

# Surgeon's Mate

Book 2 of the Patricia MacPherson Nautical Adventure Series

by Linda Collison

## Chapter One

“This leg must be amputated,” Charles Brantigan announced, his voice gritty as a holystone.

“And you, Mr. MacPherson, will conduct the operation.”

The surgeon looked at me, his blue eyes cloudy, nearly blind yet still shrewd. Still as intimidating as the day I signed ship's articles. I nodded, my face a mask. At least I hoped it was.

“Mr. Freeman, you and I shall assist,” Brantigan continued.

We stood between the hammocks and hanging cots, our feet apart for balance. The wind had risen and backed, the water was rough. The hammocks shivered and swayed erratically with the new motion. My stomach churned.

“No, please!” The patient's protest sounded more like the squeak of a rodent than that of a soldier.

Ignoring him, Brantigan untied the strips of muslin that held the thick pad of dressing, revealing the injury for our inspection. The kneecap, shattered by the recoil of a cannon a fortnight ago, looked like an overripe plum. The calf and foot were beginning to mottle as the discoloration spread distally from the swollen patella, a seeping wine colored stain. Leaning over for a better look in the dim light below decks, I caught a faint but unmistakable whiff of mortifying flesh.

I was becoming accustomed to the stench of illness. Such vile smells no longer made me retch. As Aeneas MacPherson might have said, were he still alive, a discerning nose is one of the many tools in a ship surgeon's kit. Indeed, my sense of smell was becoming keener and at the same time, my emotional response to repugnant odors was becoming dulled.

Brantigan cleared his raspy throat and fixed me in his fading field of view. “You are up to the task, Mr. MacPherson?”

I glanced at the young man's face, gone pasty white and causing his ginger colored freckles to stand out more than ever. So difficult to meet their questioning eyes when you had so little to

offer them and so much easier to look at the injury or diseased part itself, rather than a man's face. Yet he caught my glance and held my eyes with his, asking me wordlessly if this were all a bad joke, a dream from which he might awaken. I forced myself not to look away, yet my own eyes surely gave me away. I was powerless to change his fate. All I could offer was a sharp knife and a well-meaning but not entirely qualified hand.

"Perhaps if I blister it again?" I said, glad for the excuse to tear my eyes away from the patient's awful gaze.

Now Dudley Freeman's glance was a dart in my side. "Why waste time blistering a rotting leg when a scalpel and bone saw will do the job in a wink? I'll do it, MacPherson, if you haven't the stomach for it."

Brantigan removed his spectacles and wiped his eyes with his fingers. "Please be so kind as to hold your tongue, Mr. Freeman. Now then, Mr. MacPherson, you can save the limb or you can save the man, but I'll wager you cannot save both. Unless a miracle occurs by eight bells tomorrow morning the leg must come off else the poison spreads through his body and kills him."

The stifled sob that escaped from the young soldier's throat brought tears close to my eyes, yet it was Brantigan who placed his palsied hand on the soldier's arm. I believe he meant it to be a compassionate gesture, but the boy flinched at the touch.

"Easy, lad. Easy. How old are you?" Brantigan asked.

"Sixteen, sir."

"Lee is your name?"

The young man nodded, his eyes brimming.

"What is your given name? Why name does your mother call you?"

"Everett."

"And where is your home, lad?"

A slight shrug. "Rhode Island."

"I am heartily sorry Everett," Brantigan said in a low and gravelly voice. "But it must be done, you know. The gangrene will kill you if we linger. You did not survive the siege of Havana to die of gangrene on your way back to Rhode Island. You will go on to live a productive life, many a man has after losing a limb."

We all fell silent. A man's sigh from a nearby hammock brought a slovenly girl out of the shadows to attend him.

Out on the spar deck the men called out in unison as they hauled on the lines, bracing the yards, their voices carrying across the decks and down the wooden hull, ringing throughout the vessel. Masculine voices, powerful and purposeful. The frigate responded, creaked under the demand of the sails, and dug her shoulder deeper into the sea. The sounds made me long for the invigorating air aloft, the fresh wet wind in my face. I would surely rather climb to the tops in a gale than have to amputate Private Everett Lee's leg.

"Mr. MacPherson, a word with you in my cabin," the surgeon said. "Mr. Freeman, carry on with today's sick call on the foredeck."

"Aye, sir." Freeman threw me a victorious smirk before clattering up the companionway. My heart lurched like the ship itself, for I was afraid I was to be reprimanded for some breach of military etiquette, or worse, that my superior officer had discovered the truth about me. Reluctantly I followed the old man down to the orlop deck to a crowded little room that served him as both berth and office.

Brantigan closed the door behind us and fumbled to light a glim. Though it was broad daylight on deck, deep in the belly of the ship it was as dark as a coal cellar. He eased himself into his chair, wincing as his knees bent, and bade me sit down in the other chair, opposite his cluttered desk. The cabin air was oppressive. My sense of entrapment soared and I fought the familiar rising panic that enclosed spaces bring upon me.

"Now then Mr. MacPherson, I must ask you to take over the bulk of the record keeping for me. My eyes, they're worsening by the day." He rifled through the logbook with shaking hands. His tremors too, were getting more pronounced; yet he said nothing about them and we all pretended not to notice.

"Aye, sir." I waited as he found the page for which he was searching. So that was it? He just wanted some help keeping the ship's medical log? I took courage and said what was on my mind.

"Mr. Brantigan, about the amputation..."

Brantigan looked up with the swiftness of a harrier intent on a field mouse. "Are you challenging my judgment? My eyes might be failing me but there's nothing wrong with my nose. That wound is gangrenous."

“No sir, of course not. I mean, I’m not challenging your judgment.” I swallowed hard. “But don’t you think Mr. Freeman should do the cutting?”

“Why?” He fixed me in his gaze. Though his vision was poor, I knew his perception was keen.

I felt my face and neck redden although I willed them not to. My coloring was always giving me away.

“Mr. Freeman is the more experience.”

“Precisely,” he growled. “High time you had more practice, wouldn’t you say?”

Reluctantly I nodded, aware of the fens forming in my armpits, dampening my clean shirt.

In truth, I was an imposter, not a bona fide surgeon’s mate. Though trained by a man who was both surgeon and medical doctor, the finest in either profession, I had never sat for my exam. I had some knowledge, yes, and some experience, but my identity and credentials were shams.

Brantigan’s expression softened. “I’m keen to see how well you perform, though I’m certain you’ll do well or I never would have hazarded the young man’s life on it. A little experience, a little confidence, that’s all you’re lacking Patrick.”

Out of Brantigan’s mouth, that was praise indeed. Yet it only made me squirm.

“And have a talk with our young Yankee foot soldier,” Brantigan said. “Prepare him for his ordeal tomorrow. Help hi find his courage and make peace with his Maker, perhaps call in the chaplain. Mr. Freeman and I shall assist you, but you’ll call the shots, you’ll do the cutting and ligation, you’ll do the closing as well. Feel free to consult my surgical text.” He pulled a book from the shelf behind him and handed it to me. *The Sea Surgeon, or the Guninea Man’s Vade Mecum*, written by T. Aubrey. I was familiar with this work, for Aeneas had made me study it when I was apprenticed to him.

“Yes, sir,” I managed to say, clutching the ragged manual in my hands like a talisman.

Shipboard operations were not new to me. I had assisted Freeman in sawing off more than one shattered limb during the grisly Havana campaign this summer past, but I had never taken charge. I had been an automaton those many weeks, merely doing what I was told, handing over tourniquets, bone saws, ladles of hot pitch. I couldn’t recall a single name or face, just the chorus of their cries, the smell of warm blood and hot tar on flesh. The sight of severed legs and arms, livid and lifeless, covered with maggots, was a living nightmare. However, Havana was beyond the horizon, in the past, and I had tried to drop the memories overboard in the wake.

It was bad enough he must lose his leg; I didn't want to be the one to do the cutting. What if I wasn't strong enough? Surely, I wouldn't be quick enough. What if I froze? What if I failed? I thumbed through the pages of Aubrey's manual not seeing a single word or drawing.

Brantigan seemed oblivious to my anxiety. Rummaging about in the clutter of his desktop, he found a quill and an inkwell and with palsied hands pushed it toward me.

"Now then, Mr. MacPherson, if you'll write while I dictate we'll have our treatment book up to date in no time."