

Chapter 2

Captain Braden staggered into the infirmary once again, but this time he did not appear to be able to go anywhere else. Having dutifully gone back to the top deck during the storm to lead his crew, he now retreated to a sick bed. The purple splotches appearing on his neck and chest were a grisly omen of disease unchecked. His fever was rising, as was his now nearly complete delirium. Barking orders to no one in particular, he seemed convinced that the ship was going down. I assured him that the storm, which had so frightened us, was over, and that we would soon be seeing the light of dawn. "Not so, surgeon Greene," he said, "this ship is in trouble. Our mainsail was torn before we could haul it down during the storm, and repairs will take some time. We are drifting toward Spanish waters and the pirates who wait there. We must be preparing straightaway for a fight!"

With those words he slipped out of consciousness. Thankfully, the rest of the crew had headed to the rum supply for a dose of cheer to celebrate the end of the storm. I sensed that the storm was really about to begin if Captain Braden were unable to lead the ship. Judson North, the second in command, was an able man, a fighting commander who could not really lead a crew in a time of peace. His anger always seemed just below the surface, and his face seemed to reflect it. He rarely smiled, and rarely looked a person in the eye. He seemed to be able only to rise to command when he was in a fight. In the midst of a fight with a French frigate or a buccaneer galleon, he would be in his glory. Indeed, he had received the nickname "Bloody North" for a victory over a privateer in the Indian Ocean. He had seized the vanquished ship and personally saw to it that each pirate's throat was slit before they were heaved overboard. Mr. North, it appears, did not care for prisoners. However, taking charge of a group of sailors such as we had, a few grizzled, war-seasoned veterans and a larger number of raw young seamen new to the rigors of sea life, was more than he was built for.

He was not disciplined himself, nor could he impose discipline on others. I went to see Mr. North after I checked on Captain Braden. Captain Braden was breathing steadily now, and appeared to be sleeping. Whether he was sleeping or was in a coma, I could not tell, but I knew that Mr. North needed to be apprised of the situation. Mr. North was calm upon hearing the news of Captain Braden. "Thank you, Dr. Greene, for your information about the Captain," he said. "I will be taking command of the Intrepid until the Captain is able to resume his duties."

"Very well," I replied. "I will keep you informed of the Captain's condition." I was not convinced that the Captain would recover, nor could I stifle my growing concern over the symptoms that the Captain presented. "Could it be the plague?" I asked myself. "Could it be anything else?" I reasoned. God save us if it were the plague, for we would all surely be doomed. Even if the plague did not kill us, we could never be received in any port if word got out that plague was on board. Thankfully, no other man on board showed symptoms. Maybe the case was confined to the Captain. Maybe it really was not the plague. As I wrestled these things in my mind, Mr. Shepherd came into my quarters. "Good morning, Dr. Greene," Shepherd said. "I see that Captain Braden has taken ill and is at the infirmary." "That is where you should be, Mr. Shepherd," I replied. "You still have a nasty lump on your head, and I have not had the chance to give you a thorough examination." "Dr. Greene," said Shepherd, "I am not the patient you should

be worried about. I saw Captain Braden, and I fear that he has the symptoms of the plague," he said almost calmly.

I was amazed by his observation, and also shaken by what sounded like a second opinion of my diagnosis. "Are you a physician?" I asked. "I am," he replied. I did not know whether to be relieved or frightened. If Mr. Shepherd was a physician, his observation was much more valid, and would confirm my worst fears. "I thought you did not remember anything of your past?" I said. Shepherd answered, "I do not recall how I got here, but I do remember my profession. I am a physician." "You must not tell anyone of your opinion about Captain Braden," I said. "If the crew hears that he may have the plague, we will have panic on this ship. They have already been through enough this past day." "I would never tell anyone else about this," he said. "The crew would hardly believe me anyway, Dr. Greene. They would want to throw me overboard for such a statement. In fact, I think they would like to cast me off anyway. They must believe that I am bad luck."

Mr. Shepherd – Dr. Shepherd, if you please – was quite perceptive of the situation he faced. Indeed, he hardly seemed disturbed by the fact that he was not a welcome part of the ship's crew. Perhaps he had been in this situation before. Perhaps Pratt, God forbid, had been right about Shepherd. "I have no time to worry about how you are received on this ship, Dr. Shepherd," I said. "I am very worried about Captain Braden, and even more worried about this ship." "Yes," replied Shepherd, "you have very good reason to worry, but what we need is proper action. Worry will not add a thing to this situation." "You are a physician," I replied, "What is your opinion of how to proceed?"

"Well," he said, "the first thing I do in such cases is pray." I noted that he was a man of faith. A good thing, to be sure, but out of place on a ship full of hard-living men, many of whom had never seen the inside of a church. "Fine," I said. "Pray about what to do, and pray that word does not get out about Captain Braden. Maybe God will bless us with only one case of the plague."

Dr. Shepherd went off to his bed in the infirmary, having no other place to call his own, and he bowed down, evidently in prayer. I went over to Captain Braden to check on his condition, which seemed to have gotten worse. He had slipped into a coma, as I was unable to rouse him despite vigorous efforts to do so. We would be losing the Captain soon. Perhaps Shepherd was right to pray, for surely we would need more help than we presently had available.

The sun was now beginning to rise, a beautiful scene that belied the terrible weather of just hours before. The ship had sustained some damage to the mainsail, as the Captain had noted even in his delirium. The *Intrepid* had managed to come through the storm otherwise relatively unscathed, however, and the crew was already working on repair of the mainsail. Mr. North had assumed command, and the crew at this time seemed to be responding well. "How is Captain Braden, Doctor Greene?" yelled seaman Samuels. "He is resting well right now," I lied. Samuels nodded and mumbled something to several men nearby. They seemed satisfied at his report. Mr. North, however, was restless as he bustled along the deck inspecting the work. He wanted the repairs done quickly so as not to be vulnerable to attack. He was convinced that we were heading straight for the pirates who plied the coast off Spain. Those pirates had the protection of the

Spanish fleet as long as they preyed upon only English or Dutch ships. Catholic Spain felt no need to protect the heathens of England and the Low Countries.

Indeed, Mr. North would just as soon be going to battle as leading the *Intrepid* back to England from a routine cruise – no glory in that. He needed the smell of powder and the clash of iron to feel like a real leader of men. The repair work was interrupted by the report of Mr. Kent from the lookout nest. Glass still in hand, Kent screamed out, "There's a ship to the east; I cannot make out who she is!" Kent was looking into the sun, and many of the crew were not sure he was really seeing another ship. Surely the sun was blinding him, and giving him an illusion, not an uncommon occurrence. Mr. North asked him to look away for a few moments and resume his watch. Kent complied, and a few minutes later he yelled again, "I see a ship. I cannot tell her colors. It looks like she is headed north."

Mr. North responded immediately, "Turn to port." That put us on course due east, toward the unknown ship. Surely, Mr. North was hoping for some action. The crew was starting to buzz. Most of them had not been in combat, and they might be getting a chance for it now. The mainsail was not yet completely repaired, but the rest of the *Intrepid* was seemingly ready for action. As we turned to port, we could see the brilliant sunlight glare off the calm sea. There was a slight breeze from the west, which quickly picked up our speed. The tranquil sea and deep blue sky behind us was a picture of calm, but everything else about the morning had taken on an air of excitement. The unknown vessel toward which we sailed was still not visible from my vantage point. I began to think of Mr. North's rash decision to pursue this ghost. He did not hesitate for a second to look for a fight, and I was sure that he would be deeply disappointed if we could not engage this ship in action. This was his chance to lead the ship the only way he knew how.

Soon we began to make out signs of a ship in the distance. It was indeed heading north, as Mr. Kent had noted. I decided to slip below to check on the Captain and Dr. Shepherd. I saw Dr. Shepherd sitting next to Captain Braden's bed, applying something to his forehead. Captain Braden began to stir, and he started to respond to Dr. Shepherd. "Dr. Shepherd, are you treating my patient?" I called. "Dr. Greene," replied Shepherd, "I thought that you had asked for my assistance. Please forgive me if I have overstepped my bounds." "He seems to be better. What did you do?" I asked. I was not really upset over Shepherd's assistance; I was more curious that he would expose himself to a man with the plague for whom he was not responsible. As ship's surgeon, I was the one who was to take such risks, not a stranger – especially one so recently injured, and one whom the crew would not accept.

This man was different indeed. "His fever seems to be down, and his delirium is gone. He is still very ill, though, and I am quite certain that this illness is the plague," Shepherd replied. I came near to talk to Captain Braden. His neck was swollen, and he was barely able to speak above a whisper, but he seemed intent on asking me about the welfare of the ship. I told him that Mr. North was in command until he could return, fully knowing that the captain would not return to command the *Intrepid*. I told the Captain that he needed his rest, and I withdrew to my quarters with Dr. Shepherd. "What did you administer to the Captain?" I asked. "I just anointed him with oil," replied Shepherd. "I had also fed him a bit of bread I had with me in my sack. I think the bread was stale, and maybe had a bit of mold on it, but that will certainly not hurt him. He told

me that he was hungry, and I wanted to be sure to respond. That was so encouraging that I wanted to get him some food quickly. My sack was available, and..."

Mr. Shepherd seemed apologetic about feeding the Captain. I was quite certain that the bread did not hurt him. Besides, if the Captain had the plague, he would die no matter what we did. A little compassion was a good thing to have in any case. The *Intrepid* was heading straight for a confrontation with a pirate ship. Mr. North was having the ship move full speed to the conflict. The pirate ship was now in view, but was still at a great distance. The crew was preparing for battle.

The *Intrepid* was equipped with thirty-two cannon, sixteen on each side. As the seamen went below decks to load shot and black powder for the gunners, they found the horrible disarray left by the storm. Food, cannon balls, and black powder sacks were strewn from bow to stern. Water swirled below decks, spoiling a fair amount of the ship's provisions and weaponry. This ship was not really prepared for a fight, but Mr. North would not be aware of this problem until it was too late. The gunners were securing their cannon to the ship in preparation for battle. English gunners were the best trained in the world, and were able to fire their cannon at least twice within a five-minute period, often three times. Given the number of cannon on the *Intrepid*, the ship could produce steady volleys of fire at the interval of a shot every ten seconds.

The gunners had a supply of powder and shot stored in the magazine deck, and they were not aware of the problem below. They were confident that they could perform well under fire. They also knew that pirates wanted to board the ship, relying on cutting in close to the vessel under attack, boarding her, and utilizing their brutal hand fighting tactics to subdue the enemy. These gunners would let nothing of that sort happen to the *Intrepid*.

The vessel appeared to be a captured Dutch ship. It flew no colors, a pretty sure sign that it was a captured ship, likely pirates, perhaps from the Barbary Coast. As it came into closer sight it appeared that the pirates wanted nothing to do with a fight with a British warship. Merchant vessels were one thing, but fighting ships were not a desired target of these brigands.

Mr. North would have none of a retreat, neither his own nor that of his enemy. He called for his sailors to pursue their victim, and indeed they did; for the next three hours they pursued the pirate ship. Strangely, it seemed that the pirates were playing cat and mouse with us. They would seem to slow down, and then they would make a run to stay out of our cannon's range. Mr. North was becoming enraged at the cowardice of these pirates, these dregs of the seagoing world. He would shout and curse at them, as would the rest of the crew, taking his lead.

By mid-afternoon the *Intrepid's* crew was tired and hungry, having chased this elusive enemy for much of the day. The nerves of the crew were getting raw, and disputes arose about why this chase was even underway. As tempers flared, Mr. North knew only how to attack. He threatened those malcontents who were so cowardly as to complain with a time in chains before being hanged.

As these little exchanges were taking place on the *Intrepid*, Mr. Conner, who was now in the lookout position, shouted an ominous warning, "Ships to starboard, ships to starboard!" Two

Spanish warships were indeed heading for the *Intrepid's* right flank. Just as they were spotted, Mr. Kent yelled from the bow, "The pirates are turning toward us!" Mr. North suddenly realized that this was no coincidence – he had fallen into the trap set by the pirate ship. The *Intrepid* was no longer the pursuer; she was the pursued. Sleek and fast as the *Intrepid* was, she was slowed by the incomplete repair of the mainsail.

The *Intrepid* was trapped. She could try to make a run west and hope that the Spaniards would not pursue further. During the storm and the pursuit of the pirates, the *Intrepid* had come within one hundred miles of the Spanish coast – far from her original cruise plan. In his desire to make a fight, Mr. North had neglected to take note of his position. England and Spain were not in the midst of a declared war, but an English warship so close to Spain was enough to justify an attack from the Spaniards. The pirates would simply be glad to seize the vessel for their own use. Those new cannon and provisions, not to mention the price that might be gotten for these sailors as seamen to be impressed into a foreign navy, made for great motivation for the pursuers. The fight was on.

Chapter 3

North decided to fight. The pirate vessel was now bearing down on the *Intrepid*, and Mr. North decided to close the distance quickly. He would engage the pirate ship as quickly as possible, believing that the Spaniards would only be interested in a fight after the pirates did some damage. Maybe the Spanish would not even move in on the action at all unless they saw that the *Intrepid* was in trouble. North felt that the Spaniards were opportunists, and may not be committed to bloodshed. Mr. North was committed to the fight; that was sure.

As the *Intrepid* sped toward the pirates, Mr. Pratt delivered the news to Mr. North that much of the powder had been fouled during the storm. The *Intrepid* would be going into the battle with only half her available amount of black powder. North did not flinch upon hearing the news. He almost seemed to welcome the adversity, perhaps to add to his legend after the battle that he had won despite a grievous handicap. Mr. North, to be sure, was not lacking in confidence, though I suspected he was lacking good sense at times. But North's confidence and decisiveness seemed to have a galvanizing effect on the crew. They seemed to share his confidence in a quick victory despite the circumstances.

"We are closing on them, Mr. North," yelled Conner from atop the mast. "It is a Dutch frigate with twenty-four guns." North sent word to his gunners to fire a broadside as soon as they heard a musket fire. First Officer Swailes stood by North's side with a loaded musket. This served as the signal to fire, and was also a bit of protection for North if the fighting became close enough for small arms fire. In pirate fights, that was usually the case. The pirates came close enough now that North could almost hear the clamor and shouting on their ship. As North had hoped, the Spaniards had not yet committed to the fight. They were drawing closer, but had not made a run on the *Intrepid*. If the *Intrepid* could knock out the pirates quickly and decisively, he may not have to face the Spaniards. He would not have enough powder to fight them in any case. The

musket shot rang out, and immediately the *Intrepid's* gunners let loose with a broadside of eight cannon, followed seconds later by another eight shots.

The sound of cracking timber split the air as the *Intrepid's* gunners found their mark on the enemy ship's mast. Cursing could now be heard clearly from the pirate vessel as they scrambled to avoid the falling tower of sail. The pirate gunners were now firing their own broadside, and cannon balls whistled through the air. The *Intrepid's* gunners continued their fire as Mr. North led the ship away from the pirate vessel's approach.

Taking advantage of the *Intrepid's* easier maneuverability, Mr. North pulled the *Intrepid* away from the enemy ship and lined up his starboard side on the stern of the pirates. The pirate ship, disabled by the first burst of fire, which had split the mast, had trouble responding to the *Intrepid's* move. The *Intrepid's* gunners continued their murderous fire on the floundering enemy. Cannon balls raked the stern of the pirate ship, smashing through the rigging of the mizzenmast. The enemy, now reeling, could not maneuver enough to turn for a good shot at the *Intrepid*.

Mr. North burned in his soul to finish off the despised enemy ship, which lay helpless before him, but he turned the *Intrepid* quickly to the north, hoping to avoid the Spanish ships that lurked nearby. He knew that an engagement with them would be a disaster given the *Intrepid's* powder shortage. As Mr. North had hoped, the Spanish ships did not pursue. Perhaps they were intimidated by the quick work the *Intrepid* made of the hapless pirates. More likely, it was as North had suspected – the Spanish were only interested in a fight already won, or one with a very disabled opponent. Neither situation being the case, the Spaniards turned east, presumably heading toward home.

The helpless pirate ship, now drifting aimlessly, was left to its own fate, a fitting conclusion to its voyage. I went below to tend to the wounded. Captain Braden seemed to be sleeping peacefully. I was encouraged by this, feeling that his death might be without the misery usually attendant with the plague. As I walked by the Captain, I saw two gunners dragging in one of their companions. The poor fellow was bleeding heavily from his right leg. As I looked closer, I saw a large piece of wood protruding from the blood-soaked leggings he wore. The most ghastly injuries of such naval encounters were just that – splinters of wood blasted from the ship flying into the bodies of helpless gunners.

As they lay him down, his friends begged me to save his leg. "Gentlemen," I said, "I will be most fortunate to be able to save his life. He will be lucky if he leaves this ship with one leg." The victim was delirious with pain. The splinter of wood was deep in his thigh, probably not through to the back of his leg, but close, I suspected. I asked the steward to fetch a large draught of rum for the wounded man, Mr. Kelley.

Sean Kelley was a fairly large man, an experienced sailor despite his relative youth. I suspected him to be in his early thirties. Kelley was thirsty from the loss of blood, and he drank deeply from the cup offered to him. As I waited for the rum to start its numbing work, I heard Dr. Shepherd call out to me. "Dr. Greene, if I may be of some help," he said. "Yes, Dr. Shepherd," I

said, "I could use some help holding him down, but in your weakened condition, I suspect you could be of more use to me in assisting me with a knife on that leg."

Some of the crew asked why I called the stranger Shepherd "Dr. Shepherd." "He is a doctor by training," I replied, "and if he can be of help to your mate, I want him to help." "He better be good, or we can throw him back into his little boat!" snorted Kent. "Maybe that's why he was thrown off the other ship!" said Mr. Merck.

"Before you use the knife, I think it would be good to use this approach I have used before in such cases," Shepherd said. Shepherd took a length of cord and proceeded to tie it around Kelley's thigh, above the site of the dreadful injury. Kelley screamed in pain. "Get him off of me!" Kelley screamed. Before I could respond, Shepherd said, "I know it hurts terribly, but this will save your life." Kelley looked at me, expecting me to stop the odd procedure. "Give him more rum," I ordered, "and give him a cloth to bite on."

Kelley gobbled another large draught of rum, and was then given a thick towel to bite down on. Slowly he settled down on the pallet. Perhaps the rum was starting to work or the pain and loss of blood was getting to him. I was puzzled by the work Shepherd was doing. Not only did he tighten the cord by hand, he had a stick to help twist the cord very tightly on Kelley's leg. I noticed that the blood flow had stopped as I stripped away Kelley's leggings. I poured water over the wound to clear away the blood, and I saw the depth of the wood in the wound. I told Shepherd that I was preparing to remove the wood, but he stopped me. "Dr. Greene," he said calmly, "I believe that leaving it in a bit longer might be good. It is helping to stop the bleeding by being in place. It will also help if we pour rum into the wound. It will help to keep it clean."

The men standing by us began to react to this odd suggestion by Mr. Shepherd. "You are going to pour rum on this man?" they said in disbelief. "Get the splinter out of his leg. That will help him!" they screamed. "Dr. Greene, who is the surgeon on this ship, you or this madman we picked up?" said Mr. Kent. "Get Captain North," Kent yelled. "He will put a stop to this nonsense!"

I was fascinated with the results I was seeing from Mr. Shepherd's actions. I also believed that Mr. Kent and the others were less interested in maintaining my authority as ship's surgeon than in seeing Mr. Shepherd discredited and thrown off the ship.

"I will make the decisions about the medical care of this crew!" I said sternly to Kent. "And I do not need you or Mr. North to interfere. Dr. Shepherd is trying a new medical procedure which seems to be effective." I really do not know why I defended the actions of Shepherd as actively as I did. I barely knew the man, and I certainly did not know of this procedure he was doing. But there was something about the demeanor of the man, his compassion toward people he did not know – indeed toward people who detested him – that I found engaging. So I found myself defending him at my own possible peril. Kelley was more subdued now, and I decided to try to let him rest as the alcohol was taking effect. Surely I would need to remove this splinter of wood, which measured about nine inches long and almost two inches wide. The cut of my scalpel into the thick muscle of Kelley's thigh would require force, and it would require several men to hold him down, as the pain would break through the sedation of the alcohol.

It was then that Dr. Shepherd made another suggestion. “Dr. Greene,” he said, “may we have some privacy with Mr. Kelley? I fear that these men around us are a distraction.” Dr. Shepherd said this calmly and without anger, but the suggestion was met with great anger from the several men gathered around us. They had, of course, great interest in the welfare of Kelley, a fellow gunner and shipmate. He had apparently been the only casualty of the brief conflict with the pirate ship. His gunner’s port had been hit by a pirate cannonball, which had sent splinters of wood flying. Mr. Kelley was the only unfortunate one to be hit and seriously wounded.

I agreed with Dr. Shepherd, even though I had usually wanted several men present in such situations to hold down the unfortunate patient for the inevitable surgery or procedure to be attempted. “Mr. Kent,” I called, “take these men to Mr. North to await his orders.” Kent glared and said, “Captain North had sent us to you to assist with Sean. I am just obeying orders.” “You can assist me best by leaving,” I said. “I will be telling Captain North about this,” mumbled Kent. “God help this ship with a surgeon such as you.” “That will be all, Mr. Kent,” I said.

The crew left with some reluctance, but they followed Kent’s order to report to Mr. North. I turned to Dr. Shepherd and asked his reason for privacy, especially in light of the likelihood of the need for some strong men as assistants. “I do not believe we will need men to hold him down,” replied Shepherd. With that, he knelt directly over Kelley and looked into his eyes and began to speak to him, softly, almost melodically in tone. Shepherd put his hand in front of Kelley’s face, and with his other hand put pressure on a spot just below where he had tied the cord tightly around Kelley’s leg. Kelley’s eyes were fixed straight ahead and began to take a look of distance. He seemed oblivious to our presence almost, although he responded to questions from Shepherd – slowly and calmly. “Dr. Greene, I think you may begin to remove the splinter from Mr. Kelley now. He will be calm, and he will not feel pain from your surgery.”

As Shepherd said the words he seemed to be talking to Kelley and not to me. Kelley’s lack of response to the idea of having his leg cut upon gave me the confidence to begin the surgery without men to hold him down. Dr. Shepherd continued to kneel above Kelley and to talk with him as I took out my scalpel and began to make an incision near the wood splinter. I worked quickly, cutting away as little muscle as I could in order to free the splinter. I was amazed to see how the muscle did not tighten around the splinter as I had seen in other cases such as this. In a few seconds I had secured enough space around the splinter to begin the ordeal of pulling it out of Kelley’s leg. I gave a quick tug and the wood slid out.

It was at this point that I feared that the pain would be unbearable, and that Kelley would violently jerk his leg away, causing damage to me as well as to himself. I removed the splinter cleanly, and with very little loss of blood, although blood poured forth upon the removal of the ghastly spike of wood. Dr. Shepherd advised that I pour more rum into the gaping hole in Kelley’s thigh before I bandaged it. I did as Shepherd advised, and I bound the wound tightly. Shepherd then loosened the cord he had tied above the wound. Kelley’s eyes were still fixed on Shepherd, and then he abruptly fell unconscious – from the pain, I presumed, even though he had not uttered a sound during the surgery.

I was almost too amazed to speak to Shepherd after Kelley passed out. "I have never seen anything like that in all my years as a surgeon! What did you do to Kelley to keep him quiet?" I demanded to know. "How could he endure this surgery without screaming in pain?" "The mind is a powerful thing, Dr. Greene," he said. "There are times that a person can overcome physical pain." Just then Mr. North burst into the infirmary and asked what was going on with Mr. Kelley. "He appears to have survived the surgery well," I noted. With that I picked up the bloody, angry-looking spike of wood that I had removed from Kelley and showed it to North. "I removed this from his thigh with the assistance of Dr. Shepherd," I replied. North mumbled his approval and asked if Kelley would lose his leg. North, too, had seen many such injuries, which had often resulted in loss of the limb. "I do not yet know, sir," I said. "I will know better in the next day or two, but I trust that he will recover and keep the leg as well."

Mr. North left us to tend to our patient. As the thought of this amazing surgery began to sink into my mind, I began to have more concern over Captain Braden, my other patient. Certainly his condition was much more critical to the wellbeing of this crew than anyone suspected, and not just because he was the captain.