

Prelude

On the high rolling seas, two 3 or 4 or 5-masted ships, not sure—one a warship, the other a merchant ship—are some distance from each other, the warship attempting to hail the merchant ship. We hear the warship's bison and boson and their respective distorted exhortations for the merchant ship to stop. CAPTAIN VEER and LIEUTENANTS RUDY, NAPIER, and VISCOUNT are on the bridge sizing up the situation.

VEER. Strange to see a merchant ship in a war zone, wouldn't you say, Rudy?

RUDY. Indeed, Sir.

VEER. Did you get the ship's name, Rudy?

RUDY, *looking through his spyglass*. I believe it is called *H.M.S. Omen*, Sir. Though, I'm not sure. I don't know.

VEER. What do you mean, 'You don't know'? It is or isn't it? On sea, in times of war, in life, we must know what is or isn't. Guesswork is for the possum who can't decide to sleep or scurry. We must know, for we are not possum.

NAPIER, *having grabbed Rudy's spyglass*. O, Sir. I think what he means is that the letter before the 'O' in 'Omen' is obscured, maybe—maybe not.

VEER. You're certain?

NAPIER. Yes, Sir. I think so.

VEER. Very well. *The Omen*. 'Tis a strange name for a merchant ship. Nevertheless, on sea, in times of war, or in life, always, we must realize, or know, man to man, that we are sometimes possibly undermanned. 'Tis our station to impress others from our sister ships, merchant or dingy, and their crew, scoundrels or angels, in service to the Crown, to fight the French, to live or to die, or do so by trying to do so, whatever. *Rudy blows his nose into a finely embroidered Irish doily*. When is teatime, Mister Viscount?

VISCOUNT. Soon, Sir.

VEER. Very good. Carry on. Let me know when you catch *The Omen*.

RUDY. Sir, they have not let slack their sails.

NAPIER. It appears they are making a run for it, Sir.

VEER. That does not surprise me. I may know, or guess to know, the master of that ship. If I'm right, he will not surrender his crew easily. While he's not a drunk from the Old Bailey, he has a soft spot for those who skip the spar, for they are those who know the sea and scurry to trifle not with the bilge rat, right Napier?

NAPIER. Something to that effect, Sir.

VISCOUNT. What shall we do, Sir?

VEER. Fire a shot across her bow.

NAPIER. Sir, she's some distance away. We'll fall short. She'll laugh at our attempt.

VEER. Oh, you see that, Napier? Laugh, you say? Ha! We don't want to sink her; we just want to warn her.

VISCOUNT. Let me remind you both that our canons are new and untested.

VEER. Test them we may, we will, my good lieutenants. New canons parry not with imaginary distances, men. Fire at will.

RUDY. Across the bow, Sir?

VEER. It matters not, since we are 'so far away.' Ha!

VISCOUNT. But, Sir...

VEER, *interrupting*. Let me remind you that on sea, in times of war, in life, we fire canons because we fight, not because we fire canons. So...enough. Fire at will!

Veer's order echoes through command until the canon is fired. The officers follow the trajectory of the shot until it reaches its destination. The expressions on their faces tell the story.

VEER. Hmm. Right. Let me know when it's teatime.

RUDY, *aghast*. Captain Veer, Sir. We blew a hole right in the center of her hull!

NAPIER. The ship...the ship...she's sinking, Sir.

GUNNER, *offstage*. Sir! Mons Meg! Them's thar new canons is something else, Captain.

VEER. I can see that, Mr. Gunner. Indeed. Do you think I'm blind? On sea, in times of war, in life, always, a captain that cannot see is doomed to make a calliope of mistakes. But I see. Indeed. And who is laughing now? Ha! Possum, indeed!

SYKES, *under his breath, offstage*. You knob gobbler! And it's 'Opossum' not 'Possum'!

RUDY. Sir, what is that sound coming from *The Omen*?

NAPIER. Rudy, my good man, they are obviously shrieking in fear of their imminent deaths by drowning, uttering their last prayers of irresolute despair.

RUDY. We should beat to the windward, Sir, and rescue them. Impress them all. They'd be thankful. Maybe there's a good cook aboard.

VEER. Gentlemen, that is not the sound of men shrieking in fear, as Napier so wistfully, yet ably describes. They are cheering.

RUDY. Cheering, Sir?

VEER. Yes, I'm afraid. They are delighted to drown, so much more are they looking forward to death than to serving on this vessel of war and for the glory of the Crown. Their laughter pays out in coin to their own oblivion. They relish their doom and descend as happy charlatans to hoist a lung full of sea salt to Poseidon's feast. Shark bait, my dear fellows. On sea, in time of...

VISCOUNT. Look Sir! There is a sailor swimming to us. A survivor!

VEER. I see, Lieutenant.

VISCOUNT. He is yelling something, Sir. I can't quite make it out.

RUDY. Pardon, my good lieutenant. He's not yelling. I think he's singing.

NAPIER. Singing? What's he singing?

VEER. Let's still our stentorian voices and hear him sing atop the waves, shall we?

LIEUTENANTS. Very good, Sir!

SWIMMING, SINGING SAILOR, *at first, from a distance, then getting louder:*

SONG: ***You Must Be Captain Veer*** (Swimmin', Singin' Sailor)

*"You shall not drown," me captain cries
"Billy, don't drown for me
Swim to yonder war ship there
For drowning's not for thee."*

*He says, "that war is nasty stuff
It's not like selling tea"
He says, "that war's not good enough"
For men as good as me.*

*I says, "I'm just a regular jack"
He says, "Oh no, you're not
You are a man with many friends
But mankind's not your lot."
I says, "My captain, if that is true
Then where do I belong?"
He says, "Not here on this sinking ship
Ye shou'd be dancin' n' singin' songs."*

*So goodbye, good ship, Roy-al Gomen
I'm sor'ry to see you go.
Not sorry as you, nor skip, nor crew
For you all be drownin' so.*

*So here I am, help me aboard
I think I need a beer,
A bath, some sleep, a lobster roll
You must be Captain Veer.*

ALL except Veer:

You must be Captain Veer!!!