

Sons of Fortune

Chapter I

THEY HAD NEVER RUN THE BLOCKADE at night before. The air, already crisp with the moonlight, was sharpened with the scent of barley-stubble – she had sailed so close to land. The sea was a dark green pasture, billowing hither and thither beneath the slightest breeze. She spread her full head of sail and nosed lightly through those shimmering waters, alert for the least sign of the blockade. Somewhere out there Sir Henry Morgan and the Terrible Turk lay in wait for her. And in her hold she carried dangerous cargo – the most dangerous cargo of all: the croquet hoop from the middle lawn.

She held it behind her, concealing it as best she could in the folds of her skirts. Up the rose pergola she stole, hugging the safety of the rock shoals to her right. At the bend by the trellis the harbour mouth came into view. Almost there – almost safe.

Caspar Stevenson, well hidden in the rock shoals of the azaleas, watched his young sister's childish manoeuvres with angry contempt. She was just a nuisance in this game. *Blockade* demanded cunning, resource, and boldness; Abigail brought to it nothing but a brazen sort of stupidity – and the most violent temper in creation.

“Let her pass! Let her pass!” he prayed silently toward his brother, Boy (alias Sir Henry Morgan). Once Abigail was safely through to the harbour, the game could be played in earnest.

Boy Stevenson had seen Abigail sneaking along the rose pergola. He waited until he was certain she had dumped her cargo before he challenged. There was a universal conspiracy among the children that Abigail must be allowed to win, for when she lost her tantrums made the game unplayable.

“Ahoy!” he called.

Abigail said nothing.

“You – off the port bow!”

Abigail stopped and put her hands on her hips before she remembered to put them back behind her, pretending she was still in cargo. “Starboard!” she said scornfully.

“Starboard bow.” Boy accepted the correction.

“Beam,” she persevered.

“Prepare to receive boarders. I'm seizing your cargo.”

Abigail gave a screech of triumph and, raising both empty hands above her head, began a very unshiplike dance on the lawn. “Empty! Empty!” she shrieked and cackled.

“Then pass, stranger,” Boy said, turning with relief to resume his patrol.

“I jettisoned my cargo by the azalea – by the cliff. I'm allowed to return and take it in free.”

Boy saw with horror that the Terrible Turk, otherwise Nick Thornton, had come right up to the pergola and was standing in the shade of the azalea. “No, Nick!” he began. “Don't!”

But it was too late. Nick was already holding the abandoned cargo over his head. “Prize!” he cried. “Pri-ize!” He made two descending notes of it.

Abigail's shriek of rage made one long rising note. She hurled herself at Nick, bearing him down though he was almost twice her weight. He recovered quickly, leaping back to his feet and beginning to dance in triumph as she had danced moments earlier. “Spoilsport! Spoilsport!” he taunted and laughed.

Abigail's scream halted every scurrying night creature for a mile around. Boy ran to stop her from attacking Nick; at such moments she had no control of herself. Last year she had nearly bitten off one of Caspar's fingers; the tip of it still had no feeling or power of movement.

But, unpredictable as ever, Abigail went as silent and calm as the night the moment she saw Boy. “It's mine,” she said. “You challenged and lost. Tell him it's mine.”

How he wished he could. “Sorry, Abbie,” he said. “The rules of *Blockade* are clear. Jettisoned cargo is in hazard until ...” Abbie began to pant vehemently. “You should just have said, “I jettisoned,” Boy persisted. “You shouldn't have said where. So Nick was quite within ...”

Her howl of anguish, though less fierce than the earlier scream of rage, was broader and more smothering. In its time it had drowned church organs, railway trains, and German bands. Even as it diminished, as she ran away headlong down the pergola, it held the rest of them rooted to the spot.

Only Abigail's sister Winifred moved. She rose reluctantly from her hiding place between the two clipped box trees and placed herself firmly in the path. The conspiracy was that everyone did their best to let Abbie win, but if the plan came apart, she was not to be allowed to oil off into a tantrum. When Abbie was still a good half dozen yards away, Winifred stepped aside and held out a foot to trip her, knowing well that Abbie was never quite so possessed as to lose all sense of self-interest.

Abigail stopped in time but mimed a greater imbalance than she felt; she glowered at her sister and breathed out great, draughty lungfuls of air.

“Nick's right – you are a spoilsport,” Winifred said.

“I know!” Abigail shouted defiantly.

“You spoil every game when you lose.”

“Of course I do.”

“We don't want you out here.” She could see how fiercely Abbie was fighting her own unruliness. Winifred, pitying as always her young sister's strength of passion, almost relented. Only a memory of the disasters that had followed so many earlier concessions prevented her. “Go to bed,” she said sharply. “Bed's the place for babies.”

Abigail stalked off into the dark shadow of the house, howling a great baleful sound. Before she went in by the garden door the howls ceased and her voice rang out of the dark. “I can't help being born after all you!”

She slammed the door so hard the glass shattered and fell in ringing sherds to the flagstone pathway.

There was a silence. Then Nick said: “An impressive temper!”

“We ought to make her come back and play properly,” said Winifred. “But it would spoil it for you people.”

From across the garden came Caspar's shout: “Start the blockade again!” He had worked his way stealthily back through the shrubbery and up the west pergola so that his shout would reveal none of his tactics for running the blockade.

Within moments Abigail's outburst was forgotten, and five legitimate frigates were seeking again to outwit the two pirates and reach the safety of the harbour.

Caspar was not the only one to have watched these events secretly and at close quarters. The ‘harbour’ was, in fact, a medieval watchtower at one corner of the garden, for the Old Manor had once been well fortified. And on top of the tower, enjoying an evening cigar, stood John Stevenson and Walter Thornton, fathers of the two families whose older members were at play below.

“Such energy!” John said.

Walter, standing beside him, leaning on the rusted iron rail that ran along the parapet at the top of the tower, looked down at the unsuspecting children below, and drew a sharp breath in agreement. John stirred and stretched.

“How do we channel all that energy, eh?” he asked. “They'd wreck the world if we let them.”

Walter looked at him in surprise. “*Channel* it?”

John was equally surprised at Walter's response. “Of course. It's our duty.”

“Oooh ...” Walter sounded dubious. “I think that's a fallacy.”

“You do surprise me.”

“If a youngster knows what he wants, and it's not something criminal or harmful, I'd say a parent's duty begins and ends with paving the way for

him. Only if a child is aimless, surely, do we intervene more purposefully. Otherwise we're just playing God."

His conviction obviously worried John. "Do you really think so?" he asked.

Walter laughed. "An easy thing to do from the Olympian heights of this tower, mind you."

"You have me worried now, Thornton," John said, ignoring Walter's lightheartedness. "No one did any directing for me, it's true. But then I started at the bottom. All directions led upward, I suppose ... Here's the nub of it now: My children are less free than yours. Young John will take over the business, of course, he'll have to. But the others must take up more respectable professions." His laugh was so brief that Walter could not tell whether it was humorous or bitter. John went on: "This family cannot flout Society forever. If anyone is 'playing God,' as you put it, then it's Society, not I."

Without waiting for Walter to reply, he leaned over the parapet, cupped his hands to his mouth, and called "Bed!" to the children below.

Boy and Winifred looked up in astonishment; none of them had known the two fathers were at the top of the tower.

"Have you been up there all along?" Nicholas asked.

"We have," Walter told him.

"Bed," John repeated.

Some of the younger ones began to protest.

"Silence, sir!" Walter called. "Do as you are bid at once." But his eyes were not on any child of his own; they were on Caspar, now clearly visible in the moonlight. Such hate! And in one so young!

Caspar, trembling with passion, held the croquet mallet – his cargo – before him and snapped the handle in two. He narrowly avoided putting out his own eye with the splintered end. Then he, too, turned and headed for the garden door.

"You might have let them finish," Walter said.

John, unwilling to face the truth of it, turned sideways and went over to the outer rampart.

"Good night, Uncle Walter. Good night, Father," Caspar called when he reached the door. His voice was now calm, even moderate. The other children joined in and John's guilt was drowned in a chorus of farewells.

"Didn't you notice Caspar in the shrubbery?" Walter asked. "He was almost to safety."

"It was but a game," John said. "And Caspar's anger is only a spark. He just hates being thwarted." He looked at the clearing sky. "It will grow even colder soon. We could have a frost." He only half offered this as a reason for having cheated Caspar of his prize.

The clouds above, which had allowed the moon to peer fitfully down, were now breaking into ragged wisps. The whole eastern half of the sky was clear and all the land beneath was soaked in the cold moonlight. Silver-blue trees and hedgerows thrust up from shadows of deepest purple. The two men stood as it were in an arbour, canopied with thin cloud that muted the contrasts of light and shade. They watched the carpet of cold light come sidling toward them over the fields and hollows. Now that the children had gone, the night silence was profound.

“You were talking about Society,” Walter reminded John.

“Aye. We have little to do with it, of course. Work. The estates. Nora's own businesses ...”

“Quite,” Walter said.

“And if the purpose of life is to be useful, to serve God and one's country, to be a good steward of ... all that is entrusted to you ... and so forth ...”

“Quite,” Walter said again.

“Mind you, Nora does hunt. She has friends there. Lord Wyatt. Lord David Hardwick. The Marquis of Whitesands. But they are *friends*. And that is very different from the broad and shallow set of mere acquaintances we call Society.”

Walter realized he could not say ‘quite’ yet again.

“No,” John continued, “Society and we ...” He could not seem to finish the sentence.

“Are you trying to say that people are snubbing you?”

“Oh, all the time. Lord Middleton's” – he pointed north, for the Middleton Hunt Kennels were just a few miles away over the brow of the hill – “still blackballs our application regularly. Oh yes, we're being cut all the time. But we expect that. Anyone who starts with nothing and becomes very rich must expect that.”

“Then what worries you? Something is obviously worrying you.”

“In a word, Nora.”

“It would hurt her, of course, more than ...”

“Hurt!” John laughed despairingly. “She isn't even aware of it.”

“Oh, come!”

“Well ...” he conceded. “Yes, she is. She is *aware* of it. But she thinks that those who cut us are not even worth our contempt.”

“Perhaps she's right.”

“For us. Yes, of course she is. We don't give a fig for it all. But what about our children? Society can be most vindictive. Society has an elephant's memory. Is it fair to our children? The boys especially?”

“Come, I'm sure you exaggerate. But look, why not send them away to school, so that they can build their own acquaintance early?”

John nodded and smiled. There was a hint of triumph in his eyes, as if he thought he had led Walter step by step to this conclusion. "That is precisely what I have arranged."

"Ah! And Mrs Stevenson, I take it, is not enthusiastic?"

John cleared his throat. "She does not yet know."

Walter drew in a sharp breath but said nothing. At last he understood John's fretful preoccupation.

"I've had so little time," John explained. "You and I are off to the Crimea next week. You know how much organizing that has demanded. There was so little time left for ... ordinary things."

"My dear fellow, you don't need to justify yourself to me!" Walter said. "How long has it been arranged?"

"Some weeks."

"And Mrs Stevenson has no idea?"

John shook his head glumly.

Walter whistled. "Then I do not envy you!" he said