

The Point and the Edge

C. S. Forester

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The time is 1819, with Hornblower a senior captain on half pay. His restlessness, as always, demands exercise, and he has been for long taking fencing lessons; his memories of a dozen hand-to-hand fights are now colored by the strengthened realization of how the point will always beat the edge when skillfully used. England at this time is in the depths of a postwar slump; people are starving through lack of employment, and despite the savage laws, which enact that a man may be hanged for the theft of five shillings, crime is rampant. Hornblower has been invited to dine at Portsmouth on the flagship of a friend – say Lord Exmouth – who is fortunate enough to have employment in the exiguous navy that England still maintains. Hornblower travels down with Barbara, and puts up at the George. In the late afternoon Barbara looks him over, sees that his civilian clothes are in good order, that he is wearing his gold watch and chain, his gold-topped ebony walking stick, and sees him off, while she spends – like a dutiful wife – a dull evening alone.

Exmouth and Hornblower, of course, spend a pleasant evening, discussing the state of the nation and naval policy; Exmouth, rubbing his hands with glee, tells Hornblower of the revolution in recruiting methods nowadays. No flamboyant posters, no press gangs – starving seamen stand in line, waiting for the chance to enlist in the Royal Navy. Captains can pick and choose. Dinner over, Hornblower, fashionable clothes, gold-topped walking stick and all, starts back to the George. At a dark corner a man springs out at him. He is barefooted, wearing only a tattered shirt and trousers, and starving. In his hand is a branch torn from a tree – his entire stock in trade, his entire working capital. Threatening Hornblower with this improvised club he demands Hornblower's money. This footpad is actually risking his life, risking hanging, for a meal. Hornblower's liberal feelings have no time to assert themselves. He reacts violently against compulsion, and without a thought he lunges with his walking stick, a quick, instant thrust. The point beats the edge – it lands on the footpad's cheek, half stunning him, so that he reels back momentarily incapacitated. Hornblower cracks him over the wrist so that he drops his club and is at Hornblower's mercy. Hornblower could now call the watch and have this man seized and taken away to certain death, but he naturally cannot

bring himself to do so. Instead he drives him before him back to Exmouth's ship. "My Lord, would you please do me one more favor? Would you be so kind as to enlist this man into your crew?"