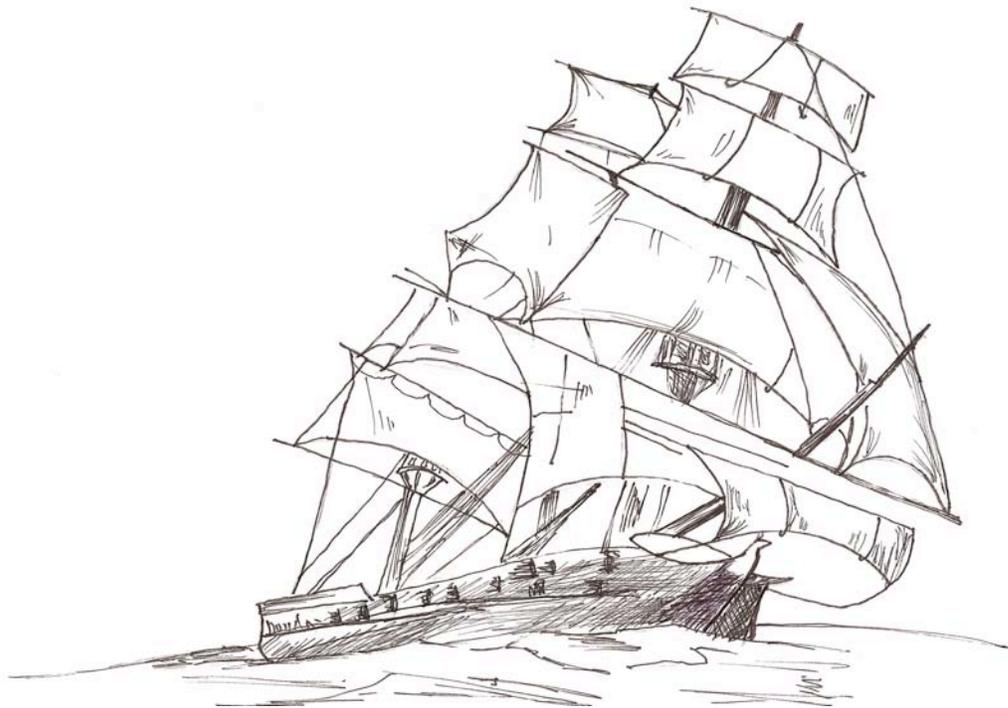


THE FIRESHIP

By

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A Short Story from
The Fighting Anthony's Series

The Fireship
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The Fireship

`Hit were like a roaring inferno
The fires `o `ell so bright.
Flames leaping upwards
Like fireworks in The night.

`Hit started on the main deck
Quick like it climbed the mast.
The sails be ablaze now
The flame `as spread so fast.

`Hits set a course for the flagship
Less some `ow it's turned.
The only choice Jack tar `as
Is jump ship or burn.

...Michael Aye

“Cap’n, Cap’n, wake up Cap’n...God, Cap’n please wake up.” A very excited and frightened midshipman Lancaster cried. “Wake up, Cap’n.”

Hearing the excited midshipman, Lieutenant Gabriel (Gabe) Anthony commanding *HMS SeaWolf*, a brigantine of eighteen guns, tried to clear his head and focus on the youth who continued in his urgent attempt to awaken him.

After years of continuous service at sea, Gabe was used to being called from a deep sleep at all different hours, for whatever needed the “Captain’s” attention.

However, after being wined and dined aboard the admiral’s flagship until the wee hours was making it much more difficult to rouse himself. Finally Gabe was able to clear the fog of too much drink and too many cigars from his brain and rise up from his bed focusing on the alarmed Lancaster who was almost comical in his exaggerated movements.

Holding up his hand to halt the boy’s blabbering Gabe said, “Stop, take a deep breath. Now tell me what’s happening.”

“Mr. Lavery’s compliments, sir, and could you please come on deck, it’s a fireship.”

“Fireship!” Gabe roared.

“Aye,” the nervous Lancaster replied, “It appears to be headed at the flagship.”

“Damme,” Gabe exclaimed, snatching up his breeches and putting them on quickly, then putting his boots on bare feet not wasting time with his stockings. He grabbed a shirt as he left his cabin almost bowling over the marine sentry who stood guard at the door.

He was fastening his shirt as he made his way amidship where Lieutenant Nathan Lavery, *SeaWolf's* second lieutenant, stood with a glass in his hand. One of the watchstanders seeing the cap'n cleared his throat, his way of letting Lieutenant Lavery know the captain was on deck.

Seeing the captain, Lavery reported without being prompted, "Appears to be a single ship, sir. I've tried to get a better view through the glass but it still to dark. All I see is the fire."

Lieutenant Gem Jackson, *SeaWolf's* first lieutenant, had made it on deck and overheard the conversation. "Is it a fireship or a ship on fire?"

"Makes no difference, she's on a course to collide with the flagship."

The group turned to see Gunnells, the master, who'd also made his way on deck. "Winds coming from ashore and blowing cross the harbour; that's slowing her progress."

The fire seemed to be getting bigger as the ship approached.

"Deck 'thar," a lookout called, "E's under full sail, 'e is."

Shaking his head, Jackson said, "Well, if it's a fireship, he's showed his hand way too soon."

"Aye," Gabe agreed with his first lieutenant, but that may be what gives us a chance to intercept the ship."

"Us," Jackson said surprised at what he was hearing.

"Is there another ship in position that would have a better chance," Gabe asked coldly, more a statement than a question.

"Are you going to try to sink her then?" Jackson asked.

“With *SeaWolf*’s pop guns? No, we’ll place *SeaWolf* between the fireship and the flagship. We’ll grapple and tow her if we can; but if we can’t we’ll ram her and try to push her away from the flagship.”

“It could cost you *SeaWolf*,” Jackson said, somewhat awed by his captain’s audacity.

“Better a brigantine than a seventy-four, don’t you think,” Gabe said matter of factly. “Now be so good as to beat to quarters.”

“Aye, captain.”

Lieutenant Jackson then added, “Lavery has already had the crew roused up.”

“Good,” Gabe answered, “Now prepare to get us underway and have the bosun form a bucket brigade and douse the sails. It’ll not only help us catch a breeze it may also keep the sails from catching on fire from sparks or flying debris.”

SeaWolf had entered the anchorage at English Harbour, Antigua that day, delivering dispatches to Admiral Graves. Due to so many ships in harbour, *SeaWolf* had been forced into an anchorage apart from the other ships in port. **There by** making her the only ship in position to have a chance to save Admiral Grave’s flagship.

“Mr. Gunnells,” Gabe called to *SeaWolf*’s master.

“Aye, sir.”

“I would like you to steer us a course to intercept yonder fireship.”

“Aye, aye, captain.”

Gabe called to the first lieutenant once more, “The master tells me we’ve a wind coming off the shore. I want two men with axes standing by the anchor cable, and then I

want the sails hoisted. With the helm down this should swing us about and when I give the order, cut the cable.”

“Aye, captain, shall I bouy the cable?”

“If there’s time, but bouy or not I want the cable cut when I give you the word.”

“Aye, captain, cut it’ll be,” Jackson replied.

BOOM...BOOM...BOOM...

“The flagship is firing at the fireship.”

Gabe turned to find Dagan speaking. Dagan was Gabe’s uncle, his protector and a man of mystery most would say.

“They’ve shown their hand a bit premature,” Gabe remarked to Dagan.

“Aye, but the master says it’s the offshore wind they’re fighting that’s delaying their progress and giving us a chance. Otherwise...”

“Do you think we have a chance?” Gabe asked.

“A chance for what?” Dagan asked, and then continued on, “A chance to save the flagship? Aye, we’ve a chance. To save ourselves, to save *SeaWolf*, the odds aren’t so good. But with a little luck we should be enjoying a wet and a bowl of tobacco after the sun crosses the yard arm. Might even have Lum play us a tune on his lotz.”

Then Dagan turned away saying, “Best I go check on those axe men.”

Damme, if he didn’t make me feel better, Gabe thought.

Lieutenant Lavery had heard the conversation between Dagan and the captain. He’d been with the two since he’d been a midshipman. During that time he’d been through many battles. Some with the elements, and several with the enemy. The one

thing he'd learned in all that time was to trust Dagan's lady luck. Well he didn't see no reason to change things now. If Dagan said it, he'd bet on it.

The sails were hoisted as men heaved on ropes as bosun mates threatened and cursed. More than one back felt the bosun mate's "starter" as evidenced by a yelp of pain here and there. Ordinarily Gabe wouldn't allow this but the men had to attend their duties and not dwell on the fireship if they were to have a chance at saving the flagship.

"Keep `yer eyes off the fireship and `yer back `on the ropes you laggards. Wilson, `es ye deaf man, I said `ta `eave," a bosun mate growled.

A loud snap was heard from above as the wind filled the wet sails. Almost immediately *SeaWolf* began to swing on her cable.

"Ease her up a bit," Gabe called to the master. As *SeaWolf's* bow came around Gabe ordered, "Now Mr. Jackson, cut the cable now."

The thud...thud...thud could be heard as the axe men chopped at the heavy rope that was holding *SeaWolf* to the anchor.

Almost at once one of the axe men shouted, "Cables cut," and *SeaWolf* lunged forward like a racehorse out of the gates.

BOOM...BOOM...BOOM...The flagship continued to fire.

"Mr. Druett," Gabe called to his gunner.

"Aye, cap'n."

"It'll do us no good to be blasted away by the flagship's guns while we're trying to save them."

"Nay, cap'n, no good at all I'm thinking and them neither."

“I’m glad you see it my way,” Gabe said unable to prevent a smile at hearing the gunner’s response. “What I want you to do, Mr. Druett, is to start firing the bow chasers toward the flagship to get their attention. Keep firing...unshotted mind you, till they cease firing.”

“Aye, Cap’n,” Druett said, as he turned to go about his duties. As he made his way forward he thought *‘but iffen the sods fail to cease firing, one little nine pounder mighten be amiss.’*

Gabe looked about the deck. The crew went about their duties as they’d been trained but he could see the fear in their eyes, a frantic look. The biggest fear of a ship at sea was a fire. Here at English Harbour, with other ships so close the men would have a chance if *SeaWolf* caught fire. Some would...some could jump overboard and swim till boats picked them up. Others would die as half the men he was sure had never learned to swim. *It was a hellish choice, he thought, drown or burn. I’d rather drown.*

“What!”

Damme, I must have been thinking aloud, Gabe thought, then said, “I’m sorry, what did you say Mr. Jackson?”

“I was saying sir we’re going to be cutting it close, there’s not much room for error.”

The bang...bang...from forward distracted Gabe for a moment. Druett had the bow chasers firing but the **BOOM...BOOM...**continued from the flagship.



“Get the grapples ready, Mr. Jackson. Put as big a line on them as will feed through the eye. Then have the “bitter” ends tied off, so that alls ready if we are able to affect a tow.”

“Aye, captain.”

“Mr. Jackson make sure you’ve got your best men ready to heave the grapples. Their mind must be on the throw and not on the heat from the fireship.”

“Aye, captain. I’ll be heaving one myself.”

Jackson was a big man and had risen from the ranks to become first lieutenant. There was no doubt in Gabe’s mind that with him leading the men, the heaves would be well timed and well placed. *No, Gabe thought. No worries about the first lieutenant getting the job done.*

Gabe glanced at his watch. It seemed like hours ago he’d been awakened from a dream and placed into a nightmare but in truth it had only been minutes. *SeaWolf* was now slicing through the water on a collision course with the fireship. It was now a blazing inferno. *A blazing inferno not unlike the fires of hell*, Gabe thought, headed directly toward the flagship.

The wind blew at the flames and sparks filled the night air as a popping and cracking sound was now easily heard. The flames rapidly spread consuming all in its path, the deck, where the fire was started, the mast, the riggings and now the sails were ablaze. All of which created an intense heat.

No wonder the men had fear on their faces as apprehensively they carried out their duties. The ships were now close enough that Gabe could see two men going over the side of the fireship into a small boat they had been towing. One of the men made it into the boat but the second man's clothes were suddenly on fire and Gabe thought he could hear the man's screams as he dove into the water.

"That one ain't likely to start any more fires," Dagan volunteered.

"Aye," Gabe replied, his thoughts returning to whether he'd rather die from drowning or from burning. At that moment he felt wetness on his shoulder as water dripped down from above.

Seeing Gabe's look, Dagan said, "You told them to soak the sails."

"Hopefully they stay soaked," Gabe responded. As he continued forward he thought, *I hope it's enough.*

Suddenly it dawned on Gabe the flagship had stopped firing. Not only had it stopped firing but men had lined the deck shouting encouragement. Looking up Gabe thought he could see the admiral.

"They're cheering us on," Gunnells said as Gabe approached.

We're closing fast now, did we judge it right, should we bring her up a point, Gabe wondered. No, he'd not tell the master his business. Gabe took a few steps

forward. The fire was bright and fairly lit up the sky. He could now feel the intense heat as the two ships closed, one hundred yards...fifty yards.

Damn, Gabe thought, we're going to collide.

“Hold on,” he shouted, everyone hold on.”

No sooner had Gabe gotten the words out of his mouth than a crash came from forward then a cracking sound as timber broke and the bows of the two ships collided and ground together sending a shudder through the ship.

Gabe was thrown to the deck hitting his shoulder and causing a sharp pain to penetrate. A crewman helped him to his feet and as he stood he looked aft and saw Gunnells had put two men on the wheel. *I'm glad he thought about the need to have two men at the helm, Gabe thought, cause I've made a poor showing in that regards.*

From forward Lavery shouted, “The bowsprit is gone.”

A groaning sound came from forward and Gabe hoped it wasn't the mast about to come down, and then he realized it was the two hulls grinding together that caused the sound. Lieutenant Lavery and the bosun had a party forward cutting and hacking at the tangled mess that had the two ships locked together.

With her sails full *SeaWolf* did seem content to stay locked together with the blazing ship and started to slip forward gaining momentum as she did so, and pushing the bow of the fireship to starboard.

“*SeaWolf* doesn't like the heat any better than we do,” Lancaster, the midshipman, volunteered.

It was the first time Gabe had noticed the boy since he'd come on deck and was glad to see that so far he was unhurt. As *SeaWolf* drove forward the bow of the fireship slipped further to starboard.

“Mr. Lancaster.”

“Aye sir.”

“Run aft and give my compliments to the first lieutenant and tell him to be ready, hurry now.”

“Aye, aye sir.”

As the boy scampered away Gabe turned to see the carpenter already had a crew helping Lieutenant Lavery and the bosun clear away the damage from the broken bowsprit. With a few chops the lines holding the dangling timber was cut away and cast over the side which did away with the drag and increased *SeaWolf's* speed. They were in position to grapple now, they had but one shot. If they missed the chance the flagship would burn.

“Grappels away Mr. Jackson,” Gabe ordered.

“Heave men,” Jackson bellowed. “A guinea for every grapnel that hooks.”

Gabe watched as the grapnels flew through the air. Not a miss. *What luck*, Gabe thought.

Now the slack was playing out. Would the lines hold Gabe wondered? Would they be able to affect a tow?

Snap! The first line parted creating a sick feeling to enter Gabe's stomach. It was then *SeaWolf* slowed almost to a halt, like a great anchor was on her. The other lines were holding...so far.

“Her bows turning,” Jackson shouted, “We’re bringing her around.”

Satisfaction now replaced the sickness Gabe had felt only a moment or two ago.

“Mr. Gunnells, would you be so kind as to bring us up a point please?”

“Aye, cap’n, up a point.”

“Fire, fire forward.”

Gabe looked at the fiery remnant of a sail that had landed near the bow chaser.

Lieutenant Lavery and a group of men were working frantically to put out the flames.

Hopefully the gunpowder used to fire the bow chasers had been used up or properly taken care of otherwise there might be two ships ablaze instead of the one.

Feeling the deck rumble beneath his feet Gabe could tell they were picking up speed. So far they were successful in creating the tow. He could still feel the intense heat coming from the fireship. Now fiery remnants of the fireship’s sails were filling the air blowing in several directions. Gabe could also hear the hiss as debris hit the water which extinguished the flames. How long would it be before the grapnel lines were burned into?

“Mr. Gunnells.”

“Aye, cap’n.”

“Is the wind still off the shore?”

“Aye, cap’n, almost directly astern.”

“Very well, now steer a course to take us out of the harbour. We’ll keep that course until the tow lines part.”

“Aye cap’n.”

“Looks like we did it captain.” This was from Jackson who looked dark and sooty.

“Yes, so far Dagan’s lady luck has held.”

BOOM...BOOM...

“What the hell?” Jackson cursed.

“We’re being fired on sir,” Lavery volunteered. “Probably the whoresons that set the fireship into action.”

“Aye,” Gabe replied. “They were probably standing off to see the results of their deeds.”

“A bit disappointed I’d say,” Lavery said.

BOOM...BOOM...

“No hits as of yet but that last one was close enough to rock *SeaWolf*.”

“Did anyone see where the shots came from?”

“Aye,” this from Dagan. “They’re off the larboard bow.”

“Mr. Lavery.”

“Aye, captain.”

“Let’s load and run out the larboard guns. Don’t wait for my order. You see a flash you let loose.”

“Aye, captain, we’ll give `em what for.”

Snap...Snap...

Two more of the tow lines parted. Only three lines left.

BOOM...BOOM...

This time a ball hit amidship plowing its way through the line of men in the bucket brigade and coming to a stop as it hit one of the cannons on the starboard side.

BOOM...BOOM...BOOM...

Gabe felt *SeaWolf's* deck shudder as one after another of her larboard guns were fired, flames leaping out of the mouth of each cannon scorching the night air. Did they score a hit? *There was no real way to know but the enemy will know we're ready*, Gabe thought.

After several minutes the night remained quiet except for the hissing sound from the fireship which was now completely engulfed in flames. The heat was blistering *SeaWolf's* paint and making it difficult for the men to carry on. Smoke drifted forward with the wind, burning one's eyes and causing men to cough and gasp for breath as smoke filled their lungs.

Snap...Snap...Snap...

"There goes the tow lines," Jackson reported.

"Aye," Gabe replied, "Prepare to come about, then Mr. Gunnells take us back to our anchorage."

"Aye, cap'n," the old master replied. He too was relieved and glad to be away from the burning hell that had once been a ship.

"Mr. Lavery."

"Aye, captain."

"We're about to come about. When we do so, I want every gun doubled-shotted and fired into the fireship at the water line. I want her sunk."

"Aye, cap'n. We run off the other rogue for you and now we'll sink this bugger."

Lieutenant Lavery was good as his word. As *SeaWolf* came about the cannons fired and ball after ball poured into the fireship until she listed to starboard then sank, creating a sizzling sound as the dark waters quenched the inferno. The distinct smell of burning wood and tar still filled the air and looking about his crew Gabe couldn't find a single person who was not blackened by the smoke and debris from the flaming fireship.

What a crew, he thought. To be awakened from a dead sleep only to face a burning hell and succeed in conquering the demon in a matter of minutes. Well, they'd enjoy a double tot once they anchored. They'd put the ship back to order on the morrow.

As *SeaWolf* made her way back toward her anchorage the flagship fired a salute in honour of their deed. Cheers filled the air from men who lined up against the rails.

"The flagship has got a signal flying, sir," Lancaster informed Gabe.

"Am I to guess? Tell me what does it say lad?"

The smiling youth replied, "Two words, captain. Well done."

"Acknowledge the signal, Mr. Lancaster."

"Mr. Jackson."

"Aye, captain."

"Am I to understand you owe six guineas to the men heaving the grapnel?"

"Nay, captain. I was speaking on your behalf so it is you I'm thinking owes the debt."

"Me," Gabe said somewhat sarcastically.

"Aye, captain, but I'm betting the admiral will cover the debt as you saved his flagship."

