

# **Hornblower's Charitable Offering**

**Horatio Hornblower series**

**by Cecil S. Forester, 1899-1966**

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HMS SUTHERLAND of two decks and seventy-four guns, Captain Horatio Hornblower, was on her way north from Gibraltar to her rendezvous in the Western Mediterranean. To port lay the coast of Spain; to starboard, and barely in sight, just peeping over the horizon, lay the hilltops of one of the Balearic Islands, Ibiza. Spain was now an ally of England, and it was no business of the Sutherland's to intercept Spanish trade or fight Spanish ships of war. Only the French were now enemies, and the French conquest of Spain had not progressed as far south yet as Valencia. It was to take a hand in the struggle in Catalonia that the SUTHERLAND—at least so Hornblower suspected—was being sent north. Meanwhile he had little enough to worry him; a full crew, a wellfound ship, and nothing special to do until he reached his rendezvous. It was a period of transition, from one duty to another, and Hornblower revelled in the feeling of suspended animation and freedom. The SUTHERLAND was laying

over her ponderous bulk as she stood to the north close-hauled to a fine easterly wind, and Hornblower paced his deck breathing deep of the crisp air and the healing sunshine.

It was the look-out at the foretop masthead who broke into the happy neutrality of his mood.

„Deck, there! If you please, sir, there’s something adrift right ahead; might just be wreckage, sir—can’t rightly tell yet.“

„Right ahead?“

„Aye aye, sir. We’re coming right up to it. Might be a raft, sir—think I can see a man—two men, perhaps, sir.“

There was an obvious explanation of the presence of a raft with men on it at sea in wartime—they might be the survivors of a battle to the death, here where the struggle for the mastery of the sea was being fought out. The SUTHERLAND could run down to investigate without fear; there was a curious shifting sensation in Hornblower’s skull when he thought of the numerous inventors who were putting forward suggestions by which small boats could explode by charges of gunpowder against the side of a ship of the line. If ever they should succeed in their wild schemes the day of the battleship’s magnificent security would be over and instead the utmost caution would be necessary in approaching strange objects. But that was all nonsense, of course, and Hornblower shrugged it away from him carelessly; the ridiculous train of thought had occupied his mind during all the minutes necessary to raise the strange object to within sight of the deck.

„It’s a raft, sure enough, sir,“ said Lieutenant Bush, glass to eye, and gazing across the sunlit water. „There’s one man waving, and I think there’s another one there, too.“

„Heave to when you get to wind’ard of her,“ ordered Hornblower.

Bush took the Sutherland up close to the strange object, and hove to neatly.

„Queer sort of raft,“ he said, peering over the dancing water as the SUTHERLAND’s leeway carried her down to it.

It was nothing more than a couple of logs bound crudely together; the waves broke over it so that the two men on it were to some extent always submerged. One man was kneeling, holding a crude paddle in his hand, while the other lay with occasionally even his head buried under the water which washed over his body.

„Heave ‘em a line,“ said Hornblower.

But even the man who was kneeling was too weak for the deftly-cast rope to be of use to him. He fumbled with it and lost his grip, his head falling forward with exhaustion. The quarterboat had finally to be hoisted out and the two men brought on board in a bos’un’s chair swung from the main-yard arm. They lay there brown and naked, like the Indians of San Salvador, and most desperately emaciated; every bone was standing out clear and well defined, as though straining against the leathery skin stretched over it. Their long lank hair and beards dripped water on the deck. One lay motionless, the other held out a feeble hand to them as they stared down at them; with a croaking voice he pointed down his throat.

„Thirsty, poor devil,“ said Bush; a gesture from Hornblower had already sent one of the hands running for water.

The castaways drank eagerly, and to Hornblower and Bush it was as if a miracle were being performed before their eyes, almost like the raising of the

dead, to see the astonishing effect of the water upon them. They revived magically; the one who had lain upon the deck, and whose head had had to be supported to allow him to drink, sat up. A death's head smile split his lean face.

„I expect they're hungry as well," said Bush. „They look as if they might be."

It only called for a nod from Hornblower for somebody to go and seek for food for them.

„Who are you?" asked Hornblower.

„François," said the stronger one. He had blue eyes which looked oddly out of place in his brown face.

„Frenchies, by God!" said Bush.

„Where do you come from?" asked Hornblower, repeating himself in limping French when he saw he was not understood.

The blue-eyed one extended an arm like a stick towards the Balearics to windward.

„Cabrera," he said. „We were prisoners."

Hornblower and Bush exchanged glances and Bush whistled—Bush could at least understand the gesture and the first word of the reply. Cabrera was a previously uninhabited islet which the Spaniards were using as a camp for their French prisoners of war.

The dark-eyed castaway was speaking rapidly in a hoarse voice.

„You won't send us back there, monsieur?" he said. „Make us your prisoners instead. We cannot—"

He became unintelligible with weakness and excitement. Bush, observant as usual, was yet puzzled by what he could see.

„I can understand their being thirsty," he said, „but they couldn't have got as thin as that just coming from Cabrera. They could have paddled that raft of theirs here in a couple of days, even without a wind."

„When did you leave Cabrera?" asked Hornblower.

„Yesterday."

Hornblower translated to Bush.

„That sunburn of theirs is months old," said Bush. „The fellows can't have worn a pair of breeches in weeks. There must be funny doings in Cabrera."

„Tell me," said Hornblower to the castaways, „how did you become—like this?"

It was a long story, the longer as it was interrupted while the castaways ate and drank, and while Hornblower translated the more sensational parts to Bush.

There were twenty-thousand of the poor devils—mainly the army which had surrendered at Baylen, but prisoners taken in a hundred other skirmishes as well—who had annoyed their Spanish captors inexpressibly while they were kept on the mainland by their continual attempts to escape. Finally the Spaniards had taken the whole twenty-thousand and dumped them down on the island of Cabrera, a mere rock of only a few square miles. That had been two years ago; there was no need for any Spanish garrison on the island itself—British sea power made it impossible for any French ship to attempt a rescue, and there was nothing with which to make boats except for rare driftwood. For two years these twenty-thousand miserable wretches had lived on the rock, scraping holes for shelter from the summer sun and winter storms.

„There are only two wells, monsieur," said the blue-eyed Frenchman, „and sometimes they run dry. But often it rains."

Hornblower's mathematical mind dealt with the time-problem of supplying twenty-thousand men with water from two wells. Each man would be lucky if he got one drink a day, even if the wells never ran dry.

Of course there was no fuel on the island—not one of the twenty-thousand had seen a spark of fire for two years, and no clothing had survived two years of exposure and wear.

The Spaniards landed food for them at intervals, which was eaten raw.

„It is never enough, monsieur,“ explained the Frenchman—Hornblower was acquainted with Spanish methods, and could understand—„and sometimes it does not come at all. Because of the wind, monsieur. When the wind is in the east, monsieur, we starve.“

Bush was looking at the chart and the sailing directions for the Western Mediterranean.

„That's right, sir,“ he announced. „There's only one landing beach, and that's on the east. It's impracticable to land in easterly winds. It mentions the two wells and says there's no wood.“

„They are supposed to bring food twice a week, monsieur,“ said the Frenchman. „But sometimes it has been three weeks before they have been able to put it ashore.“

„Three weeks!“

„Yes, monsieur.“

„But—but—“

„Those of us who are wise have little stores hidden away in the rocks for those times, monsieur. We have to defend them, of course. And as for the others—There is usually plenty of one kind of food for them to eat, monsieur. There are not twenty-thousand of us by now.“

Hornblower looked out through the cabin window at the dull smudge on the horizon where, in this enlightened nineteenth century, actual cannibalism was still taking place.

„God bless us all!“ said Bush, solemnly.

„There had been no food for a week when we escaped yesterday, monsieur. But easterly winds always bring driftwood, as well as famine. We found two tree-trunks, Marcel and I. There were many who wanted to take the chance, monsieur. But we are strong, stronger than most on the island.“

The Frenchman looked almost with complacency down at his skinny arms.

„Yes indeed we are,“ said Marcel. „Even if your ship had not seen us, we might have reached Spain alive. I suppose our Emperor has now conquered all the mainland?“

„Not yet,“ replied Hornblower briefly. He was not prepared at short notice to try to explain the vast chaos which was acquiring the name of the Peninsular War.

„The Spaniards still hold Valencia,“ he said. „If you had managed to get there they would only have sent you back to Cabrera.“

The Frenchmen looked at each other; they would have grown voluble again, but Hornblower checked them testily.

„Go and try to sleep,“ he said, and he stamped out of the cabin.

Up on deck the air seemed purer, after the foul pictures which the Frenchmen's stories had called up in his mind. Hornblower loathed human suffering; he walked his deck tormented by the thought of the starving Frenchmen on Cabrera. This brisk Levanter, blowing from the east, would go on

blowing for another week at least, if he could read weather signs—and he thought he could. It was none of his business to worry about French prisoners of war in Spanish hands. Cabrera lay out of his course. British government stores should be conserved strictly for the use of his own ship. He would have the devil's own time explaining to his admiral if he did anything to relieve the misery on Cabrera. No sensible man would attempt it; every sensible man would shrug his shoulders and do his best to forget about this whole beastly business of Frenchmen devouring their own dead among the rocks of Cabrera. Yet by laying the SUTHERLAND as close to the wind as she would lie he could just fetch the island now. Any further delay would mean a long beat to windward. Hornblower crossed the deck and gave his orders, and without another word, solely by the look in his eye, he dared his lieutenants to question him as to his intentions. Then he went back to his walk, pacing up and down, up and down, trying to think out a method of how to land stores on a surf-beaten beach.

That queer mathematical ability of his was working to its utmost. Into his mind there came a whole series of ballistic formulae. Scientific gunnery was in its infancy, in its utter babyhood; it was only in the last few years that the arsenal authorities at Woolwich had begun to experiment practically in the endeavour to obtain data as to the behaviour of the weapons they turned out in such numbers. And most of their attention had been devoted to the big ships' guns and not to the little 6-pounder boat gun whose employment was contemplated by Hornblower. And besides that, he was intending to use the 6-pounder in a way that had never been contemplated by the Woolwich authorities or by anyone else at all, as far as he knew. So far, nobody had thought of employing a gun to bridge a gap with a line as he was thinking of doing. If his plan did not succeed, he would have to think of another one—but he thought it was worth trying.

He broke off his train of thought to issue a whole series of orders to his puzzled subordinates. The blacksmith was given orders to forge an iron rod with a loop at the end and to wrap it with oakum and twine to fit the bore of the long boat's 6-pounder. The bos'un had to get out 100 fathoms of the finest hemp line that the ship possessed and work it into utter flexibility by straining every inch round a belaying-pin and then coil it away with perfect symmetry into one of the oaken fire-buckets. The cooper and his mates were set to work breaking out beef casks, half emptying them, and then heading them up securely. A puzzled bos'un's mate was set to work with half a dozen hands linking these twenty half-empty casks into an immense chain, like beads on a string where every bead was represented by a cask containing 2-hundredweight of meat connected with its fellows by 60 yards of cable. The deck of the Sutherland presented a pretty tangle to any possible observer by the time all these operations were well started. And through the gathering evening the Sutherland held her course steadily, closehailed for Cabrera.

At dawn she was there, and the earliest hint of daylight found her nosing her way cautiously towards the beach, from which even here, with the wind in the wrong direction, could be heard the thunderous beat of the surf.

„That's the dagos' victualling-ship, I'll lay a guinea,“ said Bush with his glass to his eye.

It was a small brig, hull down and hove to, over on the horizon.

„Yes,“ said Hornblower—the speech deserved no more ample rejoinder. He was much too occupied looking through his own glass at the craggy beach of rock on which the Spaniards had seen fit to place twenty-thousand men. It was just a grey fragment, one single ridge projecting like a tooth from the blue Mediterranean, its steep slopes unrelieved by any trace of green. Around its foot the rollers broke into white fountains of spray—Hornblower could see the waves reaching 20 or 30 feet up the cliffs as they beat upon them—save in the centre where a long flurry of foam revealed the landing beach and all its dangers. It was a wicked enough place.

„Can't blame the dagos for not landing stores here in an easterly wind,“ said Bush, and this time he received no answer at all.

„Hoist out the long-boat,“ Hornblower rasped; when approaching a difficult task he would take out no insurance by minor politeness for his subordinates' sympathy in the event of failure.

The bos'un's mates twittered on their pipes while Harrison, the bos'un, repeated the order in his resounding bellow. The tackles were manned and the long-boat was swung up from her chocks and hoisted overside. The long-boat's crew stood fending her off as the SUTHERLAND surged in the choppy sea.

„I'm going in her, Mr Bush,“ said Hornblower briefly.

He took hold of one of the falls and lowered himself down; his unathletic figure dangled in ungainly fashion while the long-boat's crew fell over each other in their haste to protect his fall. It was a source of continual inward disturbance to Hornblower that the poorest topman in his whole ship was better on a rope than he was himself. He managed just well enough, and with only a small loss of dignity, with a 3-foot drop as a result of his not quite correctly estimating the relative movements of the ship and the boat. Somebody picked up his hat and gave it to him and he clapped it on his head again.

„Give way,“ he snapped, and the long-boat crept under oars over the surging sea towards the distant beach.

Now, with his glass, Hornblower could see little figures pouring down to the water's edge on Cabrera. They were all as naked as the two men he picked up yesterday; Hornblower wondered what it was like to climb about with a bare skin over the jagged rocks of Cabrera; he wondered what it was like to try and live naked through a winter storm with only a hollow in a rock for shelter. He felt sick with the thought of all the horror and misery which that jagged lump of rock must have witnessed for the past two years. He was glad he was going to make this small attempt at relief. He put away his glass and walked forward between the rowers to where the 6-pounder was mounted in the bows.

At his command, one of the crew broke open a paper cartridge, poured the powder into the muzzle of the gun and rammed the wad home upon the charge. Another hand knotted the line to the queer missile which the blacksmith had prepared. Hornblower dropped the thing into the muzzle of the gun and rammed it down. He twirled the elevating screw; the wedges slid from under the breech of the gun, and the muzzle cocked itself up as the gun rested at its fullest elevation. He gauged the strength of the wind and glanced round him trying to predict the motion of the boat in the choppy sea. Then he pulled the lanyard, and the gun roared out.

At his elbow the line suddenly came to life, whirring viciously as it shot from the tub; the smoke vanished just in time to give him a glimpse of the line hanging in an arc in the air before the projectile fell into the surf and the line

after it. A little groan went up from the crew of the long-boat—they had been taking the usual childlike interest in the novelty of all this, to be expected of sailors welcoming any break in the monotony of a long voyage.

„Get that line in again,“ said Hornblower sitting down on a thwart. „Make those coils absolutely smooth.“

That was one comforting piece of knowledge which the study of scientific gunnery had given him; because one first shot had failed was no proof at all that the twentieth would not succeed. And this time line and projectile would be wet and heavier; the gun would be hot and would react differently; the likelihood that the boat would be at the same angle to the horizon on the waves was very remote; and in any case the trial shot had indicated that they must move a little farther up the coast to make the proper allowance for the wind. He ordered a double wad to be put on top of the new charge so as to keep the wet projectile from damping the powder while the long-boat crept a few yards north along the edge of the surf.

When the gun was fired again, it looked for a second as if the shot would be successful, but it dropped into the surf 10 yards from the waiting crowd—and for all practical purposes 10 yards were as effective as 100. The third and fourth and fifth shots failed by even wider margins. It began to look to Hornblower as if the initial velocity were insufficient—perhaps the pull of the line as it ran out was stronger than he had allowed for. At the risk of straining the gun, he could increase the powder charge; there was an additional risk in that because the line might break and the projectile fly free, in which case it would go clean through somebody in the crowd on the beach. But when the sixth and seventh shots also failed, Hornblower decided to take the risk. He put in a charge and a half of powder and rammed it well down. Then he ordered the whole crew aft as far as possible into the stern sheets of the boat—if the gun should burst, he wanted only a minimum of casualties, and it seemed perfectly logical to him that he should take the risk of pulling the lanyard himself instead of ordering someone else to do so.

He took a last glance down at the line and then jerked the lanyard. The gun went off with a crash which jerked the whole long-boat sternwards, and the gun itself leapt in its carriage with a clatter. But the stout metal held firm, and the projectile, trailing its curved arc of line, cleared the water's edge and dropped into the waiting crowd.

Communication was established, but it was a frail enough bond, because those madmen on shore had no sooner grabbed the line than they began to haul it in. Hornblower cursed himself for not having seen this development; he snatched up his speaking trumpet and groped wildly in his mind for a French phrase which might be the equivalent of „Avast heaving!“ or „Belay!“

„Doucement! Doucement!“ he roared.

He waved his arms frantically and danced about in the bows of the boat. Perhaps the wind carried his words down to the beach, or perhaps his gestures were understood. Someone was taking charge of proceedings; there was a swirl in the crowd and the line ceased to run out. Hornblower swung the long-boat cautiously round and pulled slowly towards the Sutherland, paying out the line behind him until he could signal for his gig and row back to his ship to supervise the rest of the operation.

The Immense string of half-empty casks was dropped into the sea, and the launch took it in tow and began to drag it slowly up to the long-boat. Half

empty, the casks rode high in the water. That would get them through the worst of the surf, and if the Frenchmen pulled in fast enough, most of the casks could be expected to reach land still containing most of their contents and if the worst came to the worst, the contents would be thrown up on to the beach soon enough. Meat which had already been six months in a cask would not be much spoiled by an additional immersion in sea water.

Hornblower dashed back into his gig to supervise the final operation. The heavier line was bent on to the light one which had been thrown on shore, and Hornblower stood up again with his speaking trumpet.

„Tirez! Tirez!“ he yelled, and waved the instrument at the crowd.

They understood him and began to pull in. The heavy rope crept in after the line, and then the long string of casks followed. Hornblower watched their course anxiously enough, as the big ungainly objects, black in the white foam under the dazzling sun, crept towards the shore. But even without watching them he could have guessed at their safe arrival, for as each one reached the beach, there was a wild swirl in the crowd as the starving men smashed the casks to pieces with rocks and fought over the contents.

Hornblower did not wait to see the end. He wanted no further reminder of the beastliness and horror of it all, and he had himself rowed back to his ship and the boats hoisted in. He would not look back again at the island as the SUTHERLAND braced her yards round and went on to her delayed rendezvous. The Spanish victualling-brig was coming down towards them under full sail. She passed the SUTHERLAND close astern, and an irate officer hailed through a speaking trumpet:

„What you mean, sir?“ he shouted. „What you mean interfering? Cabrera our country—you not must go there!“

„God damn you!“ said Bush beside Hornblower as the words reached him. „Shall I give him a shot, sir?“

After what they had seen, the crew of the SUTHERLAND would have thoroughly approved of such an action, but Hornblower felt he had done enough towards provoking an international incident between England and her ally as it was. He put his hand to his ear and made a gesture to indicate that he could not hear. The Spaniard repeated himself, bawling and raving and dancing on his deck until Hornblower almost came to hope that he would burst a blood-vessel. It was only a schoolboy trick, but it raised a laugh among the officers and men of the SUTHERLAND, and that was what Hornblower was after. In these dreary times of war and at moments of tension between allies, a laugh was worth a great deal.

And then he turned back towards routine. But a new wave of depressed realization flooded over him. The relief of Cabrera had cost his ship hundreds of fathoms of line and hundreds of fathoms of cable, a score of beef casks and a whole day's time. What oppressed Hornblower was the prospect of having to account for all this. There would be at least a dozen letters and reports to write upon the subject, and that would be only the beginning, because My Lords of the Admiralty, when the letters reached them, would certainly demand further explanations, and explanations beyond those, and further explanations still—Hornblower could see those letters stretching to the crack of doom.

Then he caught sight of his two French prisoners down on the main-deck. They were clothed and shaved and looked new men, but Hornblower found no pleasure in the sight of them. To him they represented another whole series of

letters and reports which he would have to write, and he groaned at the prospect. For a moment he almost wished that the SUTHERLAND had never sighted them, that they had drifted on to meet their death in the desolate Mediterranean. He realized at once that this was not true, and groaned at his hard-heartedness while he paced the deck and breathed free air. But all the same, this work of charity was going to cost him a devil of a lot of trouble.

