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EAN 8596547047940

DigiCat, 2022
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CHAPTER I

FAMILY AND EARLY CAREER

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George Brydges Rodney, the most famous of the great generation of English admirals who raised the navy to the level at which Nelson found it, was by descent a Somersetshire man. The family was one of considerable antiquity—of more antiquity indeed than fame. From the reign of Henry the Third until far into the seventeenth century they were established as owners of land in and about Stoke Rodney, at the foot of the Mendips, in the valley of the Axe between Draycott and Wells. The history of the house was summed up by Sir Edward Rodeney, the last of them who held the family estate, in words which I do not presume to think I can better, and shall therefore quote.

Their faults whatsoever are not written in great letters, or become the subject of common fame, or the courts of justice; but as they lived without scandal, so they died without shame, going out of the world by the ordinary gate of sickness, and never by the hand of violence, some few excepted of ancient times, that died in the wars, and the late unfortunate gentleman, Sir George Rodeney, who fell by his own sword; and although civil dissentions, in the Barons Wars, did engage men in one side or the other, yet they for any I can find lived in a calm amidst these tempests, and were not entangled in the quarrels of the times. The reason of it may be that having a firm estate of their own, and able

to subsist of themselves, they kept independent, living within their own orb, and mastering those affections of envy and ambition which commonly do but raise men for a greater fall. They had been always, from the time we first discover them, of the middle rank of subjects which is the most safe place—"*Cives medii salvi sunt maxime*," few or none of better estate, under the degree of Lords until the great flood of Church lands (whereof they possessed not one foot) improved many men's fortunes to a great height; nay, which is strange, from Sir Richard Rodeney, who was borne under Henry the Third, to Sir George Rodeney in 42 of Elizabeth, the space of above four hundred years, they stood like *Mare Mortuum* and neither ebbed nor flowed in their fortunes; they were so provident not to lessen; but neither by marriages, which is the ordinary step of augmentation, nor by any other means did they make any addition, insomuch that at this day I give the coat single which my ancestors gave without quartering any other.

Here, adorned with the brocaded elegance proper to the time of the writer, is a summing up of the history of a solid English country family. Stoke Rodney lay out of the track of the great storms of English history, and its position helped the family to stand like *Mare Mortuum* for four hundred years. Still, a house which could live through all that happened in England between Henry the Third and Elizabeth without loss or gain, must have been of an equable temperament, free from great vices, follies, or qualities. The last stage was less peaceful, for Sir Edward Rodeney has to record money troubles and family disputes. He was himself a more stirring man than his ancestors had been. In his

youth he fled abroad with Sir Edward Seymour, the husband of Arabella Stuart, afterwards Marquis of Hertford. His exile, however, was short. He returned, was married, not, as he complacently records, without splendour of ceremonial, to Mistress Frances Southwell, “a lady of Queen Anna’s private chamber,” in 1614, and spent the remainder of his life as a country gentleman in the west. In 1626 he was a deputy-lieutenant, and felt himself called upon to explain in his place in Parliament the excesses of the pressed men who were drawn into the west by Buckingham’s unlucky expeditions, and were treated as to pay and provend with that little care which Captain Dugald Dalgetty told the Marquis of Montrose might, according to custom, be bestowed on the common soldier. Sir Edward was a strong Royalist, and lived long enough to suffer for his royalism. Although he was otherwise a man much of the same kidney, he did not share the Baron of Bradwardine’s opinions as to the duty of keeping a family estate in the male line. His only son died before him, and he allowed Stoke Rodney to pass to his daughters. One of these ladies married into the family of Brydges of Kainsham, and thereby supplied a cousin of hers with a useful connection.

Sir Edward could have found male heirs had he so chosen, for he had three brothers: Henry, who was drowned on the coast of Africa; William, who does not concern us; and George. From this George came Anthony (the first of the family who spelt his name Rodney), Lieutenant-Colonel of Leigh’s regiment of horse, who served under Peterborough in Spain, and Henry. This Henry was the father of the Admiral. Having begun as a cornet of horse, he left the army

and then was appointed, by the interest of his connection the Duke of Chandos, the representative of the Brydges of Kainsham, to a post in the Royal Yacht of George the First. Henry Rodney had a family of five children by his wife, Mary, daughter of Sir Henry Newton, “Envoy-Extraordinary to the Grand Duke of Tuscany, and afterwards Judge of the Admiralty, etc. etc.” He naturally profited by his position for the good of his family. The King stood godfather to the second son, together with the Duke of Chandos, and the boy was christened George Brydges. It was for this reason, according to Major-General Mundy, the Admiral’s son-in-law and the editor of his correspondence, that the Christian name of George, which had been common in the Rodney family, was given to the boy who was to live to break the French line on August 12th, 1782.

This is the family account of the Admiral’s descent, and there is no reason to doubt its substantial accuracy. Sir Egerton Brydges, than whom no one was better entitled to insist on the delusions to which men are subject when their pedigrees are in question, does indeed utter a word of warning in his edition of Collins’ Peerage. He remarks with perfect truth that “the slender notice taken of such branches [as this younger branch of the Rodneys to wit] in the Heralds’ Visitations, the long disuse of those visitations, together with the general confusion in which this kingdom was involved by the Civil War between King Charles and the Parliament, and the great destruction of family deeds and evidences which it occasioned, must render it extremely difficult, if not altogether impossible, for not only his lordship, but also most of the descendants from younger

sons of the best families of the kingdom to join themselves to their old family stock." These are words of wisdom, and it is just possible that the Admiral did not really descend from the Rodneys of Rodney Stoke. Still there is good evidence to show that the claim was well founded. It was recognised by the Duke of Chandos when the Admiral had become famous, which is something; and, what is much more, it was allowed in his youth by George Brydges of Avington and Kainsham—a representative of the house into which Sir Edward Rodeney's daughter had married. Sir Egerton Brydges has himself recorded that young Rodney "was brought up and spent part of his early youth under the patronage of George Brydges of Avington and Kainsham, which confirms the presumption of his descent." We may therefore take it as reasonably well proved that the Count de Grasse, who by the way dated from the tenth century, was defeated and taken off Dominica by a gentleman of descent not greatly inferior to his own. It is just possible that the Admiral's Christian names were given in compliment to the kinsman who patronised his early youth. Henry Rodney was at least fortunate in that he was able to so name his son as to give him a species of claim on his King, on one whom his King delighted to honour, and on a relation whose interest was well worth having. The boy started in life in the position of a gentleman with excellent connections.

Rodney was in all probability one of the many famous men who belong by birth to London. He was baptized on February 13th, 1718, at St. George's-in-the-Fields, and it may be considered as certain that he was born in the January of the same year. His schooling, which cannot have

been prolonged, was received at Harrow—then a grammar school of no especial fame. At the age of twelve he went to sea as a King's-letter boy, being the last of those who entered the navy in that way.

The term King's-letter boy requires some little explanation. Nothing distinguished our ancestors of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from their descendants of to-day more completely than their indifference to formal regularity in the organisation of the public services, and their tolerance of anomalies. As for organisation, they were satisfied with as little of it as would serve the turn, and they endured anomalies with serene indifference as long as they were not intolerable in their practical results. They were not much addicted to giving their idea of an organisation, and when they did were inspired by the faith that if only the right men were got to fill places the good work would follow. The getting of good men, they held, was only possible by the strenuous application of patriotism, zeal for the King's service, and intelligence on the part of those who had to select. Therefore they were content to allow a great freedom of choice to those in authority. The navy itself, though its efficiency was a matter of life and death to the nation, was contentedly left in a condition which on all modern principles should have had disastrous results. There was a central corps of commissioned officers—lieutenants, captains, and admirals. These men formed the permanent staff of the navy. Whether on active service or not, they were on the list, and drew pay. All others who were employed, warrant officers, petty officers, and men, were shipped as in the merchant service

for the voyage. Their connection with the navy was limited to the ship on which they served, and terminated with the commission. Until some years after Rodney entered the navy the loss of a ship by wreck was held to terminate the engagement of all the crew. Their pay ceased, and with the pay their obligation to obey orders. It was not until it was found impossible to punish the men who so cruelly deserted Captain Cheape after the wreck of the *Wager* on Anson's voyage that the modern practice was introduced of holding that the commission of the ship lasts till she has been formally paid off, and with it the liability of all hands to punishment by court-martial. Hence the apparent absurdity by which a captain may be dismissed from a vessel which has been at the bottom of the sea for months. If she were not regularly paid off, captain, officers, and men would continue to belong to her, and to draw their full pay so long as they lived. At all times, no doubt, there were warrant officers and seamen who served for life, and the dockyards had a permanent staff. None the less it was wholly the theory, and very much the practice, that when a ship was paid off, all who had been on board her except her captain and lieutenants ceased to be officially connected with the navy. So long as squadrons had to be fitted out it was convenient for the Admiralty to have warrant officers and seamen under its hand. So those who chose to engage again were commonly taken on; but there was no obligation to take them, nor were they bound to serve, unless they were pressed again.

From out of this body were chosen the lieutenants, and here the indifference of our ancestors to finish of

organisation was very strongly shown. There were a number of regulations as to what qualified a man for a commission, but in practice the rule was that any one who had served a term of years at sea, of which some were in a king's ship, who could hand, reef, and steer, could navigate a little and keep a log, who could find a friend to put in a word for him in the right quarter, was competent to receive a commission. If the friend could not be found then he might go on in the navy for life without ever, in Nelson's phrase, getting his foot on the ladder. He might remain a midshipman, who was, and is, a warrant officer, till his death. Moreover, if he could not get a ship when his last had been paid off, the Admiralty did not recognise him. Men could be made lieutenants from before the mast, and there are cases of such promotions. A captain, as all readers of Marryat's *King's Own* will remember, could put boys on the quarter-deck. If at a later period he had the interest, he could obtain a commission for his client. There is a romantic story told about that Admiral Campbell who was Hawke's flag-captain at Quiberon, which, as it illustrates the navy of Rodney's time, may be told here. Campbell was the son of a Scotch minister, and was apprenticed to the skipper of a small trading craft in the west of Scotland. The vessel was overhauled by a king's ship with a press warrant. The navy captain selected those of her crew who seemed best worth pressing. Among them was a newly-married man, who, overcome at the prospect of indefinite separation from his young wife, began to cry. Campbell knew that as an apprentice he was exempt from the press, but he knew also that the King's service went over everything. If he chose to

volunteer he could thereby break his indentures. Being a boy of a tender heart and a high spirit he resolved to save the husband if he could. He therefore went up to the naval officer and offered a bargain. He presented himself as a substitute for the sailor. The officer very sensibly took the offer, saying that he thought a spirited lad a good exchange for a blubbering man. Campbell made up his kit, and went to serve King George as powder monkey. But his spirit had pleased the naval captain, and after a time this gentleman put him on the quarter-deck, introduced him to good friends, who helped him to share in Anson's famous voyage, and so to win his commission as lieutenant. Once on the ladder, Campbell rose by force of native faculty, and his power of making people believe in him. He lived to be at Hawke's right hand at Quiberon, to become the friend of Keppel, and he died an admiral. Even if this story has been somewhat embellished, it shows what was thought possible in Rodney's time, and illustrates what may fairly be called the elasticity of our old naval practice. No man could be a lieutenant who had not served the King; but he who had, whether it was as foremast-hand, master's mate, midshipman, or captain's servant (for young gentlemen were put on the quarter-deck under that title), and could be said to be competent, could in the old naval phrase "be made," if he could induce an admiral in command of a squadron who had a vacancy, or the Admiralty at home, to make him.

This laxity, as it would be called now, had its bad side, no doubt. Mean men in mean times took advantage of it, and permitted themselves a good deal of favouritism and

jobbery. But it had its good side too. A captain might pay his tailor's bill by putting his tailor's son on the quarter-deck; but he was much more likely to put his own son or nephew, or the son of an old comrade, there. In any case his own honour was concerned in the fitness of the lad whom he thus marked out as candidate for a lieutenant's commission. An admiral might give his own incompetent offspring a commission or a ship. Marryat has preserved a wild legend about an admiral who did so, and then, when the youth made a fool of himself, inflicted paternal chastisement on him in the after cabin of the flag-ship—perhaps with a piece of inch-and-a-half with a Turk's head on it. As a matter of sober fact, an admiral who knew how much his own honour and even safety depended on the fitness of his officers had every motive to select them well—when he had a chance to select them at all. At any rate the system, or no system, which allowed the rapid rise of Anson and Hawke, Saunders and Pocock, Rodney, the Hoods, Howe, Collingwood, and Nelson, can dare to be judged by its fruits. Could the most uniform organisation, the most careful avoidance of favouritism and jobbery, have done better for us?

Our fathers were at ease in their minds on the subject, for about 1730 they—and here we come back to the King's-letter boy—saw the abolition of the only approach to an organisation by which a regular corps of candidates for a lieutenant's commission had till then been provided; and they saw it with indifference. During the Restoration, and in the early part of the eighteenth century, it had been the custom to send a certain number of boys on board ship with a King's "Letter of Service." These lads were considered to

have a better right to be made lieutenants than others. They answered, in fact, to the modern cadet. It does not seem that they were held to be entitled to a commission, but they were more likely to get it than another. As a Letter of Service would not be given except to those who had some interest, they probably did get their commissions as a rule. In this way some regular provision was made for the supply of a corps of officers. About 1730, however, the elder Byng, he who won the battle off Cape Passaro, being then a commissioner at the Admiralty, decided to abolish the King's Letter, and to establish a naval school at Portsmouth in which boys might be trained for the sea service. This sounds very modern, but Byng carried out his reform in the genuine spirit of the eighteenth century. He did not declare that only those should become lieutenants who had passed through the naval school, and he did leave the expense of supporting the boys who went to study there wholly to their families. It was therefore not the interest of a parent who could get his boy sent straight on board ship to send him to the naval school. So, though the place went on it was much neglected, and many of the most famous naval officers who entered the service after it had been established had never belonged to it. Rodney was, it has been said already, the last of those who entered the navy in the old way.

When he first went to sea we were in the middle of the long peace maintained by Walpole. A considerable naval force was kept up, for though Sir Robert would not use the fleet, he never allowed foreigners to forget it was there to be used in case of need. Little notice was taken of midshipmen in those days—so little, in fact, that it is often

impossible to tell when an officer first went to sea. The actual date of the entry into the service of so famous a man as Lord Hawke was long unknown. According to General Mundy, Rodney's first captain was Medley, afterwards an admiral, and he passed most of his early years of service on the Newfoundland station. He became an officer when he was "made" by Haddock in the Mediterranean on February 15th, 1739. It would seem, therefore, that Rodney's interest was not strong enough to get him a commission till after an apprenticeship of nine years, or nearly thrice the period required by the rules of the service. In this respect he was far less lucky than his contemporary Howe, who was in command of a ship before he was twenty.

In 1739 the long peace was at an end, and England had entered on the three-quarters of a century of fighting, relieved by uneasy truces, which were to leave her the uncontested mistress of the seas. The war which began about Jenkins' Ear and developed into the Austrian Succession had just broken out. A fleet was sent into the Mediterranean under Nicholas Haddock, member of an Essex family which had been distinguished in the navy from the Commonwealth time. Haddock's duty was to look after any Spanish squadron which might put to sea, to support our garrison at Minorca, to take prizes, and to ravage the coast. The work was well done, but it afforded few opportunities of distinction. Spain was too weak to meet us openly, and the English fleet was mostly engaged in blockading Don José Navarro at Cadiz, and in endeavouring to keep the Straits of Gibraltar free from privateers. Towards the close of 1741 the Spaniards succeeded in slipping to sea

while Haddock was at Gibraltar, and in covering the despatch of Spanish troops from Barcelona to Northern Italy, where they were to operate against the Austrians for the purpose of putting the Milanese into the possession of the Infante Don Felipe. The escape of Don José and the passage of the Spaniards was a famous incident of the times, and the cause of much clamour; but it has no connection with the life of Rodney, and may be left alone here. It was almost a matter of course that the retreat of Haddock should be put down to the profound cunning which, to the unending joy of all Englishmen of humour, is attributed to us by the sagacious foreigner. We went away to gain our private ends. The true explanation was simpler. Ships grew rapidly foul in the time before the value of copper-sheeting had been discovered. Haddock's vessels wanted scraping, and, moreover, had been knocked about by the autumn storms; so he retired to Gibraltar to refit. While he was there Navarro slipped out and ran through the Gut. As soon as the squadron was ready for sea Haddock followed. When he came up with the Spaniards he found them in company with a French squadron under M. de Court. The French Admiral informed him that the Italian enterprise was undertaken in alliance with his master, and that no attack on the Spaniards could be permitted. England and France were still nominally at peace, though they were actively opposed to one another in the character of allies to Austria or Prussia. The position was an extraordinary one, and Haddock very pardonably shrank from the responsibility of attacking the allies. He retired to Minorca and waited for orders.

For a period of more than a year after this the English, French, and Spaniards remained in a state of war which was no war, and peace which was not peace. The allies lay at Toulon quarrelling and fighting duels. The English watched them from Minorca or Hyères Bay. The French would not allow us to attack the Spanish squadron, but they left us at full liberty to obtain water and provisions in their territory. They even went so far as to tolerate the destruction of five Spanish galleys by our fire-ships in St. Tropez Bay, but they were notoriously preparing to fight us a little later on. Altogether, the diplomatic and military situation was one to which it would be hard to find a parallel. In this, as in the previous stage of the naval war, few opportunities for real service were afforded, and, such as they were, none of them came in Rodney's way.

Early in 1742 Haddock's health broke down and he returned to England. After a brief period, during which Rear-Admiral Lestock held the command, Admiral Mathews arrived from England with reinforcements to take it over. The change did no harm to Rodney, who was appointed by the new commander to the *Plymouth*, sixty-four, on a vacancy made by the transfer of Captain Watson to the *Dragon*. Immediately afterwards he was sent home with a convoy, and so escaped having to bear a part in the most inglorious passage in the history of the English navy—the battle of February 11th, 1744, off Toulon, and the long series of scandalous court-martials which arose out of it. We have happily no concern with the miserable Mathews and Lestock quarrel except to note that as the Admiral was afterwards dismissed the service for bearing down on the enemy out of

his line of battle, it served to harden that hide-bound system of tactics which made naval engagements so utterly indecisive till Rodney himself broke through it thirty-eight years later in the West Indies. The acting rank as post-captain conferred by the command of the *Plymouth* was confirmed on his arrival in England, and he was now firmly established on the ladder. A man rose from lieutenant to captain by selection, from captain to admiral by seniority, and if post-rank did not come too late, was tolerably sure of reaching flag-rank. Whether he would ever actually hoist his flag at sea would still depend on luck and merit. Rodney had passed from the great class below lieutenant which had no rights, and from the rank of lieutenant which was the highest reached by many men, not so rapidly as some of his contemporaries, but still speedily. At five-and-twenty years of age, and with twelve years of service, he stood on his own quarter-deck with the best of prospects that he might one day command a fleet.

Although these years of apprenticeship contain no incident of interest in Rodney's career, they—and particularly the last three of them—must have been of vital importance to him. They had taught him his business as a matter of course, and had hardened him to the sea life. How hard it was we know from *Roderick Random*. There is a certain amount of deliberate exaggeration for purposes of literary effect in Smollett's great book, but its essential truth is beyond dispute. A ship is never for those who have to work her, or fight her, a luxurious dwelling-place, but in the early eighteenth century the interval between what would be counted decent comfort on shore and the utmost

attainable comfort at sea was indeed great. Ships were small, and crowded with men and guns. The between-decks were low, ill ventilated, and abounding in stenches. Officers of all ranks slept in hammocks, and captains who were anxious for the efficiency of their ships would not tolerate standing cabins. It may be asserted with confidence that the officers of His Majesty's ships were worse lodged, about 1740, than the crew of a sailing merchant-vessel of to-day. A man had to be made of tough stuff to stand it all. When Rodney was captain of the *Eagle* he took his brother to sea with him. One cruise was enough for James Rodney, and he went ashore for good on his return to port. Even those who were made of sterner fibre could not endure the hardships of the life. They broke down with gout, rheumatism, and diseases of the nature of scurvy, brought on by exposure, bad air, and bad food. Habitual indulgence in fiery liquors had something to do with the prevalence of gout and stone among naval men, but the fiery liquors were not only the fashion of the time, they were also the natural refuge of men whose nerves were affected by stinks and whose palates were exasperated by salt food. In the matter of liquor, Rodney probably went with the multitude around him to do evil, taking his share of whatever bumbo or hypsy (dreadful compounds of rum or brandy and wine, all young and all fiery, disguised in spices) was going on board or ashore. At least he never shrank from more fashionable dissipations in later times, and probably did not care to be singular in earlier days. When he was famous there were old men who boasted that they had shared in the carouses of his youth. Then, too, he had tell-tale sufferings in later years

from the gout, the prevailing disease of that hard-drinking generation.

All this, however, was the life of his time and his service which he shared with other men. To him, who was born to be a great commander, the spectacle afforded by the fleet during his three years' service must indeed have been especially instructive. It must have taught him what a squadron ought not to be, and how it ought not to be managed. The navy of that time was the navy of Hawser Trunnion, Esquire. Now one may have a real affection for Hawser Trunnion personally, and yet be compelled to acknowledge that the generation of officers of which he is the type fought less well than English naval men have done before or since. It was not that they were not brave, for they often were; nor yet that they were not seamen, for that also they were; but there was far too often something which they preferred to the discharge of their duty. It was often party politics, for they were very Whig and very Tory. Too many of them were members of Parliament, and owed their commands to their seats. In that case they carried on the party battle with one another in presence of the enemy. Perhaps they did not actually betray one another, but they believed one another to be capable of treason. The Tory officer saw the Whig in a mess with a certain complacency, and the Whig was pleased when baffling winds gave him an excuse for not coming to the help of the Tory. As an inevitable consequence their fighting was apt to be slack, and their recriminations furious. Personal quarrels were carried to a pitch of rancour not to be rivalled out of a cloister. Mathews was brutally insolent to Lestock, and

Lestock hated Mathews with the concentrated fury of Mr. Browning's Spanish Monk. When one turns over the pamphlets they wrote against one another, the picture of Commodore Trunnion as he listened to the report that Admiral Bower was to be made a British peer, rises at once. The mug, we remember, fell from his hand, and shivered into a thousand fragments; his eye glistened like that of a rattlesnake. Even so may Lestock have behaved when he heard that his enemy Mathews was coming to command him. His pamphlets were certainly written with the venom of a rattlesnake. Many years later, when Rodney was himself a peer, and at the head of the profession, he deliberately recorded on the margin of a copy of Clerk's *Tactics* his belief that Lestock had betrayed his superior officer. The judgment was too harsh, but it shows what an impression the factions in the fleet had made on Rodney's mind. When he was afterwards in command he showed a distinct readiness to believe that some of his subordinates were capable of the same conduct, and he resented their conduct fiercely. It is premature to discuss his justice on this occasion, but, no doubt, the memory of what he had seen in the Mediterranean was very present with him in those days, exasperating his suspicions and animating him to stamp the bad spirit out.

CHAPTER II

SERVICE AS CAPTAIN TILL 1752

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On his arrival in England Rodney's post-rank was confirmed, and he was appointed to the *Sheerness*. She was a much smaller ship than the *Plymouth*, but a post-ship none the less—that is, a vessel large enough to be commanded by a post-captain and not by a commander. Over this intermediate rank, which every officer must now pass through on his way from lieutenant to captain, Rodney appears to have skipped in the free and easy way the time allowed to those who had luck or interest. Interest Rodney certainly did not want. If his own words, written many years later, are to be understood in their literal sense, it was the best a man could then have—the interest of the Pelhams. In 1756 Rodney declared in a letter to the famous electioneering Duke of Newcastle, the "noodle" who would allow nobody to govern England without him, that he owed all his preferment in the navy to His Grace. This statement was, however, made in a private note, at a time when the writer was in lively expectation of future electoral favours, and need not be taken as rigidly accurate. It is at all events certain that Rodney did not want for friends at Court, for he was in command of sea-going ships, mostly on home stations, for the next ten years without a break. A man may use interest in two ways. He can either get comfortable billets on shore, or can avail himself of it to be put in the