

## Man Overboard

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# Man Overboard

by [DestielsDestiny](#)

## Summary

A becalmed sea. An explosion. A concerned doctor. A wounded captain. Or, a typical Thursday on the HMS Surprise.

## Notes

AN: Please forgive the admittedly fast and loose use of naval terminology, and the willful misrepresentation and misuse of the physical structures of naval vessels in general. I shamelessly chose spectacle over accuracy for this story.

There is gun powder in the air. The deck is heavy with it, the crew's vision shrouded as thickly as the densest fog, for all that the day had dawned clear and bright and golden blue.

Jack shook his head thickly, attempting to clear his eyes of dust or his ears of their ringing, he is unsure precisely which. His hand slides along the decking, bumping up against the ropes for the mizzen, lifting towards his face seemingly of their own accord. They come away wet.

That is when Jack remembers, flashes and fissures filtering in behind his eyes as brief and painful as explosion afterimages. An accident. Not a battle. A cannonball rolling, someone yelling, a barked order, a misplaced fuse, a silent pop, followed by a deafening boom.

His fingers are still wet. Another flash. A hand on his arm, a concerned face near his. Words. He can almost... "Jack? Are you alright? Can you hear me? Joy, speak to me. Jack!"

A second explosion, a crack, the ship rocked sideways despite the becalmed sea. A muted cry, a splash...

Jack jerked to a stand swiftly, suddenly, blinding pain lancing through his skull, from ear to jaw. He suspected something was broken there, but now was hardly the time to ponder it.

His hands closing on the aft rail, Jack strained past the slowly clearing smoke to scan the waters below. His voice, when it finally came, was more whisper than bellow, but suffused through all together with anguish in spite of this. "Stephen!"

The water is only visible in its slight movements, the tiniest of waves stirred up by the rocking of the Surprise's great hull. Beyond that, the depths are crystal and blue and clear. And utterly, maddeningly empty.

Jack levered his swaying bulk further over the rail, droplets of red flying from his brow to hit the water far below, the steadiness of their path attesting to the continued calm all about them, injurious lapses in safety and good judgement aside. Perhaps he would finally allow Stephen to tip some of the grog over the side, if only to teach these damn lubbers a good lesson...

"Sir!" Tom Pulling's hand was steady on his arm, his grip telegraphing both his urgency and his relief. Jack let the young man's steadiness wash over him, drawing the strength from it necessary to banish such foolish thoughts of nonexistent trickery and ungentlemanly blame from his aching head.

Jack always did have an alarming tendency towards blinkered vision where Stephen was concerned. He had never found occasion to correct this minor character fault however.

"Ah Tom! I assume from your tone that the ship is not in fact in danger of blowing up beneath our feet in the next few moments?" Jack's tone was just this side of expectant, his hand tightening to knuckle white on the rail, his panic a carefully contained thing in his breast.

His first Lieutenant bore up to it all admirably, as he always did. “Yes Sir, the last of the stray balls has been secured, and Mr. Mowett reports the damage appears to be largely superficial.” Tom’s scarred face puckered into an endearingly boyish smile. “Luck was with us today Sir, if I may be so bold.”

Jack’s grin was, he suspected, altogether sticky with sluggishly flowing blood, and yet all the more genuine for it. His hand pivoted forward slightly, even as his words tumbled over each other in their haste. Haste, but not panic. The water had been clear in all directions.

“Yes, well, luck is usually on my side, or so they tell me.” A quicksilver grin, muscles tensing, preparing to leap. “Do look after the ship for a bit, won’t you Tom. No more explosions if you please sir.”

Jack heaved himself over the rail, his arms holding his bulk suspended over the drop to the water for just a moment longer. “And send a long boat around this end to pick up me and the doctor, would you. There’s a lad.”

That taken care of, Jack released his grip, and let himself drop like a straight lance into the water below. The water stung his head something awful, his vision whitening out momentarily, and so it was that he broke the surface with a quite uncharacteristic sputter.

Treading water at a rather more sluggish pace than normal, Jack tilted his head upwards, stinging eyes taking in the familiar and expected, although no less welcome for it, sight before him.

“Good afternoon doctor. Lovely day for a swim I would have thought. You should join me directly.”

His companion shifted not a jot from his white knuckled grip on the rudder, yet managed to level a glare in Jack’s direction that chilled the hazy, humid air significantly.

Then the doctor’s eyes caught sight of the fresh blood Jack could feel beginning to trickle stubbornly down his jawline, and all thoughts of annoyance were long banished.

“Joy, are you alright?” The splash of the longboat, deployed with a swiftness that was explained away in both men’s minds in the same manner the boat crew’s complete lack of reaction to finding their captain swimming in a pool of his own blood, their ship’s physician perched improbably, some would even venture impossibly, upon their ship’s rudder, precluded Jack from being required to answer in any form more substantial than a rib cracking bellow of laughter.

The agony that flashed hot and stiff down his jaw drew an unwilling grimace out of him however, prompting Stephen’s predictable crash into the water beside him, one sinewy arm wrapping around Jack’s back, the other dog-paddling awkwardly towards the waiting boat.

“Mr. Mowett, pass the word for Higgins to be ready with my things the moment we are aboard if you please.”

His powerful kicks the only thing keeping their heads above water, for all that Stephen was more determined in these situations than a lioness protecting her young, Jack flashed his doctor an insouciant grin. "You would do well to remember that I give the orders around here Stephen."

A gentle grip on his cheek, the nimble fingers brushing his sodden hair out of his face for a brief instant before tilting his jaw carefully shut, even as the long boat drew level with them at last.

"Do be quiet my dear. You've dealt that jaw of yours a nasty blow indeed."

Jack later swears off on account of momentary muscle weakness—you said it yourself Stephen, I suffered a most fearsome blow to the head- but the protective warmth of Stephen's arm wrapping instinctively about Jack's ribs as his legs deliberately slacken, allowing their heads to momentarily slip into an oncoming wave entirely of their own making, his fingers strong and steady as they forced Jack's head up and away from the water, even as their doctor spluttered out salt with all the dignity of a drowned feline, sent a wave of deep affection through the captain's breast.

His eyes begin to sting in time with his jawline, and for once, Jack is grateful for how very terrible a water-man Stephen has always proven to be, as the concern of keeping his patient's wound clean and dry prevents his doctor from noticing the faint tears slipping into the water, any saltiness diluting utterly into the briny glass work that has surrounded them for days.

He has frankly lost count of the number of times he has been obligated to throw himself over the side after their good doctor, come rain or shine or gale or calm. It is an exercise that never gets old, or any less nerve wracking, as each time he grasps the railing with a flick of his wrist, each time he lets his body fall into the water, clean as a knife through fresh butter, every time he calls across the expanse of blue or black or grey, every time he breaths a sigh of relief when he receives an answer, he grows more and more certain that one day, there will come a time when he repeats the whole sorry process, only to receive no reply at all.

Each repetition of these events stirs a renewed terror in Jack's heart, even as they blur together into a series of moments he will never forget. There is something stolen about these moments, something intimate and private and intensely personal. Something hidden. Something secret.

Sometimes, as he drags Stephen back up the ladder sodden and shaking, Jack thinks those feelings are so private indeed that he is the only one aware of them, even among their rather intimate friendship of two men who have spent more of the last decade living out of each other's back pockets than they have spent apart, and woe betide any man or woman who dares to come between them.

The wind, king and country, the Ship, the Service, medicine, nature, all of those things have and will come between them, over and over and over again. Jack is as resigned to that now as he was the day he first clapped eyes on Stephen and realized he could not picture a time when he would wish to forget the doctor's pale and shrewd face.

But in these moments, when Stephen throws caution to the wind and proves yet again that he will fight terror, cold, pain, fear, the very sea itself to keep Jack by him, well.

There is a reason Jack has never made more than a halfhearted attempt to teach his doctor to swim anywhere reaching passably.

Jack's questing hand finds the gunwale of the longboat even as Stephen tugs him firmly upwards, a strong hand holding his neck rock steady. More hands join the effort, and soon there are blankets and chatter and warming brandy and playful ribbing and Stephen's sure hands and steady gaze and all thoughts of secrets fly from Jack's increasingly addled mind.

Shaking his head stubbornly against Stephen's admonishing glare, Jack raised a laboriously painful brow, and offers up a blinding grin.

"Well Stephen. I thought that came off rather well, as unplanned explosions on becalmed frigates go."

Stephen's eye-rolling "Jack..." is arid dry, his face a picture of put upon exasperation, but for a moment, fondness shines out of those reptilian eyes, and Jack closes his eyes on the sight, and lets himself drift away.

Unconsciousness makes a dashed convenient excuse for passing out with his forehead pressed to Stephen's heart after all, the reassuring thump following him down into blissful rest.

Stephen has the most beautiful heartbeat he's ever heard. And no slight to Boccherini, but the melody of that heart will always remain the single most beautiful song he has ever heard, in all his long years at sea.

It is a thought for Jack alone. But it is one that will never waver, not even when Stephen inevitably drowns them both with his well meaning, landlubbering clumsiness.

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Jack is warm. The pain pulsing about his face is diffuse, the wash of laudanum blurring the edges of it to a mute assurance of his continued existence in the here and now, even as the tincture's grip keeps him from truth consciousness.

A dark shape shuffles across Jack's vision, the steady hand on his brow the only thing necessary to identify his companion.

"Steph..." The slur is barely audible, and Jack suspects he whitens rather spectacularly at the renewed fire in seemingly every nerve ending remotely connected to his jaw.

"Ssh my dear, you will be quite all right in a day or two." A hand slipped behind his head, pressing a cup of tepid water to his questing lips. "There is a hairline crack of the jaw, from what I can feel through the rather impressive swelling, but as that has already begun to recede, I judge you shall suffer no lingering ill effects from your impromptu meeting with the ship's mast."

The blankets were being soothed around him even as Jack struggled to blink his eyes clear. “Mizzen Stephen, it was her mizzen.”

A quiet chuckle sounded somewhere to his left, as the light was dimmed.

Stephen’s reassuring bulk settled against Jack’s side, a hand brushed through his fresh smelling hair. How long had he been unconscious for...

“You may lecture me on the topic to your heart’s content come the morrow dear one.”

A dry kiss brushing across his brow banished all remaining questions from his heart, and Jack settled against Stephen’s side with a quiet sigh. “Just rest now joy. I am here.”

And in the growing darkness, Jack risks a smile utterly without artifice. “Rest well soul.”

Jack may have to consider scheduling gunnery practice more often. The most delightful surprises can happen as a result.

Beneath his ear, Stephen’s heartbeat is steady and sure.

Yes, most delightful indeed.

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