

William Johnson Cory (1823-92)

1 *A Ballad for a Boy*

When George the Third was reigning a hundred years ago,
He ordered Captain Farmer to chase the foreign foe.
“You’re not afraid of shot,” said he, “you’re not afraid of wreck,
So cruise about the west of France in the frigate called *Quebec*.

Quebec was once a Frenchman’s town, but twenty years ago 5
King George the Second sent a man called General Wolfe, you know,
To clamber up a precipice and look into Quebec,
As you’d look down a hatchway when standing on the deck.

If Wolfe could beat the Frenchmen then so you can beat them now.
Before he got inside the town he died, I must allow. 10
But since the town was won for us it is a lucky name,
And you’ll remember Wolfe’s good work, and you shall do the same.”

Then Farmer said, “I’ll try, sir,” and Farmer bowed so low
That George could see his pigtail tied in a velvet bow.
George gave him his commission, and that it might be safer, 15
Signed “King of Britain, King of France,” and sealed it with a wafer.

Then proud was Captain Farmer in a frigate of his own,
And grander on his quarter-deck than George upon the throne.
He’d two guns in his cabin, and on the spar-deck ten,
And twenty on the gun-deck, and more than ten score men. 20

And as a huntsman scours the brakes with sixteen brace of dogs,
With two-and-thirty cannon the ship explored the fogs.
From Cape la Hogue to Ushant, from Rochefort to Belleisle,
She hunted game till reef and mud were rubbing on her keel.

The fog are dried, the frigate’s side is bright with melting tar, 25
The lad up in the foretop sees square white sails afar;

The east wind drives three square-sailed masts from out the Breton bay,
And "Clear for action!" Farmer shouts, and reefers yell "Hooray!"

The Frenchmen's captain had a name I wish I could pronounce;
A Breton gentleman was he, and wholly free from bounce, 30
One like those famous fellows who died by guillotine
For honour and the fleurs-de-lys, and Antoinette the Queen.

The Catholic for Louis, the Protestant for George,
Each captain drew as bright a sword as saintly smiths could forge;
And both were simple seamen, but both could understand 35
How each was bound to win or die for flag and native land.

The French ship was *La Surveillante*, which means the watchful maid;
She folded up her head-dress and began to cannonade.
Her hull was clean, and ours was foul; we had to spread more sail.
On canvas, stays, and topsail yards her bullets came like hail. 40

Sore smitten were both captains, and many lads beside,
And still to cut our rigging the foreign gunners tried.
A sail-clad spar came flapping down athwart a blazing gun;
We could not quench the rushing flames, and so the Frenchman won.

Our quarter-deck was crowded, the waist was all aglow; 45
Men hung upon the taffrail half scorched, but loth to go;
Our captain sat where once he stood, and would not quit his chair.
He bade his comrades leap for life, and leave him bleeding there.

The guns were hushed on either side, the Frenchmen lowered boats,
They flung us planks and hencoops, and everything that floats. 50
They risked their lives, good fellows! to bring their rivals aid.
'Twas by the conflagration the peace was strangely made.

La Surveillante was like a sieve; the victors had no rest.
They had to dodge the east wind to reach the port of Brest.
And where the waves leapt lower and the riddled ship went slower, 55
In triumph, yet in funeral guise, came fisher-boats to tow her.

They dealt with us as brethren, they mourned for Farmer dead;
And as the wounded captives passed each Breton bowed the head.
Then spoke the French Lieutenant, "’Twas fire that won, not we.
You never struck your flag to us; you’ll go to England free." 60

’Twas the sixth day of October, seventeen hundred seventy-nine,
A year when nations ventured against us to combine,
Quebec was burnt and Farmer slain, by us remembered not;
But thanks be to the French book wherein they’re not forgot.

Now you, if you’ve to fight the French, my youngster, bear in mind 65
Those seamen of King Louis so chivalrous and kind;
Think of the Breton gentlemen who took our lads to Brest,
And treat some rescued Breton as a comrade and a guest.

1885

(From *Ionica*. London, 1891)