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978-1-108-02437-2 - A Narrative of the Battle of St. Vincent

John Drinkwater

Excerpt

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**NARRATIVE**  
**OF THE**  
**BATTLE OF ST. VINCENT,**  
*&c. &c. &c.*

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FROM the statements already given in the Preface, it will be evident that the main object in publishing the original Narrative of the Battle of St. Vincent, was to do honor to Commodore Nelson, who had borne so pre-eminent a share in that celebrated action.

In re-publishing that work, and adding such new matter as it is now intended to do, in the view of increasing its interest, the object is equally to extend, if possible, that gallant hero's renown. To make these additions more intelligible, I shall be obliged to go back to an earlier date, from which I shall give a brief sketch of some public transactions with which Commodore Nelson was connected previous to the 14th of February, 1797.

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Admiral Lord Hood arrived in the Mediterranean at the commencement of the French revolutionary war, in the summer of 1793. The plan of this publication does not lead me to do more than cursorily allude to his Lordship's splendid service in obtaining possession of the French arsenal of Toulon—to the interesting defence of that important fortress against the French republicans—the withdrawal of Lord Hood, with the combined forces, from Toulon, and his Lordship's subsequent occupation of Corsica. Nelson at that time commanded the *Agamemnon*, of sixty-four guns, which formed a part of Lord Hood's fleet. In this ship he was most actively employed, and was charged, amongst other duties, to watch the French garrisons in Corsica, and ultimately, he acted, as is well known, a very distinguished part in the subsequent sieges of the cities of Bastia and Calvi by the British forces. When Corsica became an appendage of the British crown, Nelson was employed in many transactions connected with that island, and thereby ample opportunities were afforded to him of becoming intimately acquainted with Sir Gilbert Elliot, the Viceroy, and with most of the public functionaries acting under his Excellency's government; in which number I had the good fortune to be included.

When the measure for evacuating Corsica was decided upon, and the arrangements were made

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for withdrawing the troops and stores, Nelson had the special charge of superintending the retirement of the Viceroy from Bastia, the seat of government; likewise, the embarkation of the stores and troops of that garrison. It is almost needless to add that he executed this service, which was of no small difficulty, in a manner that marked decision and firmness, as well as superior talents and professional skill. About this time he had been removed from the *Agamemnon* to the command of the *Captain*, of seventy-four guns, and promoted to carry a broad pendant.

On giving up Corsica, the Viceroy had determined to occupy Porto Ferrajo, in the island of Elba, a fortress of considerable strength, where the British army might remain until Government were made acquainted with the position of public affairs in the northern parts of Italy: Commodore Nelson escorted the Viceroy and troops from Bastia to Elba.

When Lord Hood resigned the command of the Mediterranean fleet, he was succeeded by Admiral Hotham, who again, in a short time, was succeeded by Admiral Sir John Jervis.

At the period when the British fleet appeared in the Mediterranean in 1793, Spain was acting in

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union with England against France; but in 1796 she had made an alliance with the French Republic, declaring war against Great Britain: and the expected junction of the French and Spanish fleets, (which afterwards actually took place at Toulon,) was understood to be one of the chief reasons which induced the British Cabinet to abandon Corsica, and to order the British fleet to retire from the Mediterranean.

The Viceroy had been some weeks in possession of Elba, and the British Admiral, after collecting the Levant trade and his distant cruisers, had sailed for Gibraltar, when it occurred to Sir Gilbert that the interval, until he received the reply of Government to his representations respecting the occupation of Porto Ferrajo, might be profitably employed in a visit to the Italian States in amity with Great Britain, to whom he had been, from an early period, accredited. He therefore availed himself of the occasion, to repair to Naples, and subsequently to Rome, and to have a personal communication with those governments regarding the actual position of their affairs, in consequence of Buonaparte's active and successful movements in the north of Italy.

When Sir John Jervis arrived at Gibraltar, he found fresh orders from England, directing him to

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withdraw the British troops from Elba, and orders were immediately given for the execution of this unexpected service, which was entrusted to Nelson. He was ordered to remove his pendant from the Captain of seventy-four guns, to *La Minerve*, a frigate of thirty-eight guns, commanded by Captain George Cockburn, which ship, with another frigate, the *Blanche*, of thirty-two guns, commanded by Captain Preston, was placed under Commodore Nelson's orders, for this special service.

On his passage from Gibraltar to Elba, the Commodore, on the night of the 19th of December, fell in with two Spanish frigates, the largest of which carrying a stern light, he brought to action, and after a very spirited engagement of upwards of two hours, captured her; whilst the *Blanche* was directed to pursue the other frigate, which after a short action submitted. Captain Cockburn, on taking possession of his prize, found her to be the *Santa Sabina*, of forty guns and 286 men, commanded by Don Jacobo Steuart, whose loss in the action was stated by him to be 164 men killed and wounded. The British officers and men detached to secure the *Sabina* had scarcely got on board of her, and the *Minerve* taken her in tow, when the *Minerve* was assailed by a fresh frigate, which, after cutting off her prize, she soon obliged to sheer off; but, at the same time, Captain Cockburn dis-

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covered that three other ships, one of them of the line, were approaching him, and at no great distance. The *Minerve* was now compelled to consult her own safety, which, by good seamanship and address, crippled as she had been in the late fight, was happily effected, although with the painful sacrifice of two of her lieutenants, Culverhouse and Hardy, who, with a sufficient party, had been sent on board the prize. At the moment, the loss of these officers was an occurrence much regretted by both the Commodore and Captain Cockburn ; but eventually, the circumstance proved of very great importance, and amply repaid them for their temporary mortification. The *Blanche* had not taken possession of her prize, when she was obliged to abandon her, and was equally fortunate in making her escape. The loss of the *Minerve* in her two actions, amounted to seven killed and forty-four wounded.

On the 27th of December, Nelson reached Porto Ferrajo. Sir Gilbert Elliot was then absent on his visit to the Italian States, but intelligence of the Commodore's arrival was immediately sent to him. On the return of the Viceroy to Elba, a consultation was held between Sir Gilbert Elliot, Lieutenant-General De Burgh (who commanded the troops,) and Commodore Nelson, respecting the late orders from Government at home, which Nelson had been specially deputed by the Admiral to carry into

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effect. The subject was one of great difficulty, involving many interests, and had of course the most deliberate consideration, the result of which was that, under existing circumstances, it was deemed of paramount importance that the British troops should, notwithstanding those orders, continue in possession of Elba, until his Majesty's Ministers could be fully apprized of the many cogent reasons for that course of proceeding.

This decision, however, only affected General De Burgh and the troops. The naval stores brought away from Corsica were, in pursuance of Sir John Jervis's orders, to be removed immediately from Porto Ferrajo.

Every exertion was now used in completing the repairs of the *Minerve*, and executing the other arrangements connected with the Commodore's early return to Sir John Jervis.

It was highly expedient that Sir Gilbert Elliot should see the British Admiral, if possible, and make known to him the general purport of what he had collected on his late visit to the courts of Naples and Rome; and therefore it was arranged that Sir Gilbert Elliot should embark with Nelson and Captain Cockburn in the *Minerve*. In this frigate, accompanied by the *Romulus*, of thirty-six

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guns, commanded by Captain George Hope, the Commodore proposed to reconnoitre, on his way back, every port of the enemy, French and Spanish, where it was probable he might collect any intelligence regarding the employment of the enemy's naval force, and their equipment, &c. Captain M<sup>r</sup>Namara, in the Southampton frigate, was destined to take charge of the store and hospital ships, Dromedary and Dolphin, and the Dido and Sincere frigates were directed to have under their convoy the twelve naval transports, and any ships that chose to avail themselves of their protection. The two latter divisions had special instructions to take different courses, in order that they might be less embarrassed, should they on their passage fall in with the enemy's fleet—an event then considered as not very unlikely to occur.

With Sir Gilbert Elliot, were embarked in the *Minerve*, Monsieur Pozzo di Borgo, (Secretary of State in Corsica during its connection with Great Britain,) who was now seeking a retreat under British protection, and several members of his Excellency's late Corsican establishment. On board of the *Romulus*, Mr. Hardman, private secretary to the Viceroy, and myself, were embarked.

The three divisions left Porto Ferrajo on the same day, the 29th of January, 1797, and each



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pursued a distinct and separate course for its ultimate destination—viz., the British fleet, at a rendezvous already indicated by the Admiral, not very distant from the western entrance of the Straits of Gibraltar.

Leaving Porto Ferrajo, Commodore Nelson steered directly for Cape Corse, to look into the Gulf of St. Fiorenzo, where report stated that a squadron of the enemy's ships had been lately seen. The intelligence proved groundless—nothing was observed in the gulf. The *Minerve* then stretched over to the coast of France, to reconnoitre the harbour of Toulon, off which the frigates remained two days, although the *Romulus*, on the first of them, had the misfortune to spring her mainmast and bowsprit: six or seven French ships were lying in ordinary, with only one frigate in a state for sea. From Toulon the *Minerve* ran across the Gulf of Lyons for Cape Creuse. Approaching the Spanish coast, both frigates hoisted French colours, but no vessel came out of Barcelona to speak them. Nothing of interest offering in this quarter, the Commodore proceeded to the southward, with the intention of looking into Mahon Harbour, but the wind not serving, he stood along shore to Cape Palos, in order to reconnoitre Carthagená; near that port a large ship was seen under the land, which either did not think the British ships deserving of notice,

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or had other objects in view to induce her not to alter her course.

Looking into the harbour of Carthagena, two frigates only were seen, and all doubt was thereby removed of the Spanish grand fleet being at sea; whether gone to the westward or to join the French ships at Toulon, presented matter for conjecture. The prevailing opinion was in favor of their having gone for Cadiz; therefore the Commodore, after satisfying his curiosity off Carthagena, decided to push on to the westward. A fresh easterly breeze taking the frigates off Cape de Gatt, and every accessible port, in which the enemy could have taken shelter, having been now explored, they stood merrily on towards the Straits. The old Rock was soon in sight, and on the afternoon of the 9th of February, the *Minerve* and *Romulus* anchored off the new mole in the bay of Gibraltar; and, as it singularly chanced, a few hours before their arrival, the Southampton Division from Elba passed the Straits to the westward; and the night following the *Dido* and *Sincere* went through with their charge.

Commodore Nelson now learned that the Spanish grand fleet had passed the Rock to the westward, on Sunday the 5th of February, sending into the bay of Gibraltar three two-deckers and a frigate with supplies for the enemy's lines before Gibraltar: