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Master Blythe Gets His Cannon

by
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ORMOND
McCLELLAND

Illustrated by JAY JACKSON

"He tripped on the doorsill and fell flat on his back; he seemed to shrink as a dark pool formed around him."

MASTER BLYTHE, late one April day in 1775, sat on the battered butt of a dock-side piling and stared at the sparkling waters of Narragansett Bay. In spite of his name and the cheerful condition of the bay, Master Blythe's small body drooped with dejection and his blue eyes burned with a desperate fury.

"Blast her!" Master Blythe muttered. "She lies there solid as Goat Island, and it'd take a frigate to blow her out of the water!"

The object of Master Blythe's ire was His Majesty, King George III's trim cruiser, *Scorpion*, schooner rigged and mounting eighteen guns. The *Scorpion* swung at anchor with the same jaunty insolence that marked her officers when they led their press-gangs into Newport's water-front taverns.

"Peter Hemp's aboard her," Master Blythe grated savagely. He hauled the bright bronze hilt of his small-sword up between his knees and gnawed at the neat button. His three cornered hat slid to the back of his powdered wig and

his blue coat bunched around his shoulders. "And my trade's ruined!"

Heavy brogans thudded the rough planking of the dock behind Master Blythe, but he did not remove his baleful glare from the distant *Scorpion*. The brogans pounded toward him. "Cap'n Blythe!"

The shout made Master Blythe sink lower on the post; shrink into the stiff collar of his coat. He didn't deserve his title! Hadn't his own saucy brig been boarded by a boat's crew off the *Scorpion*? Boarded after a six months' voyage—just as they were entering their home port!

The twinge of bitterness that wrenched through Master Blythe's lower abdomen almost made him ill.

That cocky young whelp of a British ensign! He'd routed out Master Blythe's crew of joyful seamen, looked them over like he was judging so many cattle—and then with insolent deliberation had ordered a full dozen horrified stalwarts over the rail!

Seamen within sight of home and wives and children had been pressed into the hated king's service!

And not only that, but that sprig of

an ensign had ordered Peter Hemp into the waiting boat! Peter Hemp, big red-headed mate of the brig, Master Blythe's boyhood friend, had gone over the side: but his stricken glance had stabbed deep.

Master Blythe, indignant and helpless in the face of naked cutlasses, had redoubled his heated protests. He had shouted his rights and had come close to damning Britain; the king; and His Majesty's Royal Navy!

The smirking ensign had nodded and Master Blythe thought he had won his point! But the ensign had nodded to his burly bos'n who stood directly behind Master Blythe. The bos'n had swung his heavy sea boot. His kick took Master Blythe with unexpected suddenness. It lifted Master Blythe off the deck and sent him sailing through the open companion-way. Master Blythe and his protests had landed at the bottom of the ladder.

MASTER BLYTHE had straightened his crumpled spine, wiped the blood from his face and with painful effort had dragged himself back up the companion-way and across the deck. In spite of his native caution, Master Blythe had weakly clung to the rail, shouting and shaking his small fist at the *Scorpion's* retreating boat and the upright figure of the mocking ensign!

The brogans pounded close behind Master Blythe and a voice, hoarse with excitement, shouted:

"Cap'n Blythe! Have ye heard the news!"

Master Blythe frowned. For the past week he had been avoiding company. There was no news he wanted to hear. Master Blythe swung then, reluctantly, to face the panting arrival.

It was Old Ben Smith, gasping with

exertion and hitching up his seaman's trousers. "Gor' blimey, Cap'n," he blurted. "The minute-men has chased the blasted Redcoats clean home from Concord!"

"What?" Master Blythe jerked bolt upright. "Aye! Yesterday it was! The Redcoats marched out of Boston better'n a thousand strong! They fired the first shot at Lexington! But the minute-men rallied at Concord, an' stopped 'em at Concord bridge! Then shootin' from every stump and wall, the minute-men chased the whole bloody gang back to Boston! Killed nigh onto three-four hunderd of 'em!"

A cold thrill shivered through Master Blythe. He breathed deeply and exhaled a thoughtful: "Lord!"

"Newport's gone wild!" Old Ben hurried on. "They're breathin' rebellion! The minute-men are gatherin' an' they're goin' to march at once and help lay siege to Boston! Never did see so many muskets!"

"Muskets!" Master Blythe's eyes swept back to the anchored *Scorpion*. Behind those ports were the muzzles of shotted cannon—Master Blythe's quick elation left him. "Muskets can't sink ships-of-war, Ben."

Perplexity knotted Old Ben's weathered face. "Huh? Wha's that?"

Gloom clouded Master Blythe's eyes. Minute-men could kill Redcoats, but it took cannon to sink a man-of-war! It was all very well for minute-men to go marching to Boston but sailors belonged on the sea—and if the Colonies went to war England would bottle up every port on the Atlantic. Master Blythe pointed to the *Scorpion*. "England has three hundred and fifty of those ships! We'd never get a cargo out of port. We'd starve!"

Old Ben's neck swelled as Master

Blythe's arm dropped to his side. "I thought ye had some spunk!" he exploded. "Look at ye! Draped over that bollard like a wet sail! Your best fighting's aboard that stinkin' Britisher!"

None knew it better than Master Blythe! But how was a ruined Newport ship's captain going to get him off? It was easy enough to talk rebellion—but fighting the king's navy took more than talk and minute-men! And as for a little brig's master — Master Blythe snorted.

Old Ben did not wait for an answer. He rolled away from Master Blythe, scorn bristling from his square cut shoulders.

YES, Master Blythe reflected bitterly, his best friend was aboard the Britisher. But not even the most foolhardy seaman in Newport would try to take him off by force! And now, Old Ben would march back to Newport's taverns and in the heat of anger he would brand Master Blythe a coward and a Tory.

Master Blythe shook his head sadly. Lord, if there was only some way to get cannon! He'd show Newport how quick he'd engage that Britisher! He'd try it with only half a dozen guns!

His glance flicked along the low seawall; over the idle shipping moored at the deserted docks; and on to his own little brig. True enough he had two small cannon on board, but he'd never get within range of the *Scorpion's* guns. They'd blast him out of the water before he could go into action!

Wearily, Master Blythe eased himself off the bollard. A horn of ale might lift his drooping spirits. He would go up to the taverns and pledge his loyalty to the Colonies and wish the minute-men good luck.

Dusk was settling darkly over the town and, as Master Blythe picked his way through the cordage on the dock, he failed to notice the *Scorpion's* long-boat pull away from the ship-of-war. The oar blades did not flash and the oarlocks, carefully oiled and muffled, made no sound.

The press-gang's boat slipped through the water. Dinner hour on the water-front would find the taverns crowded. Make easy pickings for the hard-handed gang bent upon the remorseless task of filling out the *Scorpion's* crew.

Master Blythe turned into Thames Street and made for the secluded quiet of "The Seamen's Haven." Yes, a glass would help him. Master Blythe could not remember when he had been so depressed.

Yet, strangely, the "Haven" was not overcrowded. As Master Blythe entered the cool taproom a sullen hush settled on the dozen odd occupants. They turned their faces away.

Old Ben had had his say and—from the greeting—he'd said plenty. Nevertheless, Master Blythe touched the brim of his hat and nodded: "What cheer, gentlemen?"

A growl answered him. But Master Blythe was not to be put off so easily. He looked over the frozen faces of the assembly. Old Ben was seated on a stool at the far end of the taproom.

"Ben," Master Blythe asked briskly, "where's everyone?"

Old Ben's undershot jaw jutted. "The minute-men's gone on to Boston. They ain't cowards—they ain't! An' most o' the seamen has trudged along with 'em—even the storekeepers has shut up..."

"Ben!" Master Blythe leaned forward slightly. "Were you insinuating that I am a coward?"

Old Ben's hand crept along his belt, slipped around behind his back to the ugly seaman's dirk on his hip. "Master Blythe, I sailed in your father's ship 'afore I signed with you! He were a man! He wouldn't have left his best friend—not Peter Hemp—"

Old Ben stopped suddenly. His eyes bunged. He closed his mouth soundlessly. He jabbed a blunt forefinger at the open door. His jaw worked and he screamed:

"Press-men!"

MASTER BLYTHE pivoted: every man in the taproom bounced to his feet and faced the doorway. A score of British tars raced down the cobbled street, swarmed around the tavern. An ensign brought up the rear. He sauntered through the door with cool insolence. He could afford to be cool. A hairy chested bos'n swishing a cat-o-nine-tails, and two hunch shouldered jack-tars with cutlasses trailed after him respectfully. They did the dirty work while the rest of the press-gang outside blocked escape!

Master Blythe stiffened, his chin came up, his shoulders went back. He looked like a bantam rooster with his feathers ruffled—it was the same ensign who had boarded Master Blythe's brig!

The ensign bowed and smirked. "Well, my fine fellows, who among ye would sign with the king?" The ensign lifted his brows at the silence. "No volunteers?"

Anger seethed through Master Blythe. These poor able-bodied seamen were at the mercy of the press-gang! With the minute-men gone to Boston and the town practically empty the press-gang could do as they pleased.

"Hmm," murmured the ensign, disdainfully looking over the taproom. "A

sorry looking lot, by Jove!" He shook his head and his eye fell on Master Blythe. He pointed his slender walking stick. "You would make a dam' fine cabin-boy! We need a cabin-boy."

The burly bos'n blurted a gruff gaw-faw. He flicked the cat-o-nine-tails suggestively. For a painfully long moment Master Blythe did not fully realize the significance of that flirting cat-o-nine-tails.

Then Master Blythe felt very hot. Blood rushed to his face. His breath was constricted. He was a small man and that he granted—but he was master and owner of his own ship! The anger that had seethed through Master Blythe boiled.

They meant to press *him* into service as a cabin-boy!

Master Blythe was surprised to hear his own voice say as coolly as a New England breeze: "I am a ship's master, young sir, and I warn you not to lay a hand on my person!"

A DEAD silence smothered the taproom. Master Blythe heard Old Ben gasp. Even the huge bos'n was startled. The ensign was furious. His lips rolled apart. "Damn your impertinence! When the king wants a man—high or low—he gets him! Bos'n, give him a taste of the cat!"

Master Blythe's sea-won muscles became as taut as a ship's line in a gale. His right hand clenched. His stiff fingers opened again.

The bos'n lunged forward. The cat-o-nine-tails unwound; the skin-splitting lash reached for Master Blythe.

But Master Blythe had not waited for the whip. His hand flashed like a train of lighted powder to his sword hilt.

"Cabin-boy!" he spat the word like a mouthful of sand. Then, with small-

sword quivering fingerlike in his hand, Master Blythe nimbly side-stepped and drove his blade into the bos'n's hairy chest. The point of Master Blythe's small-sword came out of the bos'n's back!

"Ahhhh——" the bos'n moaned. The cat-o-nine-tails slid out of his hairy paw and with an expression of utter amazement on his face the bos'n reeled across the taproom. He tripped on the doorsill and fell flat on his back: he seemed to shrink as a dark pool formed around him.

"Treason!" the ensign shrieked. He clawed at the hilt of his small-sword. "Surrender! Surrender in the King's Name! You'll hang for this!"

"No," said Master Blythe, and he drove forward to engage the ensign's blade. "No, I will not surrender!"

The ensign lunged, sword darting at Master Blythe's throat. Master Blythe deftly parried the thrust and his quick return sliced the ensign's cheek. The ensign floundered wildly. He had little relish for Master Blythe's kind of sword play!

"Ho!" he shouted. "To the King!"

The two press-men with cutlasses seemed to wake from some horrible nightmare. They shook themselves and started for Master Blythe. A tall ape-armed Newport seaman near the door laconically spit on his hand, caught up a three legged stool and cracked the nearest press-man on the head.

Master Blythe was too intent to notice. His glittering blade swooped and ripped into the ensign's sword arm. The ensign's small-sword shot out of his hand. He yelped like a frightened terrier and scurried to the taproom door.

"Have at ye!" Master Blythe barked and whirled on the last press-man. The wretch dropped his cutlass and chased the ensign into the street.

"Look out!" It was Old Ben's below. "There's a big gang outside!"

"So I see," Master Blythe leaped for the bar. A brace of loaded pistols always rested there. He tucked his bloody sword under his arm, scooped up the pistols and sprinted to the door.

"Get that dirty little imp!" the ensign raged at the press-gang. He wrapped his coat around his arm and kept well away. "Go in after him!" The press-gang stalked forward cautiously, a little uncertain.

But there was nothing uncertain about Master Blythe. He crouched in the wide doorway, a long pistol knotted in each small fist. "Come on, gentlemen, and get your meat for the king. Meat that will poison him!"

A press-man with a black patch over his eye snorted derisively. "This will poison ye!" He cocked his short barrelled fowling piece and took deliberate aim at Master Blythe, his one eye glowering along the sights.

Master Blythe swung his pistol and fired. "You asked for it!"

THE black patch over the sailor's eye jumped. The sailor jumped too. He twisted as he fell and fired his flintlock into the press-gang! The blast of small shot sprayed the street. The press-gang yowled and charged. They charged right over the ensign and raced down the cobbled street to the safety of the *Scorpion's* barge. The ensign picked himself out of the gutter and ran after them.

Master Blythe fired his second shot over their heads. The ensign overtook the press-gang. Master Blythe shrugged a little regretfully and turned back into the taproom.

"Now," he said quietly, "now, I will have my ale."

The landlord waddled to Master Blythe's elbow, cleared his throat respectfully and set a brimming tankard in front of him. "Your ale, Cap'n."

Master Blythe sheathed his sword, slapped it firmly into the scabbard. He looked up then and saw Old Ben Smith standing before him. The old seaman's face was a mask of awe and wonder. He tugged nervously at his forelock.

"Cap'n Blythe," Old Ben swallowed twice. "I begs your pardon humble like! I'll eat dirt! I'll drink bilge water! If ye'll only forgive me, I'll—"

Master Blythe lifted a hand, "Easy, Ben! Any man can fly off the nadle." He raised his tankard and nodded to the room. "To the Sovereign Colony of Rhode Island — and damn King George's breeches!"

There was a hearty chorus of "Ayes" to Master Blythe's toast, tankards clicked. Master Blythe buried his face in the foam and drank his pint to the bottom.

Old Ben did not move. He waited

impatiently until Master Blythe set his tankard on the table. "Cap'n, sir, if ye'll pardon me, sir."

"Yes, Ben."

"Don't sit there like that with your legs crossed, sir! Get a horse under ye! Ride like hell! That press-gang will be back with half the ship's crew! They'll hang you, Cap'n Blythe!" Old Ben's voice quavered. "They'll seize your fine little brig! You ain't got a chance! You run, Cap'n, 'fore they be acomin' back!"

"Yes, Ben, I know all that," Master Blythe nodded slowly. And more! His snug white house, his brig, his life—everything he possessed was forfeit. "I'm a traitor to the king in their eyes, but—" he added significantly, "I'm a citizen of Rhode Island first, and I say a state of war exists. The British will have to look out for themselves!"

"My God," Old Ben groaned. "Cap'n, sir, be ye daft? The King's Navy'll come roaring up the quay any minute now, an' ye won't have a chance!

"A tall spe-armed Newport seaman near the door laconically spit on his hand, caught up a three legged stool and cracked the nearest press-man on the head."



Please, Cap'n, get your flippers goin'—an' run like hell!"

"Belay, Ben, stow it!" Master Blythe scowled at a spot of dust on his buckled shoes. He stood up slowly, diminutive and gentle beside the rugged, sputtering sailor. He glanced around the room. "Ben's right and you'd all better ske-daddle. That press-gang and the *Scorpion's* will storm Newport this night! They'll be back with blood in their eyes!"

"God love us! We're all traitors!" Old Ben choked. "We stood by while His Majesty's people were put to rout! We'll *all* dance from a yard-arm!"

Stools bounced, a tankard crashed on the flagstones. Old Ben's words were a blow that left every man jack of them gasping!

The fat landlord swelled out his cheeks and boomed: "Damn me—it was worth it! They can tear down mine inn! I'd stick here and fight if we had a man to lead us!"

Every man in the taproom halted and looked at Master Blythe. The gangling, ape-armed seaman rolled forward. "How about it, Cap'n Blythe? It's up to you. We follow where you lead!"

With one voice they agreed, a hearty, determined growl of approval.

Master Blythe clasped his hands under the long tails of his blue coat. He stared at the floor for a long moment then looked up and said reflectively: "There's better than a hundred men aboard the *Scorpion*! She mounts eighteen guns! In a pinch she could anchor just out of musket shot and bombard Newport to a bloody shambles!"

"It's up to you, Cap'n Blythe," the long sailor repeated.

"Yes, I know," Master Blythe said. "I was just casting up the odds. We

can scarce muster a score of men, with all the minute-men gone, and no tars in the town . . ." Master Blythe sighed. "Well, my buckos, get home quickly, fetch cutlasses and pistols, mind you. Then meet me at the sea-wall within the hour!"

THERE was a scramble for the door and Master Blythe called after them. "Easy does it! They'll be coming ashore!"

"You keep them there pistols," the landlord puffed. "I've another brace!"

Thoughtfully, Master Blythe loaded the long barreled flintlocks while the landlord locked the tavern doors and slammed the heavy shutters. Thames Street was deserted. The whole town must have followed the minute-men.

Night, clear and calm, had settled on the bay. A glow to the east warned Master Blythe that the moon would be bright. He paused at the corner of Broadway and peered at the distant and somber shadow of the *Scorpion*. Lights moved like fireflies on the man-of-war's deck.

"Very active out there," Master Blythe mused. The landlord came gal-lumping down the street; he slowed to a dog-trot and Master Blythe was startled. The landlord's white apron was gone, and his vast girth was held by a broad belt with a massive brass buckle. A shining cutlass and two goose-neck pistols jutted out of the belt.

Master Blythe nodded approvingly. "We'll get to the sea-wall."

Three longboats put out from the side of the *Scorpion*. They moved swiftly over the open water, dark and sinister, and very quiet. Master Blythe watched them impatiently. The Newport seamen drifted up one by one to join Master Blythe in the shadow of the sea wall.

Eighteen men counting himself. One man for each of the *Scorpion's* cannon! It could be worse. Yes—he could be here all alone!

The *Scorpion's* longboats were close to the end of the landing dock. Master Blythe said, "Crouch down behind the sea-wall, men, and for God's sake be quiet!"

Old Ben brushed past. "What ye gonna do, cap'n? Ambush 'em like them Concord fellers done the Redcoats?"

"No! Don't fire!" Master Blythe warned. "Don't pull a trigger unless I give the word!"

The seamen ducked into hiding just as the first of the *Scorpion's* longboats bumped the dock. A horde of striped shirted jacktars swarmed on the quay. They formed a column of twos under the quick, low voiced commands of their blue-coated officers. The soft glow of the rising moon glinted on their arms.

"A full strength landing party," Master Blythe breathed. "They're going to take the town apart!"

At double-quick the landing party came down the dock and swung briskly into Broadway. Their sea boots rumbled ominously. The officers with drawn swords trotted beside the grim and silent ranks.

MASTER BLYTHE hunched lower and pleaded under his breath. "Don't shoot, boys, don't shoot! Hold your fire!" Master Blythe felt a ripple of tension sweep his hidden men, a gathering anger that might send them charging over the low wall.

The landing party smartly jogged abreast of the seawall. Sixty men, Master Blythe counted, and all of them scowling with the fierce joy of fighting men soon to be completely revenged. They came within ten yards

of the wall and veered past, deploying a thin skirmish line at the head of Thames Street. They were going to sweep the town.

"What'n hell's wrong with ye, cap'n?" Old Ben growled. "Why didn't you shoot 'em! They're gone now!"

"Good!" Master Blythe said. The last of the landing party disappeared down Thames Street. He jumped to the top of the wall. "Ben, if you hear a shot tell the boys to scatter and run like hell. If you hear me whistle, come arunning! Pass the word along."

Master Blythe was gone then, boldly marching down the dock, his small-sword clanking at his side and the hard heels of his buckled shoes clicking as briskly as any Officer's in His Majesty's Navy! He saw the sentry guarding the longboats swing to meet him.

Master Blythe straightened his shoulders. His hand slipped to the pistol butt inside his blue coat. He was banking on that blue coat. In this moonlight, the sentry could easily mistake him for a ship's officer!

"What's wrong, sir?" the sentry called. He held his musket at ready. Master Blythe quickened his step. He was within thirty paces of the sentry. He whipped out his pistols.

"I'll blow your head off if you move!" Master Blythe barked.

That settled the sentry. He lowered his musket. Master Blythe started to whistle, a cheerful melodious whistle. He walked within a yard of the sentry. "Drop that musket!"

"I'm a pressed-man, sir, the sentry muttered. "I won't raise no cry if you give me a chance to get away! Only don't let them bluecoats lay hands on me! A hunnert lashes . . ."

"Shut up!" Master Blythe ordered curtly and waved his pistol. The Newport seaman came running down the dock. They gathered around Master Blythe and his prisoner.

Old Ben lifted his pistol and nodded at the captive. "Shall I brain him?"

"No! I need him," Master Blythe said. "Into a longboat men! Look sharp! We'll pay the *Scorpion* a visit!"

The ape-armed seaman whistled.

Master Blythe turned on him. "You left it up to me—but there's still time to clear away."

"No, cap'n," the ape-armed seaman grunted, "I like's to row in the moonlight! But every man aboard the *Scorpion* will be on deck—they'll be lookin' for fires in the town."

"Yes," Master Blythe said, "but get an oar in your hands!"

MASTER BLYTHE sat in the stern with the sentry at his side. The Newport seamen pulled with a will. The longboat hissed over the water. Old Ben, facing Master Blythe, grunted between strokes. "Cap'n . . . thought you . . . couldn't take a . . . ship . . . without . . . cannon!"

Master Blythe smiled. "No time for cannon, Ben. Besides I'd like to see Peter Hemp!" The low rakish stern of the *Scorpion* loomed ahead, Master Blythe lifted the pistol in his lap and shoved the muzzle into the sentry's side. "When they hail us, you make reply! One slip, sailor, and I'll shoot a very neat hole through you!"

The port side of the *Scorpion* faced the town. Master Blythe directed the longboat under the starboard rail. The watch sent a surprised hail across the water. "Boat, Ahoy!"

Master Blythe prodded his prisoner's ribs. "Give 'em a true answer!"

Heads popped over the starboard rail. The breathless Newport seamen leaned on their oars. The longboat coasted under the frowning muzzles of the *Scorpion's* cannon. An action lantern near the quarterdeck cast a strange and sickly light on the water.

Master Blythe's prisoner sucked in a sullen breath and flinched as the pistol nudged hard. "Lieutenant Gratt's boat! Bringing a prisoner!"

"So you got him, eh?" the jubilant watch called. "We didn't think you'd be back so quick!"

"Neither did I!"

Master Blythe choked. He rammed his pistol into the seaman's ribs. "If that's a tip off . . ."

"It ain't, sir," the sentry whined, "Gawd, no, it ain't!"

A harsh laugh echoed from the *Scorpion's* deck. "Bring the dirty little rebel aboard!"

"I'll be right up," Master Blythe whispered. "Ease her into the Jacob's Ladder, boys, and follow me!"

Master Blythe loosened his small sword in the scabbard, tucked a pistol into his buttoned coat and grasped the other pistol firmly. He would need to be firm about this business: there were about forty men aboard the *Scorpion* and they'd fight like fiends.

THE Newport seamen shipped their oars. The ladder was under Master Blythe's left hand. The longboat bumped the fender. Then Master Blythe clambered swiftly up the ladder, a good deal faster than he would have gone up the side of his own brig!

Master Blythe looked up. The face above him gaped with surprise. Master Blythe did not have time to be surprised. He was moving too fast. He swung his right arm up and over.

The long barrel of Master Blythe's pistol slapped that startled face, smashed it back over the rail.

Master Blythe bounced to the deck: right in the middle of the *Scorpion's* crew. A big blackamoor darted for the mainmast and a rack of cutlasses. His big hand wound around a hilt. Master Blythe leveled his cocked pistol and smoke gushed around an orange flame. The blackamoor's hand turned red.

The Newport seamen stormed over the rail: Old Ben in the van. His wild yell and headlong charge scattered the stunned crew!

The blue-coated officer of the watch roared from the quarterdeck. "Damme! The blighters are rebels!" His commands lashed the *Scorpion's* crew into action. The deck swarmed. Knots of men, fighting savagely, swirled against the rail.

Master Blythe's small sword was in his hand. He saw the officer on the quarterdeck dash for the small swivel cannon mounted on the rail. The swivel gun was used on boarders. It was effective and it was exceptionally handy.

That swivel gun in the hands of the officer would clear the deck!

"No you don't," Master Blythe muttered. He sprinted along the rail. A cutlass swiped out of nowhere. Master Blythe's hat and his wig sailed into the bay, but Master Blythe's small sword streaked out. The wielder of the cutlass clawed at his bloody throat and sprawled out of Master Blythe's path.

The officer, a sputtering match in his hand, wrenched the swivel gun around. He swung the muzzle over the deck. It pointed directly at a flying wedge of Newport seamen rushing the forecastle head.

"Hold!" Master Blythe roared.

The officer, a snarl of fury on his lean face, jerked around. He had the choice of firing the swivel gun or protecting himself from Master Blythe's small-sword. He dropped the match and cleared his sword.

"Very wise," Master Blythe murmured. He whipped forward, sword poised, to cross blades with the officer.

"Damn your bones!" the officer panted. "You little pup, I'll teach you a trick or two you won't relish!" He lunged at Master Blythe with all the force and anger of a man who has been rudely interrupted in the course of duty.

Master Blythe leaned back from the officer's point and parried with high *prime*. He was a little slow. The point pinked Master Blythe's cheek.

"Ha!" the officer chortled as blood splattered down the front of Master Blythe's blue coat.

Perhaps, Master Blythe decided, he had been a bit impulsive. This officer's long arm, and clever sword play might well be fatal. The tall officer parried Master Blythe's quick return and savagely thrust at Master Blythe's briefly exposed chest.

Master Blythe jack-knifed, strained to counter in *tierce*. The officer's point slashed into Master Blythe's coat, grazed his chest and ripped out of the fabric below his left arm!

"LUD!" Master Blythe breathed as he snapped upright.

The officer was grinning broadly, confident and assured. As their blades engaged he nodded. "That's twice! The third time does it!"

He was deliberate in his preparations for the final assault. He started the long and difficult *double on both sides*

of the arm. His complicated and graceful parades were an insulting contemptuous gesture of self-acknowledged superiority. His point danced around Master Blythe. The officer was enjoying himself hugely!

If the officer had forgotten himself in a fencing lesson, Master Blythe had not forgotten that he was fighting for a ship—and he had no time for nonsense! Master Blythe's blood-smearred jaw clamped shut. "This has gone far enough!"

The officer's whirring blade darted and Master Blythe, ignoring the niceties of the attack, parried and lunged hard. His *time thrust* put an end to the fencing lesson! Master Blythe's blade shot through the officer's indifferent guard and slid into his shoulder as smoothly as a surgeon making an incision.

The tall officer's sword arm slowly dropped, his limp fingers opened, his small-sword clattered on the deck. He stared down at Master Blythe, his eyes round with astonishment. "Why, you little beggar!"

"Ship's owner!" Master Blythe corrected, withdrawing his blade from the officer's shoulder. The officer swayed, staggered back and slowly sat down, his hand clutching his shoulder.

Master Blythe whirled then, snatched up the smoldering match from the deck and jumped to the swivel gun. The Newport seamen were finding things difficult. The landlord braced himself against the mainmast, flailed his cutlass like a butcher knife. His blows were effective, but the crowding ring of jack-tars made him grunt with exertion. Old Ben and the ape-armed seaman furiously fought to clear the forecastle head. The odds were against them.

"Not so good," Master Blythe mut-

tered. He blew on the match until it glowed brightly. Then sighting the swivel gun on a dozen odd charging *Scorpion* jacktars, Master Blythe put the match to the touch-hole. The swivel gun bucked, roared, and blasted small-shot.

"Very effective," Master Blythe shuddered. The gray smoke drifted across the littered deck. The cannon had turned the tide. Up forward came a sharp cry of "Quarter! Quarter!" The cry lifted to a chorus! The *Scorpion's* crew had their bellies full!

"Drive 'em below!" Master Blythe shouted. The *Scorpion's* shattered crew crowded forward with anxious eyes on the swivel gun. Master Blythe remembered the wounded officer. He swung around—the officer had crawled to the stern rail.

"Haw!" said the officer triumphantly. He jerked his head at the bay. "See?"

Master Blythe saw! Crowded to the gunwales; surging through the water; oars flashing in the moonlight came the *Scorpion's* longboats! The landing party was returning. They were within two hundred yards of the ship and the oarsmen rowed like mad!

"Hell!" said Master Blythe. He lifted his voice. "Ben! Ben!"

Master Blythe leaned across the deck, dropped beside a blunt muzzled port-side carronade. He spun the elevation screw. The carronade dropped. He sighted the gun a little grimly. His battered Newport seamen could never stand against those boarders if they got under the *Scorpion's* lee!

Old Ben bounded to Master Blythe's side. He saw the approaching longboats. "You'll never hit 'em!"

"Kick those blocks out," Master Blythe snapped. "And pray the braces hold!" He yanked his second pistol out

of his coat front, held it close to the touch-hole of the carronade. The pistol cracked: the cannon roared.

Master Blythe peered through the dark smoke. A tall geyser of water spouted between the racing longboats. The moonlight glistened on the column. The rowers faltered. Sharp voices urged them on.

"Get crews to the guns, Ben," Master Blythe barked. "I'll give 'em a hail!"

Old Ben snorted. "There ain't men enough, Cap'n! Not even fer the port broadside!"

"Kick loose what guns you can then," Master Blythe swung nimbly to the ratlines. He cupped his hands to his mouth. "Boats, ahoy!" His voice carried over the water. "Sheer off and rest your oars or I'll blow you out of the water!"

THE longboats drifted, clearer now in the moonlight. Master Blythe glanced down. Eight Newport seamen were trying to clear five guns, they worked frantically. "Ben, can you get those guns free if we need 'em?"

"Aye, sir, but I've nothin' to touch 'em off with, Cap'n!"

"You'll find a match on the quarter deck," Master Blythe said and cupped his hands again and shouted. "I'll give you a full broadside if you come closer!"

A voice, shrill with anger, blazed from the drifting longboats. "In the King's name, hold fire! Stand by to deliver my ship! You'll swing for piracy and treason!"

Master Blythe frowned. Piracy? That was extremely harsh!

There was a flurry on the deck, a half score of men burst out of the forward companionway. For a moment, Master Blythe thought he was attacked front and rear. Then he saw a shining

red-head. Peter Hemp! His own mate and fresh support for the weary Newport seamen. The big mate was grinning. He led his men forward to serve the guns!

"Good evening, Mister Hemp," Master Blythe said. He pointed to the longboats. "That fellow says we're pirates!"

"Pirates, hell!" Peter Hemp exploded. "We'll fight for Liberty and Rhode Island!"

A good answer, Master Blythe decided. And, since the Colonies were at war with England, Rhode Island might as well acquire a Navy! Master Blythe pursed his lips. He looked out over the water. He wanted the ship but he did not want a hundred prisoners. That landing party couldn't go back to hostile Newport!

Master Blythe smiled to himself. The Massachusetts people had chased the Redcoats back to Boston! It was an idea—a good idea!

He lifted his voice. "The British are bottled up in Boston! I suggest you try rowing!"

There was a sputtering shout of rage from the longboats. Master Blythe turned to his red-headed mate. "Drop a shot between 'em, Mister Hemp! This's not the moment for them to quibble about rowing to Boston!"

Master Blythe leaned back against the ratlines and watched the longboats' oarsmen angrily chop the water, pulling out to Narragansett Bay. He sighed, and then frowned down at Old Ben.

"That proves my point, sir! See 'em pull! You must have *cannon*—" Master Blythe paused, whistled a soundless tune; he nodded to himself. "And now, we have cannon and there's no sense wasting 'em! We'll sail—and use 'em on a British ship-of-war!"