," he explained to Hornblower. „I have orders to search this man."

„Certainly," said Hornblower.

„You have my permission," said McCool.

The master-at-arms and his assistants had to quit the crowded little room to enable Payne to do his work, while Hornblower stood in the corner and watched. Payne was quick and efficient. He made McCool strip to the skin and examined his clothes with care—seams, linings, and buttons. He crumpled each portion carefully, with his ear to the material, apparently to hear if there were papers concealed inside. Then he knelt down to the chest; the key was

already in the lock, and he swung it open. Uniforms, shirts, underclothing, gloves; each article was taken out, examined, and laid aside. There were two small portraits of children, to which Payne gave special attention without discovering anything.

„The things you are looking for," said McCool, „were all dropped overside before the prize crew could reach the ESPÉRANCE. You'll find nothing to betray my fellow countrymen, and you may as well save yourself that trouble."

„You can put your clothes on again," said Payne curtly to McCool. He nodded to Hornblower and hurried out again.

„A man whose politeness is quite overwhelming," said McCool, buttoning his breeches.

„I'll attend to your requests," said Hornblower.

He paused only long enough to enjoin the strictest vigilance on the master-at-arms and the ship's corporals before hastening away to give orders for McCool to be given food and water, and he returned quickly. McCool drank his quart of water eagerly, and made effort to eat the ship's biscuit and meat.

„No knife. No fork," he commented.

„No," replied Hornblower in a tone devoid of expression.

„I understand."

It was strange to stand there gazing down at this man who was going to die tomorrow, biting not very efficiently at the lump of tough meat which he held to his teeth.

The bulkhead against which Hornblower leaned vibrated slightly, and the sound of a gun came faintly down to them. It was the signal that the court martial was about to open.

„Do we go?" asked McCool.

„Yes."

„Then I can leave this delicious food without any breach of good manners."

Up the ladders to the main deck, two marines leading, McCool following them, Hornblower following him, and two ship's corporals bringing up the rear.

„I have frequently traversed these decks," said McCool, looking round him, „with less ceremonial."

Hornblower was watching carefully lest he should break away and throw himself into the sea.

The court martial. Gold lace and curt efficient routine, as the RENOWN swung to her anchors and the timbers of the ship transmitted the sound of the rigging vibrating in the gale. Evidence of identification. Curt questions.

„Nothing I could say would be listened to amid these emblems of tyranny," said McCool in reply to the President of the Court.

It needed no more than fifteen minutes to condemn a man to death: „The sentence of this Court is that you, Barry Ignatius McCool, be hanged by the neck—"

The storeroom to which Hornblower escorted McCool back was now a condemned cell. A hurrying midshipman asked for Hornblower almost as soon as they arrived there.

„Captain's compliments, sir, and he'd like to speak to you."

„Very good," said Hornblower.

„The admiral's with him, sir," added the midshipman in a burst of confidence.

Rear-Admiral the Honourable Sir William Cornwallis was indeed in the captain‘s cabin, along with Payne and Captain Sawyer. He started to go straight to the point the moment Hornblower had been presented to him.

„You‘re the officer charged with carrying out the execution?“ he asked.

„Yes, sir.“

„Now look‘ee here, young sir—“

Cornwallis was a popular admiral, strict but kindly, and of unflinching courage and towering professional ability. Under his nickname of „Billy Blue“ he was the hero of uncounted anecdotes and ballads. But having got so far in what he was intending to say, he betrayed a hesitation alien to his character. Hornblower waited for him to continue.

„Look‘ee here,“ said Cornwallis again. „There‘s to be no speechifying when he‘s strung up.“

„No, sir?“ said Hornblower.

„A quarter of the hands in this ship are Irish,“ went on Cornwallis. „I‘d as lief have a light taken into the magazine as to have McCool make a speech to ‘em.“

„I understand, sir,“ said Hornblower.

But there was a ghastly routine about executions. From time immemorial the condemned man had been allowed to address his last words to the onlookers.

„String him up,“ said Cornwallis, „and that‘ll show ‘em what to expect if they run off. But once let him open his mouth—That fellow has the gift of the gab, and we‘ll have this crew unsettled for the next six months.“

„Yes, sir.“

„So see to it, young sir. Fill him full o‘ rum, maybe. But let him speak at your peril.“

„Aye, aye, sir.“

Payne followed Hornblower out of the cabin when he was dismissed.

„You might stuff his mouth with oakum,“ he suggested. „With his hands tied he could not get it out.“

„Yes,“ said Hornblower, his blood running cold.

„I‘ve found a priest for him,“ went on Payne, „but he‘s Irish too. We can‘t rely on him to tell McCool to keep his mouth shut.“

„Yes,“ said Hornblower.

„McCool‘s devilish cunning. No doubt he‘d throw everything overboard before they capture him.“

„What was he intending to do?“ asked Hornblower.

„Land in Ireland and stir up fresh trouble. Lucky we caught him. Lucky for that matter, we could charge him with desertion and make a quick business of it.“

„Yes,“ said Hornblower.

„Don‘t rely on making him drunk,“ said Payne, „although that was Billy Blue‘s advice. Drunk or sober, these Irishmen can always talk. I‘ve given you the best hint.“

„Yes,“ said Hornblower, concealing a shudder.

He went back into the condemned cell like a man condemned himself. McCool was sitting on the straw mattress Hornblower had had sent in, and the two ship‘s corporals still had him under their observation.

„Here comes Jack Ketch,“ said McCool with a smile that almost escaped appearing forced.

Hornblower plunged into the matter in hand; he could see no tactful way of approach

„Tomorrow—“ he said.

„Yes, tomorrow?“

„Tomorrow you are to make no speeches,“ he said.

„None? No farewell to my countrymen?“

„No.“

„You are robbing a condemned man of his last privilege.“

„I have my orders,“ said Hornblower.

„And you propose to enforce them?“

„Yes.“

„May I ask how?“

„I can stop your mouth with tow,“ said Hornblower brutally.

McCool looked at the pale, strained face. „You do not appear to me to be the ideal executioner,“ said McCool, and then a new idea seemed to strike him. „Supposing I were to save you that trouble?“

„How?“

„I could give you my parole to say nothing.“

Hornblower tried to conceal his doubts as to whether he could trust a fanatic about to die.

„Oh, you wouldn‘t have to trust my bare word,“ said McCool bitterly. „We can strike a bargain, if you will. You need not carry out your half unless I have already carried out mine.“

„A bargain?“

„Yes. Allow me to write to my widow. Promise me to send her the letter and my sea chest here—you can see it is of sentimental value—and I, on my side, promise to say no word from the time of leaving this place here until—until—“ Even McCool faltered at that point. „Is that explicit enough?“

„Well—“ said Hornblower.

„You can read the letter,“ added McCool. „You saw that other gentleman search my chest. Even though you send these things to Dublin, you can be sure that they contain nothing of what you would call treason.“

„I‘ll read the letter before I agree,“ said Hornblower.

It seemed a way out of a horrible situation. There would be small trouble about finding a coaster destined for Dublin; for a few shillings he could send letter and chest there.

„I‘ll send you in pen and ink and paper,“ said Hornblower.

It was time to make the other hideous preparations. To have a whip rove at the portside fore yardarm, and to see that the line ran easily through the block. To weight the line and mark a ring with chalk on the gangway where the end rested. To see that the noose ran smooth. To arrange with Buckland for ten men to be detailed to pull when the time came. Hornblower went through it all like a man in a nightmare.

Back in the condemned cell, McCool was pale and wakeful, but he could still force a smile.

„You can see that I had trouble wooing the muse,“ he said.

At his feet lay a couple of sheets of paper, and Hornblower, glancing at them, could see that they were covered with what looked like attempts at writing poetry. The erasures and alterations were numerous.

„But here is my fair copy,“ said McCool, handing over another sheet.

„My darling wife," the letter began. „It is hard to find words to say farewell to my very dearest—"

It was not easy for Hornblower to force himself to read that letter. It was as if he had to peer through a mist to make out the words. But they were only the words of a man writing to his beloved, whom he would never see again. That at least was plain. He compelled himself to read through the affectionate sentences. At the end it said: „I append a poor poem by which in the years to come you may remember me, my dearest love. And now goodbye, until we shall be together in heaven. Your husband, faithful unto death, Barry Ignatius McCool."

Then came the poem.

'Ye heavenly powers! Stand by me when I die!
The bee ascends before my rolling eye.
Life still goes on within the heartless town.
Dark forces claim my soul. So strike 'em down.
The sea will rise, the sea will fall. So turn
Full circle. Turn again. And then will burn
The lambent flames while hell will lift its head.
So pray for me while I am numbered with the dead.'

Hornblower read through the turgid lines and puzzled over their obscure imagery. But he wondered if he would be able to write a single line that would make sense if he knew he was going to die in a few hours.

„The superscription is on the other side," said McCool, and Hornblower turned the sheet over. The letter was addressed to the Widow McCool, in some street in Dublin. „Will you accept my word now?" asked McCool.

„Yes," said Hornblower.

The horrible thing was done in the grey hours of the morning.

„Hands to witness punishment."

The pipes twittered and the hands assembled in the waist, facing forward. The marines stood in lines across the deck. There were masses and masses of white faces, which Hornblower saw when he brought McCool up from below. There was a murmur when McCool appeared. Around the ship lay boats from all the rest of the fleet, filled with men—men sent to witness the punishment, but ready also to storm the ship should the crew stir. The chalk ring on the gangway, and McCool standing in it. The signal gun; the rush of feet as the ten hands heaved away on the line. And McCool died, as he had promised, without saying a word.

The body hung at the yardarm, and as the ship rolled in the swell that came round Berry Head, so the body swung and dangled, doomed to hang there until nightfall, while Hornblower, sick and pale, began to seek out a coaster which planned to call at Dublin from Brixham, so that he could fulfill his half of the bargain. But he could not fulfil it immediately; nor did the dead body hang there for its allotted time. The wind was backing northerly and was showing signs of moderating. A westerly gale would keep the French fleet shut up in Brest; a northerly one might well bring them out, and the Channel fleet must hurry to its post again. Signals flew from the flagships.

„Hands to the capstan!" bellowed the bosun's mates in twenty-four ships. „Hands make sail!"

With double-reefed topsails set, the ships of the Channel fleet formed up and began their long slant down-Channel. In the RENOWN it had been, „Mr Hornblower, see that *that* is disposed of.“ While the hands laboured at the capstan the corpse was lowered from the yardarm and sewn into a weighted bit of sailcloth. Clear of Berry Head it was cast overside without ceremony or prayer. McCool had died a felon‘s death and must be given a felon‘s burial. And, close-hauled, the big ships clawed their way back to their posts amid the rocks and currents of the Brittany coast. And on board the RENOWN there was one unhappy lieutenant, at least, plagued by dreadful memories.

In the tiny cabin which he shared with Smith there was something that kept Hornblower continually reminded of that morning: the mahogany chest with the name „B. I. McCool“ in high relief on the lid. And in Hornblower‘s letter case lay that last letter and the rambling, delirious poem. Hornblower could send neither on to the widow until the RENOWN should return again to an English harbour, and he was irked that he had not yet fulfilled his half of the bargain. The sight of the chest under his cot jarred on his nerves; its presence in their little cabin irritated Smith.

Hornblower could not rid his memory of McCool; nor, beating about in a ship of the line on the dreary work of blockade, was there anything to distract him from his obsession. Spring was approaching and the weather was moderating. So that when he opened his leather case and found that letter staring at him again, he felt undiminished that revulsion of spirit. He turned the sheet over; in the half dark of the little cabin he could hardly read the gentle words of farewell. He knew that strange poem almost by heart, and he peered at it again, sacrilege though it seemed to try to analyse the thoughts of the brave and frightened man who had written it during his final agony of spirit. *The bee ascends before my rolling eye*. What could possibly be the feeling that inspired that strange imagery? *Turn full circle. Turn again*. Why should the heavenly powers do that?

A startling thought suddenly began to wake to life in Hornblower‘s mind. The letter, with its tender phrasing, had been written without correction or erasure. But this poem; Hornblower remembered the discarded sheets covered with scribbling. It had been written with care and attention. A madman, a man distraught with trouble, might produce a meaningless poem with such prolonged effort, but then he would not have written that letter. Perhaps—

Hornblower sat up straight instead of lounging back on his cot. *So strike ‘em down*. There was no apparent reason why McCool should have written *em* instead of *them*. Hornblower mouthed the words. To say *them* did not mar either euphony or rhythm. There might be a code. But then why the chest? Why had McCool asked for the chest to be forwarded with its uninteresting contents of clothing? There were two portraits of children; they could easily have been made into a package. The chest with its solid slabs of mahogany and its raised name was a handsome piece of furniture, but it was all very puzzling.

With the letter still in his hand, he got down from the cot and dragged out the chest. B. I. McCool. Barry Ignatius McCool. Payne had gone carefully through the contents of the chest. Hornblower unlocked it and glanced inside again; he could see nothing meriting particular attention, and he closed the lid again and turned the key. B. I. McCool. A secret compartment! In a fever, Hornblower opened the chest again, flung out the contents and examined sides and bottom. It called for only the briefest examination to assure him that there

was no room there for anything other than a microscopic secret compartment. The lid was thick and heavy, but he could see nothing suspicious about it. He closed it again and fiddled with the raised letters, without result.

He had actually decided to replace the contents when a fresh thought occurred to him. *The bee ascends!* Feverishly Hornblower took hold of the *B* on the lid. He pushed it, tried to turn it. *The bee ascends!* He put thumb and finger into the two hollows in the loops of the *B*, took a firm grip and pulled upward. He was about to give up when the letter yielded a little, rising up out of the lid half an inch. Hornblower opened the box again, and could see nothing different. Fool that he was! *Before my rolling eye*. Thumb and forefinger on the *I*. First this way, then that way—and it turned!

Still no apparent further result. Hornblower looked at the poem again. *Life still goes on within the heartless town*. He could make nothing of that. *Dark forces claim my soul*. No. Of course! *Strike 'em down*. That *em*. Hornblower put his hand on the *M* of *McCool* and pressed vigorously. It sank down into the lid. *The sea will rise, the sea will fall*. Under firm pressure the first *C* slid upward, the second *C* slid downward. *Turn full circle. Turn again*. Round went one *O*, and then round went the other in the opposite direction. There was only the *L* now. Hornblower glanced at the poem. *Hell will lift its head*. He guessed it at once; he took hold of the top of the *L* and pulled; the letter rose out of the lid as though hinged along the bottom, and at the same moment there was a loud decisive click inside the lid. Nothing else was apparent, and Hornblower gingerly took hold of the lid and lifted it. Only half of it came up; the lower half stayed where it was, and in the oblong hollow between there lay a mass of papers, neatly packaged.

The first package was a surprise. Hornblower, peeping into it, saw that it was a great wad of five-pound notes—a very large sum of money. A second package was similar. Ample money here to finance the opening moves of a new rebellion. The first thing he saw inside the next package was a list of names, with brief explanations written beside each. Hornblower did not have to read very far before he knew that this package contained the information necessary to start the rebellion. In the last package was a draft proclamation ready for printing. *Irishmen!* it began.

Hornblower took his seat on the cot again and tried to think, swaying with the motion of the ship. There was money that would make him rich for life. There was information which, if given to the government, would clutter every gallows in Ireland. Struck by a sudden thought, he put everything back into the chest and closed the lid.

For the moment it was a pleasant distraction, saving him from serious thought, to study the ingenious mechanism of the secret lock. Unless each operation was gone through in turn, nothing happened. The *I* would not turn unless the *B* was first pulled out, and it was most improbable that a casual investigator would pull at that *B* with the necessary force. It was most unlikely that anyone without a clue would ever discover how to open the lid, and the joint in the wood was marvellously well concealed. It occurred to Hornblower that when he should announce his discovery matters would go badly with Payne, who had been charged with searching McCool's effects. Payne would be the laughing-stock of the fleet, a man both damned and condemned.

Hornblower thrust the chest back under the cot and, secure now against any unexpected entrance by Smith, went on to try to think about his discovery.

That letter of McCool‘s had told the truth. *Faithful unto death*. McCool‘s last thought had been for the cause in which he died. If the wind in Tor Bay had stayed westerly another few hours, that chest might have made its way to Dublin. On the other hand, now there would be commendation for him, praise, official notice—all very necessary to a junior lieutenant with no interests behind him to gain him his promotion to captain. And the hangman would have more work to do in Ireland. Hornblower remembered how McCool had died, and felt fresh nausea at the thought. Ireland was quiet now. And the victories of St Vincent and the Nile and Camperdown had put an end to the imminent danger which England had gone through. England could afford to be merciful. He could afford to be merciful. And the money?

Later on, when Hornblower thought about this incident in his past life, he cynically decided that he resisted temptation because bank notes are tricky things, numbered and easy to trace, and the ones in the chest might even have been forgeries manufactured by the French government. But Hornblower misinterpreted his own motives, possibly in self-defence, because they were so vague and so muddled that he was ashamed of them. He wanted to forget about McCool. He wanted to think of the whole incident as closed.

There were many hours to come of pacing the deck before he reached his decision, and there were several sleepless nights. But Hornblower made up his mind in the end, and made his preparations thoughtfully, and when the time came he acted with decision. It was a quiet evening when he had the first watch; darkness had closed in on the Bay of Biscay, and the RENOWN, under easy sail, was loitering along over the black water with her consorts just in sight. Smith was at cards with the purser and the surgeon in the gun room. A word from Hornblower sent the two stupidest men of the watch down below to his cabin to carry up the sea chest, which he had laboriously covered with canvas in preparation for this night. It was heavy, for buried among the clothing inside were two twenty-four-pound shot. They left it in the scuppers at Hornblower‘s order. And then, when at four bells it was time for the RENOWN to tack, he was able, with one tremendous heave, to throw the thing overboard. The splash went unnoticed as the RENOWN tacked.

There was still that letter. It lay in Hornblower‘s writing case to trouble him when he saw it. Those tender sentences, that affectionate farewell; it seemed a shame that McCool‘s widow should not have the privilege of seeing them and treasuring them. But—but—When the RENOWN lay in the Hamoaze, completing for the West Indies, Hornblower found himself sitting at dinner next to Payne. It took a little while to work the conversation around in the right direction.

„By the way,“ said Hornblower with elaborate casualness, „did McCool leave a widow?“

„A widow? No. Before he left Paris he was involved in a notorious scandal with La Gitanita, the dancer. But no widow.“

„Oh,“ said Hornblower.

That letter, then, was as good a literary exercise as the poem had been. Hornblower realized that the arrival of a chest and a letter addressed to the Widow McCool at that particular house in Dublin would have received the attention it deserved from the people who lived there. It was a little irritating that he had given so much thought to the widow, but now the letter could

follow the chest overside. And Payne would not be made the laughing-stock of the fleet.