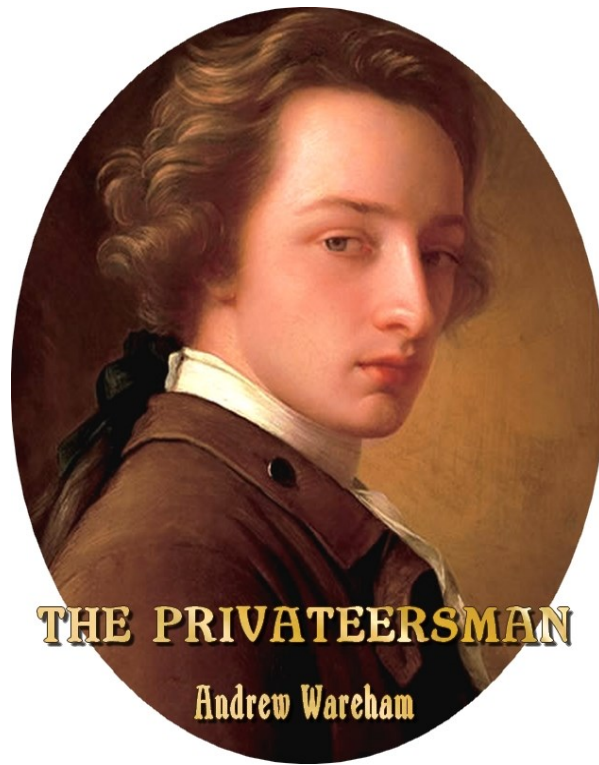


THE PRIVATEERSMAN

Book One: A Poor Man at the Gate Series



Andrew Wareham



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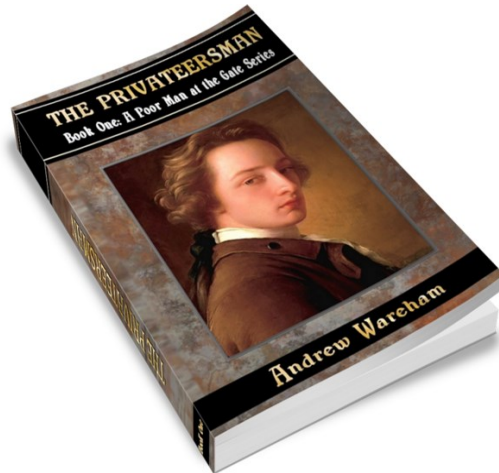
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at the Gate Series**

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Language: UK English Spellings and Word Usage

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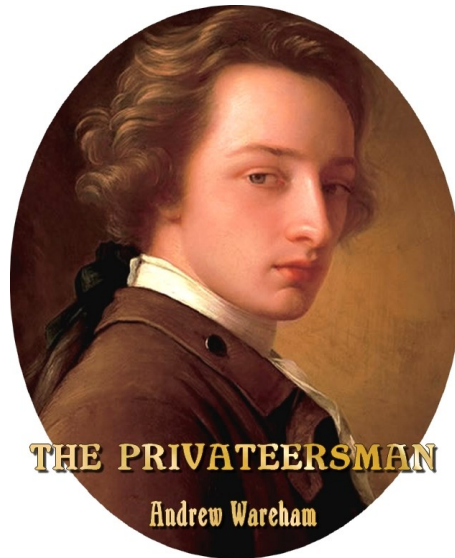
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Introduction

Young Tom Andrews, a small-time smuggler in Dorset, escapes the hangman's noose only to find himself shanghaied onto a privateering ship. The ship plunders its way across the Caribbean, before he and crewmate, part Carib freeman, Joseph, flee to America carrying illicitly obtained booty. They prosper in the vile corruptness of New York - a town destined to be on the losing side in the Revolutionary War. Betrayed and forced to return to England, they seek riches in the early industrial boom. Their shady deals and dubious acquisitions in coal, iron and cotton yield great wealth. Tom relishes the money, but also secretly yearns for love and social acceptance. His hopes rise on meeting the beautiful daughter of an impoverished aristocrat.

Author's Note: I have written and punctuated *The Privateersman* in a style reflecting English usage in novels of the Georgian period, when typically, sentences were much longer than they are in modern English. **Editor's Note:** Andrew's book was written, produced and edited in the UK where some of the spellings and word usage vary slightly from U.S. English.



**Book One: A Poor Man
at the Gate Series**

[Chapter One](#)

Running, never stopping, a slow trot most of the time, a little faster where the fields were open and he might be seen; it was easier not to think when you were moving, not to remember the blood and the screams and the smell of a man's guts opened and spilling out of his belly; pushing on and on, never a backwards look, choosing always the quickest, flattest path, left or right as was convenient to avoid villages or isolated farmhouses, making sure only that he never turned back on himself. Eyes wide open and his head turning from side to side, watching to spot every piece of cover in case he might need to hide, ears straining for the beat of hooves behind him – he would have a minute at best from the first sound, time to conceal himself, to hide from the searchers beating every bush or die. They would be angry, their mates' blood still wet on their boots, in no mood to take prisoners – discovery would be followed by a slashing sabre however high your hands might be.

He had to make some miles first, then he could decide where he should go – somewhere far away, a great distance eventually, but he had to make for a mid-way point, somewhere to get himself together, to become inconspicuous. He was a coastal man, known as such, so it made sense to head straight inland in the beginning, but he would have to get back to a port, to some place where he would not stand out. He could not hide himself in a farming village, never having walked behind a plough or dug a ditch or swung a scythe in his short life – he would stick out like a sore thumb on a farm. Make towards Yeovil for the hours of darkness and then he would

have to turn east or west, back to the sea, but only after a day's sleep; he was tired now, two days of hard sailing followed by the ambush on landing, the energy-sapping fight and the panicked, immediate flight had exhausted him. You didn't get to run much on a fishing boat; you built muscles in chest and arms from the ropes and nets, and the occasional loading in a French port, but you would not run for more than thirty foot at most, and his legs were passing that message to him. No matter, if he was to live then he must push a little harder, force himself not to stop till the first dawn and sun enough to see what he was doing when he chose a place to lay up.

He found an area of old woodland just before full light, down in a shallow valley bottom, mostly blackthorn with bracken and brambles under it, good cover, impassable to a horse. He worked his way out of sight, swearing as the briars snagged his skin, heaved bracken fronds up into a nest and disappeared from view, head and shoulders covered by his old leather jerkin in case of rain; he fell asleep quickly, his bruises aching, worrying and grieving his dad, but not enough to defeat the exhaustion and keep him awake.

He was hungry and thirsty when he stirred in mid-afternoon; there was nothing to be done about the hunger, that would have to be put up with, but he could hear a small stream a few yards away. He sneaked through the little coppice, low to the ground, looking around nervously – there could be children playing or out gathering firewood, this would be just the place to pick up sticks for kindling, the ground was always dry under the thick tangle of blackthorn. The woodland filled the little valley but he could just see the hillsides through the branches, chalk downs, the one empty, the other running a flock of sheep – never a shepherd in sight, he would be up high where he could watch over everything without having to walk too far, but his dogs would check out any movement that might be threatening. He found the stream, saw that it ran clear over a bed of gravel; no cattle and no village within sight, with any luck the water would be safe; he had no choice, in any case, he had to drink. He tasted a handful cautiously, there was no taint and he could see half-inch long minnows swimming nearby - no fish in foul water, not as a rule. He drank his fill, knowing that if it was bad then his chance of escape was gone – if the spotted sickness did not kill him directly, he would be laid up for a month, with no food or shelter, dying slowly unless he showed himself in a village and gave himself over to the constable or overseer or beadle, whichever it might be. He glanced in a still pool, winced at the bruise showing across his cheek where a flailing backhand had scraped him; there was blood matted in his hair, contrasting dark red streaks against his light, reddish-brown mane – it wasn't his and he scrubbed hurriedly at it, revolted, stomach turning. For the rest, it was just the face he was used to, square, blue-eyed, heavy on the chin – a typical local appearance – he didn't look any different at all for the men he had killed; nor should he, bloody butchers – they had shot without saying a word, with no warning at all, no chance to put their hands up – they had deserved all they'd got.

He had gone out with his father, no other crew on a thirty-footer, before dawn, as normal, but had headed straight across the Channel rather than south of west to their normal fishing grounds; three times running in the past week they had come in with their small fish-hold less than half-full, the fish weren't about to be caught so they had to make their money the other way. Into a small inlet on the Normandy coast on the second dawn, tying up at the wooden jetty that stuck out into the river, waiting to be noticed; if they were ignored for a couple of hours they would know there was no cargo to hand and would cast off, never a word spoken. A villager trotted out to them in the first ten minutes, glanced at his father's face and nodded recognition; a few minutes after that and a donkey cart appeared, fully laden with small barrels of brandy, a couple of longshoremen walking beside it. Three cart loads over as many hours and the fish-hold and all the other spaces below the deck were packed full, even their tiny cabin taken over. The tide

turned soon after noon and they sailed out, tacking slowly against the on-shore breeze, making a slow offing then a long leg to the south-west before beating their way across almost to the Devon coast so as to pick up with any other boats that were out, to seem to be just another fisherman. As they opened Torbay next afternoon they spotted an inshore crabber, their contact, and his father waved a red-striped jersey three times over his head before tacking a couple of miles out to sea to wait for full darkness; there would be a shore-party waiting to take their load when they ran up on the shingle in the cove below their cottage.

The party was there and so were dragoons and Excisemen, armed and impatient.

It was before mid-summer so the fields would be empty of anything edible, and he did not dare go into a village to try to buy bread – leaving aside that there might not be any sort of shop, was none in most villages so that he would have to knock on doors and ask to buy food, he would be seen, remarked on, possibly questioned, certainly remembered and commented on. It would take at least another day for hunger to weaken him; he had gone longer than this without food in dad's boat several times when bad winds had held them out longer than expected and he knew that a couple of days starvation was a nuisance, no more. The sun was westering and he needed to make distance and a decision; eastwards, in all probability, was best – Poole was not too far away, Portsmouth less than a week's walking, and both were big ports where there would be a way out. West was too long a walk, whether he tried for Bristol or the south coast; Poole was better, not only nearer but home to merchant shipping with a wage and the chance to sign off legally or to buy a cabin passage, he had enough money for that; Portsmouth meant navy, heaved aboard ship willy-nilly and off to fight the war in America for little money and that paid a year late. Getting to America was probably a good idea, but not in a naval ship, if it could be avoided; desertion was always possible, but it could be a damned nuisance to organise from all he had heard. Either way, he had to get there yet and he was probably no more than ten miles from home in a straight line and the hunt would be up, though he suspected they would be after the other four who had taken to their pack-horses and gone off on the highway, making for the Bristol road and hoping to out-distance any pursuit.

“Not a chance! Bloody fools,” he said aloud, for the comfort of hearing a voice as he slipped from tree to tree, crouching in the hope of concealing his six foot frame. He was big, even for a Dorset man, and he still had some growing to do, he was only just sixteen. He sat in the last cover, suddenly found tears flowing as he saw his father turning to him in last night's darkness and shouting to run and then the blood spurting from his mouth as he fell and a dismounted dragoon, clumsy in his heavy boots, charging him waving a sabre, mouth open, panting. Wearing light shoes, slipped on as he landed, he was much quicker on his feet, grabbed the flailing arm and snapped it and took the sabre and ran forward at the others stood by his father...

He had no time to weep, not if he was to live.

The woodland came to an abrupt end with a ditch and then rough pasture with a couple of dozen cattle; he could see the roofs of a small village a half mile or so ahead; not large, there were no more than seven or eight cooking smokes visible, and most of the labourers' wives would have the stew pot on by this time of day. He did not know the area, but thought it might be one of the Piddles, not so far from Dorchester. If that was the case then he needed to keep a bit north of the town before working his way cross-country – there was a barracks with dragoons in Dorchester, and it was a fair bet that they would be out, patrolling the highways and maybe poking their noses down the bigger lanes. He was too well-bruised to deny that he had been in a

fight, had obviously been out all of the previous night, sleeping rough, and would be taken up on sight. He stared all round, plotting the route he would take when night fell.

Over the shoulder of the empty down on his right, the bare turf easy to walk on in the dark and just enough of a moon to see rabbit holes; it would probably be possible to see the streak of the roadway down in the valley as well, a guide to follow, to give him a rough direction. That road would eventually lead him to Poole, he thought; he had seen the port, but only from the sea, at a distance when they were following the herring run down the coast. Still, the hills of Purbeck would give him an unmistakable landmark; he could not get lost.

He kept as low on the hillside as he could, just above the rough of the valley, so as not to outline himself against the skyline – there was probably no need to be so careful, none of the locals ventured out at night further than to the beer house and back, but there was no need to take any risks at all, not if he wanted his neck to stay unstretched. Five miles, two hours of slow walking, brought him to the far side of the down where he had the problem of what to do next: the lowland was clay, waste land in an unenclosed manor, left uncultivated by tradition and because it was held in common usage so that it was worth nobody's while to spend out to clear it and make fields. It was covered in blackthorn and sloe bushes and brambles and nettles and patches of boggy reeds and rushes – slow ground to walk in daylight, impassable at night, so he could stick to the high ground and go miles out of his way to the north or follow the track through the middle. The waste would provide plenty of hiding places if he had to run, and he would be able to hear any party of horsemen in the very unlikely case that they were out at night; there would be no picket lying in wait, not on so small a lane in such an out-of-the-way place. He worked his way to the dirt path and stretched out in a fast walk to the south and east.

He was wide awake, alert, watching everything, head never still. After an hour he spotted a black shape perched on a low branch near the track, hunched over, not upright like an owl – a pheasant from its size, strayed a mile or two from a sporting squire's coverts. He cast about him, found a heavy stick, two fingers thick and a foot or so long; a fast throw from five yards and the bird was down, in his hands, neck wrung and tucked away inside his jerkin; it was poaching, in the close at that, but he was not too worried about standing before the Bench for that charge, poaching only carried transportation and they'd be hanging him first,

Just before dawn the heavy clays ended and he moved out onto heathland, the sandy soils much drier and carrying only a waist-high vegetation of furzes and bracken, the gorse bushes just showing their golden flower, dense and impenetrable to horsemen. A man on foot, however, who knew what he was doing, could find dry cover in the foot or two of clear space between the lowest branches and the ground, crawling carefully underneath, pulling an armful of soft bracken fronds to cover the prickles and provide some warmth, looking out warily for the adders who also loved this cover. He slept undisturbed till late afternoon, then plucked and drew the bird, brushing the ants off it, and moved a couple of hundred yards away, still in cover, and pulled together a tiny fire of dead, dry twigs and stems, hot but almost smoke-free. He spitted the pheasant and waited patiently, turning it every few minutes until he was certain it was cooked all the way through; he dared not risk loose bowels, not if he was to keep moving fast.

He ate the tough, dry, unhung meat, forcing it all down despite its lack of flavour, and moved again, a good half a mile away from the fire and smell of cooked food, laid up a few yards back from the road, waiting for darkness and safety. An hour before twilight his caution was rewarded as a large party of horsemen came into view. A full squadron of dragoons trotted slowly by, looking left and right, scanning the verges, coming from the direction of Poole and heading towards their barracks in Dorchester, at a guess. They were heavies, he noted, carrying carbines

in saddle buckets and long, straight swords, not the lights he had met at the shoreline and who had used shorter, curved sabres. That meant at least two regiments quartered in the area, and maybe a dozen squadrons out, sufficient to cover all of the roads, including the highway to Bristol. Fugitives on slow pack-ponies would certainly have been run down, probably within a very few hours. If he was lucky, *very* lucky indeed, they might be content with them, might not even become aware of a fifth on foot; more likely they would question the four they had taken and then offer King's Evidence to one so that he could not only save his neck, but could expect early freedom. The four would obviously blame everything on the fifth, the one who was not there to give his side of the story – not that he had much to offer, nothing that would save him from the hangman – and give his name and all they knew of him. Say one day to catch them and bring them back to barracks and then another day to wring them dry . . . the hunt would be up with a vengeance by tomorrow, the countryside aswarm with militia and cavalry combing the areas they had not covered yet. He needed be lying-up in town by tomorrow noon at latest, so he must run the most direct road tonight, there was no choice; he could not risk detouring inland in the hope of throwing them off the scent, he must get to Poole and on board a ship.

The track quickly led him to the highway, such as it was; it was an old road, not a modern turnpike, which meant that it had no gates to pass but also that its surface was rutted, pot-holed, broken, thickly muddy where it crossed a stream, a dust-bath when it was dry, a quagmire when wet, but it was better than trying to force a slow passage across the heathland or through the river valley. It was a dry night and he was able to make an easy trot under the sliver of a moon and the bright starlight. There was enough light for him to be able to pick out movement at a safe distance, but the road was empty, only his figure moving through the desert of the night, local people had no call to be out of their villages after dark and carriers and carters worked the daylight hours solely; only the Mail coaches ran at night, and there were none of them on this local road.

A tawny owl passed silently over his head, a rush of air its only indication, and a pair of screech owls talked to each other for a few minutes. Once he spotted a bat against the moon. Otherwise he was alone, but that was nothing new, he always had been. He could not remember his mother, she had died when he was two or three, and his father had always been a distant figure – not unkind, protective, making sure there was food on the table and clothes on his back, teaching him the ways of the fishing boats, and the associated trade, but never with much to say, almost never touching him. His father had found the pennies for dame school, had never begrudged them, had insisted that he went to school, in fact, and in one of their very few conversations had asked him if he wanted to go on to the Latin school in Bridport, the dame having said he was bright enough to be successful there; he had accepted his assurance that he would rather go to sea without comment either way. They had lived in their own small cottage, a little removed from the village, with their own short crescent of shingle where they drew the boat up, just far enough out to keep themselves to themselves and to make sure that his acquaintances from school never became close friends. It had the advantage that there was nothing to regret, no kin, no soul-mate to sever ties with; very little in the way of personal possessions either, nothing to cherish for sentiment – he could look forward, there was nothing behind him; he wondered if there would ever be anything in front.

For miles the road crossed the empty heaths before dropping down to the coastal clays, equally desolate at first, the soil unfriendly to farming except after a lot of labour and money had been put into drainage and dung and marl, but close to Poole and its market there was arable land, made fields with smallholdings and hamlets to work them. In the nature of things, the road

would go through the middle of each cluster of houses, and that presented him with a gamble. If he kept to the road he might be stopped in any of the villages – strangers in the night were rare and unwelcome beings, especially close to a villainous set of townies, thieves and rascals to a man; if he moved out into the fields he might wake the dogs, might be chased down by suspicious farmers who would certainly hale him off to the constable for being on their land without reason. On the road he might be able to claim that he was a bona fide traveller, a seaman, say, from Wimborne, who had dallied over-long at home or with his girl and had to make the morning tide; in the fields he had to be a poacher at best. If the hue and cry was up for him then he was lost, but if there was no alert out then he might be able to talk his way through a village.

In the event he was not stopped at all; he walked the road and was ignored, if he was ever seen. The constables remained tucked up warm in their beds and the busybodies occupied themselves elsewhere while the watchdogs were used to foot-traffic on the road and would only raise the alarm for those who strayed off the carriageway.

Soon after dawn he was in Poole, ambling down the High Street to the quayside, lost in the early-morning bustle of the waking working day. He found a pie-shop as it opened, joined a dozen other men grabbing a hot breakfast.

‘Rabbit pie’, so the board said, ‘hot for d1’.

It was hot and it cost a penny, so the shopkeeper wasn’t a complete liar, but it tasted unlike any rabbit he had ever eaten.

“Rabbit, mister?”

“Well, what do you expect for a bloody penny? There’s a bit of ‘orse in it. About fifty-fifty, I suppose.”

“Yeah, one ‘orse, one rabbit!”

It was edible and he was hungry; he finished it and wandered off, down to the waterfront to see what was about.

The town was old and rich and the port was bustling, the harbour full of coasters and small merchantmen and one big whaler, immediately identifiable by the basket crow’s nest. Nothing else bigger than two hundred tons, he estimated, most much less, typical local traffic. A dozen or so of fishing smacks, the larger drifters who would follow the herring run all the way from Newcastle to Penzance, selling at each port along the whole coast; they would work the mackerel off the West Country and then make their way back north before the worst of the winter storms set in; good money, but six or seven months out at a time. A few smaller boats, mostly local crabbers, not many in Poole, they were mostly working out of the local fishing villages, had probably come in to market. Three schooners and a lugger that looked a little too prosperous for working boats, well-kept and smart; smugglers for sure, working out of the Jersey entrepot, bringing in wines for the gentry and thus untouchable by the excise men, their bribes paid at the highest level and willing to be seen in daylight. One brig, somewhat larger than most, pierced for five or six guns on the broadside; not smart enough for navy and too few men in sight; too big to be a Revenue cutter, and probably too slow as well; a trader to Africa, maybe, or a Levanter, needing to defend herself against the Barbary pirates; being Poole, she might well be a private ship of war. Worth thinking about if he couldn’t get out any other way, there was money to be made on the privateers, but they were poorly regarded, generally speaking, too willing to turn to slaving in peacetime, and slaving was low. Besides that, there were always rumours about privateers – inconvenient prisoners, such as crewmen and poor passengers who could not pay a ransom, knocked over the head and thrown overboard, worse happening first to the females

amongst them, that was always said; of some private men of war the accusation was made of downright piracy – they were said to take English ships into French ports, French ships into English. It was all possible, even likely, which was why generally speaking fisher folk did not go into privateers, or if they did, never came back to the nets again.

The quayside was lined, alternately it seemed, with boozers and ships' chandlers – Poole was famous for its drinking houses, there were said to be ninety two along the mile of the High Street alone – Saturday night was famous for its drunken rioting. Not so many years back a drunken mob had hanged every Excise man in town outside their own office – though that was regarded as excessive, a one-off jollification which had not been repeated, the redcoats had been sent in afterwards and had been more than usually brutal. The pubs acted as meeting houses and often as ships' agents, places where crew could sign on or passengers find a cabin; it was just a question of finding the right one. He looked up and down the whole quay before determining on the Horseshoes Inn because it was older, bigger, stone-built, respectable-seeming, likely to deal with a better class of mariner, perhaps. He sat and waited for a couple of hours, until the sun was higher – the drinkers of early morning would have no interest in business, would have nothing useful to say; anyone who needed to drink his breakfast was unlikely to be a successful, prosperous, honest sailor.

He did his best to spruce himself up, splashed water on his face and hands and smoothed his hair down, trying to look within reason respectable himself, then walked into the bar and took a pint of mild, the cheapest and weakest of beers. A quick pull at his mug and he asked the potman how he would go about buying a passage out of Poole; he wanted to go to the Americas, he said, and understood he needed to take passage on a Bristolman.

“Or from Cork, young master. You won't be wanting to go up to London, to pick up a cabin there, so the easiest way be to take a coasting ship to Bristol or to the Cove of Cork. There's three Bristolmen in that I know of the while, but whether they be bound east or west, I can't say, off hand, like, young sir. I could find out for thee easy enough, sir. Will you be staying here, overnight, sir? A dinner and a bed and bite to eat in the morning, sir, your own room, all for eighteen pence, sir.”

He had to sleep somewhere, did not want to rough it in a back alley – a room made sense.

“Yes, please, I'd not thought of having to stay a night, but that makes good sense.”

“Yes, sir. What be the name, sir?”

“Andrews, Thomas Andrews.”

As he said it he realised that he should not have given his own real name, he should have invented one, but it was too late now, and he would be gone tomorrow.

“If so be you're wishful to go to the Americas, Mr Andrews, you'll be wanting some clothes for the voyage, I should reckon.”

“I suppose I will – I can get them this morning.”

“Would thee like to pay for the room, up front, like, sir?”

Tom dug into his pocket, took out his leather drawstring purse, pulled out silver for the room, putting gold back, not awake to the bartender's eyes making a rapid valuation of the contents.

“Thank'ee, sir. If you be wishful, you can pick up warm clothes and a bag and necessities in the shops along the High Street, sir.”

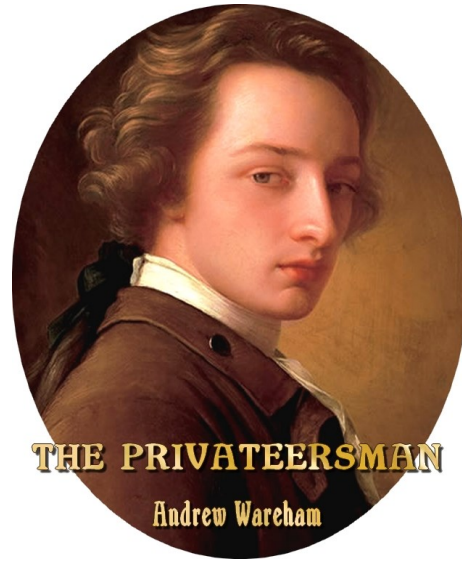
Tom thanked him for his help and obediently went out to make his purchases – a heavy leather valise and working shirts, canvas trousers, thick socks and a warm woolly jumper, a waterproof jacket to go over all; he decided to buy boots as well, found a pair that fitted quite comfortably and would provide him with something to wear on land. A little thought saw him invest in two pairs of flannel drawers to wear week and week about, and then a length of towelling and a bar of soap. Equipped for all of his needs, he took his new kit back to the Horseshoes Inn and stowed it away in the small back room that was his for the night. He ate an early dinner of mutton and greens and new potatoes followed by a big plateful of summer pudding, the strawberries a rare treat. He wandered back down to the quay to look at the sights and ease his digestion, idling in the sunshine. He passed several unaccompanied young ladies, which was unusual in his limited experience; two of them asked him if he would like a good time but he smiled politely and said he was enjoying himself already, thank you.

The barman greeted him in the friendliest fashion when he came back to the Inn and drew a pint for him, on the house.

“The Swallow lugger be sailing on the morning’s tide, Mr Andrews, bound for Plymouth and Bristol, and there’s an empty cabin that’s yours for five bob, sir, if you takes your own grub along, ten bob if you eats at the master’s table. The master’ll be in later on, sir, and I’ll take you over to ‘im if you wants.”

“Yes, please, that would be very good of you. I’m much obliged to you.” Tom could see that he would need to give the man a tip as a thank you, wondered anxiously just what the right amount would be.

Tom leant on the bar and chatted idly for the next couple of hours – it was not busy in the early evening, it seemed. After three pints he found the need to ease his bladder and ambled out into the back yard at the barman’s instructions, found the appropriate wall by its smell; he was just adjusting his clothing when a wooden club caught him firmly above the right ear and dropped him neatly to the cobblestones, unconscious but not severely hurt, a very tidy, professional job.



**Book One: A Poor Man
at the Gate Series**

[Chapter Two](#)

His head hurt; it throbbed; when he felt very gently behind his ear it was tender.

“Some bastard hit me!” The sound of his voice gave him a headache; he closed his eyes again. It put the seal on a bad week, he felt, the whole world was against him, was creeping up behind his back.

Reluctantly, he decided he should make some effort to find out what had happened, discover the worst, whatever it might be – if he was in prison he might as well know at once, and start to prepare his mind for a fairly rapid hanging.

It wasn't as bad as it might have been – he was lying on a wooden floor, not stone, and there was a thin palliasse underneath him and a rough woollen blanket drawn up to his chin. Some effort had been made to look after him, but he wasn't in the room he had taken in the Horseshoes Inn.

He was wearing his new clothes, and the boots he had bought the previous day; knowing it must be a waste of time, he checked his pockets. No purse. Thirty guineas up the spout – six months and a dozen runs it had taken to put that much together, saving every penny his dad had given him, spending nothing, risking his neck, all for some thieving bugger to grab and piss up against the wall! A hundred and he had been going to buy his own boat, then he could have gone out with his dad seining rather than drifting, more than doubling their catch, with a bit of luck. He swore, then shrugged, at least he was alive and what he had made once he could do a second time, easier for knowing a bit more about the way the world worked now; in any case, he wouldn't ever be going out with dad again and it didn't seem likely he would be doing much fishing for a while yet. He stood up and stumbled as the floor pitched.

It was a deck, he was at sea, shanghaied.

Not the navy – if a press gang had taken him and somehow got him on board a man of war then he would be waking up in a crowded mess-deck, not on his own in a cabin or store-room like this. He sat down again to think.

He had to get out of England, that was given, and he had to stay away for a year or two, until the hue and cry had died down; when he came back it must not be to the fishing in Dorset, and it might be better not to come back at all. He had no money now, could not buy a passage out, so he had to sign on as a seaman, as a fore-castle hand, which had always been on the cards; he was on a ship already, one that had taken some pains to get him on board and was hardly likely simply to let him go again. Wiser to make the best of it – he'd got some of what he wanted. He just hoped it wasn't the whaler – a three year run to the Great South Sea by way of Cape Horn was not the way out he would have chosen, though he would be a thorough-going deep sea sailor by the end of it.

The door cracked open – he had not bothered to try the handle, it had to be locked and they weren't about to forget him and leave him to starve, nor would they leave him long in idleness.

A cautious voice called in to him.

“You awake?”

“Yep.”

“You want to come out, then?”

“On me way.”

He walked slowly out of the small cabin, hands showing clear and empty – no knife or bottle or billy - glanced about him. He was below decks, had been kept in a bos'n's store by the looks of things, hard up in the bows, a paint room, maybe; possibly purser's lazaretto, but neither should have been empty, leaving harbour. He could just see a figure in the half light, pointing him to a ladder.

He blinked in the sunlight, his head complaining at the brightness; he wondered if this one was the bloke who had hit him, decided to let it wait – he would find out in time and he wasn't too concerned anyway, what was a thump on the head after all that had happened already this week?

He was on the brig, and a dirty, scruffy, ill-cared for vessel it was! Eight small cannon and two empty ports on each side, there should be twelve all told. Four pound, he estimated. A chaser in the bows, roundshot in the ready-use rack about the size of an orange, probably six pounds. Not navy, as dirty as this. Not a merchantman, they carried stern-chasers for defence, had no use for a great gun in the bows. Not a smuggler – they ran, would fight only as a very last resort, never carried broadside guns which would condemn them as pirates. Must be a privateer, and an unlucky one, at that; profitable private ships turned would-be crewmen away, never had to resort to force to make up their numbers.

He looked more openly about him as his eyes became accustomed to the light. There was a watch of fifteen or sixteen men, which suggested a crew of about forty when he would have expected the better part of a hundred, privateers needing boarders and prize crews.

Stood six feet away, out of arm's reach, was a lean, medium-tall, hard-looking seaman, a man who knew what he was doing. He was unarmed, so he thought he had no need for any weapon; best to take him at his own price, assume that he did know just what he was doing. He was dark-haired, swarthy, brown-eyed, hook-nosed, looked more like a Spaniard or a Romany than a local Englishman, Tom thought.

“Captain wants to speak to you. What's your name?”

“Tom Andrews.”

“I’m Jack Smith, prize master, Star of the Avon. Captain’s name is Blaine, by the wheel. You coming?”

“Yes, sir.”

Smith – if that was the name he wanted – relaxed, turned his back and led Tom aft, happy he would not be attacked from behind, not by a man who had just called him sir – he would have had other names for him if he was after blood.

“New man, Captain. Name is Tom Andrews.”

The captain nodded and coughed and sniffed; he stank of gin, explaining, perhaps, the state of the Star. He was skeletally thin, undernourished, the bottle probably his only sustenance, far gone; he was watery-eyed, fair hair uncut and thinning, blowing wildly in the light wind. Tall but stooped, Blaine would have been much the same height as Tom, looked over his shoulder, never into his face.

“How old are you, Andrews? You look big enough to do a man’s work.”

“Sixteen, sir. Last month.”

“Still got some height to make, and a lot of muscle to bulk out – you will be a big fellow before you’re finished! By the way you stand you have used the sea, Andrews?”

“Yes, sir. My dad had a drifter, a thirty footer. I crewed with him since I could walk, just about.”

“Good. You’re here now and you can make a choice – gun crew or boarder, whichever you wish. Ordinary seaman, not a landsman, so that will make you a one-and-a-half share man. If you show you’re good enough we’ll change that to ‘able’ and two shares. You don’t have to sign on, of course – if you want you can always swim back to Poole.”

Tom smiled at his wit – captains always had to be humourists. He had already seen that there was no land in sight, that they were well out into the Channel. He raised his hand, politely.

“I volunteer, sir. Boarder, if you please.”

“Captain Blaine knows the sea, Tom, he just had a bit of bad luck which turned him sour a bit,” Smith explained. “Beginning of the war, he was doing well, a young man, I don’t know how old exactly, say twenty-five or so, but he had his own frigate, Arrow, 28, nine-pounders, was cruising off Chesapeake Bay when the lookouts called a sail at dawn, making out to sea in the fogs you get there, couldn’t see hardly nothing. Captain closed her and then made the challenge at a cable, gave her a gun across the bows as a wake up. She made no reply and set her topsails and seemed to swing towards, so he gave her a full broadside and closed and boarded. Kestrel ship-sloop, had taken damage from a big blockade runner the previous day, lost her captain and first and the youngster left didn’t know what to do when he couldn’t hoist the lights for the reply, thought to come within hail. Anyhow, the broadside killed a dozen of her men, including a midshipman whose mother was a niece of the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs! The court found for the captain, but he was beached and wasn’t never going to command a King’s Ship ever again. I was master’s mate on watch with him, stayed with him when he was offered a berth as master of a privateer. He made enough to buy Star in the first twelvemonth, but his luck’s been out since.”

Smith was resigned, philosophical almost.

“How long has he had Star, Mr Smith?”

“Eight months; long enough to fit her out and take her on two empty cruises. Not so much as a sniff of a prize. Anything we chased ran up English colours!”

Tom nodded; judging by the store-room he had seen this was not going to be a long cruise.

“So where are we bound, Mr Smith?”

“Bordeaux stream, then the Spanish coast if we have no luck. Rich waters, French West Indiamen as well as coastal traffic.”

Tom nodded; he knew nothing of those waters, having previously crossed the Channel only to run directly to Normandy to pick up smuggler’s cargoes from the smallest fishing villages. He noticed that Smith was uncomfortable, had left something important unsaid. He waited, let the silence draw out, dad had always said that the silent man heard most.

“Thing is, Tom, those are heavily patrolled waters, too. Both the French and the Spanish keep an eye open in that part of the Bay. You need to be wide awake in those waters.”

Tom thought of the picture Blaine had presented – he could have described him in several different ways, but ‘wide awake’ was not a term that leapt to his mind.

The Star was a strangely disorganised vessel – there were two watches, but no petty officers to run them, the men splitting the work between them as they fancied, the result being that the least popular jobs simply were not done and the decks grew dirtier on a daily basis while the heads were utterly appalling. Blaine and Smith were the sole officers – there had been two other boarding masters but they had refused to sail for a third cruise on the Star, preferring to earn a living wage instead. The cook had sailed again, and he boiled the ration beef daily and issued them with biscuit and cheese for breakfast and supper; for the rest, there were onions for those who wished to cut them up, and suet and flour and dried plums for anyone who wished to boil up a pudding. Small beer was issued by Smith, thrice daily, a quart pot per man at each issue as the water was somewhat dubious, safe only when well boiled because the barrels had not been scrubbed out before filling; there were no spirits outside of the captain’s cabin. Discipline was relaxed, to the point of being effectively non-existent – the men were almost all volunteers and they could see their own interest as being best served by good behaviour, while there was no such concept as ‘desertion’ as they were all free to resign at any time, in theory, though it might have been somewhat impractical to hand in their notice in the middle of the ocean. In any case, most of the men had a reason to be where they were, at sea and invisible, not on land in their home towns or villages, though, naturally, they tended to keep those reasons to themselves.

Over four uneventful days Tom came to know the names of the men in his watch, the five other boarders particularly.

George and Joby Coles were brothers, either side of twenty, although they did not know their ages for certain. They were Diddicoy, settled travellers who claimed their families to have been Romany, once upon a time. They were short, squat, sandy-haired and kept themselves to themselves; both carried knives where they could be seen.

John Murray was an older man, nearly forty, toothless and balding, lean and slightly bent over; his back ached and he moaned that it was crippling him; he had a very short temper, it was said, with drink in him could explode in anger, blade or bottle in his fist, whatever was close to hand. He was thought to be a Scot who had come south years before; he had little of the accent of the far north, sounded to Tom very much the local man – perhaps he had been brought to England by his parents as a small child.

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