

The Revenge of Josiah Breeze

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North American

Intermediate

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Two thousand Cape Cod fishermen had gone to join the colonial army, and in their absence the British ships had run in shore to land crews on mischievous errands. No man, woman, or child on the Cape but hated the troops and sailors of King George, and would do anything to work them harm. When the Somerset was wrecked off Truro, in 1778, the crew were helped ashore, 'tis true, but they were straightway marched to prison, and it was thought that no other frigate would venture near the shifting dunes where she had laid her skeleton, as many a good ship had done before and has done since. It was November, and ugly weather was shutting in, when a three-decker, that had been tacking off shore and that flew the red flag, was seen to yaw wildly while reefing sail and drift toward land with a broken tiller. No warning signal was raised on the bluffs; not a hand was stirred to rescue. Those who saw the accident watched with sullen satisfaction the on-coming of the vessel, nor did they cease to look for disaster when the ship anchored and stowed sail.

Ezekiel and Josiah Breeze, father and son, stood at the door of their cottage and watched her peril until three lights twinkling faintly through the gray of driving snow were all that showed where the enemy lay, straining at her cables and tossing on a wrathful sea. They stood long in silence, but at last the boy exclaimed, "I'm going to the ship."

"If you stir from here, you're no son of mine," said Ezekiel.

“But she’s in danger, dad.”

“As she oughter be. By mornin’ she’ll be strewed along the shore and not a spar to mark where she’s a-swingin’ now.”

“And the men?”

“It’s a jedgment, boy.”

The lad remembered how the sailors of the Ajax had come ashore to burn the homes of peaceful fishermen and farmers; how women had been insulted; how his friends and mates had been cut down at Long Island with British lead and steel; how, when he ran to warn away a red-faced fellow that was robbing his garden, the man had struck him on the shoulder with a cutlass. He had sworn then to be revenged. But to let a host go down to death and never lift a helping hand—was that a fair revenge? “I’ve got to go, dad,” he burst forth. “Tomorrow morning there’ll be five hundred faces turned up on the beach, covered with ice and staring at the sky, and five hundred mothers in England will wonder when they’re goin’ to see those faces again. If ever they looked at me the sight of ’em would never go out of my eyes. I’d be harnted by ’em, awake and asleep. And to-morrow is Thanksgiving. I’ve got to go, dad, and I will.” So speaking, he rushed away and was swallowed in the gloom.

The man stared after him; then, with a revulsion of feeling, he cried, “You’re right, ‘Siah. I’ll go with you.” But had he called in tones of thunder he would not have been heard in the roar of the wind and crash of the surf. As he reached the shore he saw faintly on the phosphorescent foam a something that climbed a hill of water; it was lost over its crest and reappeared on the wave beyond; it showed for a moment on the third wave, then it vanished in the night. “Josiah!” It was a long, querulous cry. No answer. In half an hour a thing rode by the watcher on the sands and fell with a crash beside him—a boat bottom up: his son’s.

Next day broke clear, with new snow on the ground. In his house at Provincetown, Captain Breeze was astir betimes, for his son Ezekiel, his grandson Josiah, and all other relatives who were not at the front with Washington were coming for the family reunion. Plump turkeys were ready for the roasting, great loaves of bread and cake stood beside the oven, redoubtable pies of pumpkin and apple filled the air with maddening odors. The people gathered and chattered around his cheery fire of the damage that the storm had done, when Ezekiel stumbled in, his brown face haggard, his lips working, and a tremor in his hands. He said, “Josiah!” in a thick voice, then leaned his arms against the chimney and pressed his face upon them. Among fishermen

whose lives are in daily peril the understanding of misfortune is quick, and the old man put his hand on the shoulder of his son and bent his head. The day of joy was become a day of gloom. As the news went out, the house began to fill with sympathizing friends, and there was talking in low voices through the rooms, when a cry of surprise was heard outside. A ship, cased in tons of ice, was forging up the harbor, her decks swarming with blue jackets, some of whom were beating off the frozen masses from lower spars and rigging. She followed the channel so steadily, it was plain to be seen that a wise hand was at her helm; her anchor ran out and she swung on the tide. "The Ajax, as I'm a sinner!" exclaimed a sailor on shore. A boat put off from her, and people angrily collected at the wharf, with talk of getting out their guns, when a boyish figure arose in the stern, and was greeted with a shout of surprise and welcome.

The boat touched the beach, Josiah Breeze leaped out of it, and in another minute his father had him in a bear's embrace, making no attempt to stop the tears that welled out of his eyes. An officer had followed Josiah on shore, and going to the group he said, "That boy is one to be proud of. He put out in a sea that few men could face, to save an enemy's ship and pilot it into the harbor. I could do no less than bring him back." There was praise and laughter and clasping of hands, and when the Thanksgiving dinner was placed, smoking, on the board, the commander of H. M. S. Ajax was among the jolliest of the guests at Captain Breeze's table.

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