

The Merriman Chronicles

Book One

A Certain Threat

By Roger Burnage

A Certain Threat

Amazon Customer Reviews

Seafaring Masterpiece ★★★★★

Cracking tale in the Hornblower genre. Unputdownable. If a period seafaring adventure is your preference. You can't do better than this. Can't wait for the next in the series!

Great read! ★★★★★

As seafaring books go this is a very good read and I would recommend it to a friend. Once you've picked it up you can't put it down. Looking forward to the next book.

Irish Sea Saga ★★★★★

An excellent book that was so hard to put down. Interestingly set in the Irish Sea between the wars with France, yet cleverly involving the French. Highly recommended.

Best Napoleonic war story I have read ★★★★★

A VERY good story and good likable people. I want to read more from this author. Good story well put together. Next one please!!!

A very Readable Book ★★★★★

Very much in the Hornblower tradition but well put together, which kept the action coming. I recommend the book whole-heartedly.

A book that was difficult to put down ★★★★★

Superb read, the story flowed smoothly from start to finish, would recommend it, it is a fine work of fiction.

Could not put it down ★★★★★

Being from the Wirral and knowing the area very well - mind you the 1960's not the 1700's although the sea hasn't changed much - I was captured from the first chapter. I have sailed many of the areas mentioned and have even dangled my hand in the water at Parkgate although it is mainly vegetation now.

I am so pleased I was as it is a wonderful read and I am in love with Helen.

Merriman and company ★★★★★

A plot involving the Irish, Welsh and French and add a bit of pre-war espionage and you might have a story. Give it to Roger Burnage and that is what you have.

Mystery and naval mayhem add further intrigue, throw in government and the secret service and you certainly want to read a little just to find out of this what it is about, and you are hooked.

Don't worry there are another six more to read

A gripping read ★★★★★

A gripping read that I struggled to put down. Entertaining and while I'm no expert seemed to be very well researched. I'll be reading the next book in the series.

Great naval historical yarn ★★★★★

Merriman is in a league with other naval heroes such as Kydd written by Stockwin. Hornblower and others. Once started you will not be able to read quickly enough. Great story.

Great read ★★★★★

Great series read the lot and thoroughly enjoy them.

Britannia Rules The Waves ★★★★★

To all who appreciate a rousing tale of British seamen, this book is for you. Intrigue, spies, rebels and the British Navy. Who could ask for more. Well, me for one. I'm ready for the next one. Enough authenticity to leave the smell of ocean spray and tar in the nostrils.

Excellent read! ★★★★★

Excellent read. The characters were believable, the story was exciting. The book is based on some letters found behind a fireplace and the author stuck what was documented in the letters. He has faithfully recounted what was in the letters. I now wish he would let his imagination take flight and create some adventures for a thoroughly likable character.

If you like sea stories, this book is for you



This book kept me turning pages well into the night. Excellent writing about an action-packed story. Would love to read the next book in the story of Captain Merriman.

New sheriff in town ★★★★★

This book is excellent, historical and give us a run for the money to all previously known authors. A great read.

Copyright Information

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Book 1

A Certain Threat

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With the exception of certain well known historical figures, the characters in this book have no relation or resemblance to any person living or dead

This book and all “The Merriman Chronicles” are works of fiction

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The Merriman Chronicles - Books in the series

James Abel Merriman (1768 - 1843)

A Certain Threat

The Threat in the West Indies

Merriman and the French Invasion

The Threat in the East

The Threat in the Baltic

The Threat in the Americas

The Threat in the Adriatic

The Threat in the Atlantic (In production 2023)

Edward James Merriman (1853 - 1928)

The Fateful Voyage

Foreword - Author's notes

In the spring of 1998, workmen demolishing an old nursing home in the country to the north-west of Chester, discovered bundles of old papers concealed behind a bricked up fireplace.

One of the men with more perspicacity than his fellows, rescued the papers from the bonfires of rubbish and gave them to his employer, a builder, who, knowing of my interest in such things, passed them on to me. The discovered papers were mostly in a very bad state due to the effects of dampness, mildew and the depredations of vermin over the years, and many of the oldest bundles were totally illegible. Another obvious problem was that the papers had been written by different people and some of the handwriting was not of the best. Sorting the papers into chronological order took many months of part time effort, indeed I gave up on the job for weeks and months at a time, but as I progressed with the work I realised that it was a history of the Merriman family from the late 18th century to the early years of the 20th century.

The first clearly decipherable writings referred to a certain James Abel Merriman, a naval officer at the time of the Napoleonic wars, and revealed some startling facts about French activities in and around Ireland and the Irish Sea at that time. I quickly realised that I had in my hands the material for a novel or novels about a little known part of our history.

Other papers showed that beside those serving in the navy, other members of the family were connected with the 22nd Regiment of Foot, the Cheshire Regiment. Intriguingly, a family tree was among the papers in one of the later bundles. Armed with that and from research in local archives, church records etc., it appeared that the last direct male heir of the family, Albert George Merriman was killed in France in 1916 and the last descendant, his unmarried sister Amy Elizabeth, a nurse, was also killed in France in 1917.

I have written several novels about members of the Merriman family whose members served their country and sometimes died for it and I have collected them under the heading "The Merriman Chronicles". This novel, the first, is "A CERTAIN THREAT".

Prologue

With the pale light of dawn, the sea took on the colour of old pewter. Sullen grey clouds deposited their contents in a steady downpour that had not ceased for several hours. Eventually, as the rain eased, a stray gleam of weak sunshine broke through the clouds, illuminating a small boat drifting waywardly with the waves, urged on by the wind and flooding tide.

The boat was partly filled with water which slopped backwards and forwards over the three people lying inside. Only one of these appeared to be alive. He was young, little more than a boy, wearing once-white breeches and a blue coat, both now torn and horribly stained.

A sudden large wave lifted the boat which then crashed down onto a sandbank causing the water inside to surge forward and splash into the boy's face and mouth. He coughed, a movement which sent a ripple of agony through his shoulder and chest. Weakly he tried to lift himself up to see where he had beached, but fell back against the thwart with a groan. Fresh blood drenched his torso as the wound in his shoulder opened anew. He raised his head slowly and scanned the boat until he saw the two bodies half covered in water.

At once he remembered. The shouts and screams. The Welshman, Aled, picking him up and jumping over the side, another seaman there too, swimming, climbing into

the boat. The musket fire, the seaman killed even as he cut the painter to free the boat. The ball in his own shoulder and Aled shot down, dying in front of him as the boat whirled away into the darkness. He stared at the bodies with tears pricking his eyes as he thought about how kind the Welshman had been to him, a raw newcomer to the service.

He was only thirteen and was sure he was going to die. Half lying, half sitting, supported by the thwart, icy water sloshing about in the bottom of the boat – he was aware of all this with a vague resentment and a sort of detached interest as though he was somebody else. His head dropped and he stared miserably at his clothing. That blue coat with the brass buttons had been a source of pride when his mother sewed them on.

He could feel the boat bumping on sand beneath him but gave it no notice, lost as he was in his all-encompassing world of pain and misery.

Next thing he knew, rough hands lifted him, wrapped him, voices spoke, and the neck of a bottle was thrust into his mouth. The fiery spirit burned a path down his throat. He coughed, cried out, then he passed into darkness.

Chapter One

The year 1792

Merriman wakened, cursing fluently as the violent lurch when a coach wheel juddered into a hole in the appalling road caused his left arm and bandaged hand to bang sharply on the window frame.

“God damn it to hell! Can’t the damned coachman keep out of the bloody holes... Your pardon, ma’am.” He spoke these last words as he realised where he was and that the lovely dark-haired and bright-eyed young lady seated on the opposite side of the coach, swathed in a voluminous travelling cloak, was regarding him with something like a smile of amusement. He flushed with annoyance and turned to the window, vowing not to fall asleep again and thus give others the opportunity to show pity or sympathy.

Despite the disgraceful state of the road, the coachman managed to encourage his horses to maintain a reasonable speed. The old mud-splashed coach bounced and rattled as it navigated the worst parts of the road or moved more smoothly on the better stretches, although better was only a relative word for it. The horses were more often than not up to their fetlocks in squishy mud, the result of the heavy rain of the last few days softening the poorly maintained road surface. Indeed it was only fit to be

called a road where the turnpike trusts took the trouble to repair it, which usually only happened close to the various towns and villages along the way.

The day was cold with no rain at present but a mist enveloped the countryside which the brief glimpses of weak, pale sun did little to disperse. Although the heavy frost of the early morning had mostly disappeared, a biting easterly wind meant the air remained cold enough to make the breath of horses and passengers alike rise like steam from a boiling kettle. The passengers on the roof of the coach were the worst off. They could only sit and shiver and huddle into their coats and scarves, clinging desperately to the handrails and hoping not to fall off when the coach swayed, lurched and bounced on the through braces which passed for springs. Inside, the passengers were at least sheltered from the wind and rain by the leather window blinds. In their coats and blankets they managed to keep tolerably warm, some even managing to doze off on the smoother parts of their journey.

Merriman gazed blankly at the passing scenery where remnants of the late September frost lay in any hollows shaded from the paltry sun and the trees were no more than black outlines. He let his mind drift back over the past few weeks. The arrival of the flagship at Portsmouth, the surgeon fussing over his arm and hand, the constant pain, the fear of

losing his hand and the dark despair at the realisation he had lost his ship, *Conflict*, even though he had been cleared at the subsequent court martial at Gibraltar.

Unthinkingly he clenched his tightly bandaged hand, the resulting pain in his arm making him gasp aloud as instant sweat dampened his forehead.

“Are you unwell, sir? May we be of some assistance?”

Merriman came out of his reverie to find the young lady and an elderly gentleman seated next to her leaning forward, looking anxiously at him.

“Thank you, ma’am, I shall be myself directly. Just a small twinge, no more.” He lapsed back into embarrassed silence.

The coach began to pick up speed on a downward slope and the jolting and rattling were enough to ensure that he would not drop off to sleep again.

The young lady regarded him with interest. She saw a dark-haired young man of perhaps twenty-two or twenty-three years, dressed in naval uniform. His face and one visible hand were deeply tanned, so that it was clear that he had been in the tropics, but the darkness of the features was enlivened by his bright blue eyes. The face was interesting, severe and brooding as it was at present, she felt that the serious expression was but a facade to hide the real person beneath.

Merriman was aware that he was still the subject of the young lady's attention. This annoyed him and, with a little more interest, he looked about at the passengers enduring the journey alongside him.

In addition to the lady and gentleman opposite, to whom he had already spoken, a gentleman of sober appearance dressed all in black except for his cravat and tie-wig sat next to him. His large, well-rounded paunch and several wobbling chins gave evidence he was no stranger to good living, confirmed by the food stains on the front of his waistcoat. He was trying to read what appeared to be a legal document. Beyond him sat a smallish man, with a wizened face and beady eyes, which gave him a sly and furtive look. This man peered from time to time into the depths of a large black leather bag which he carried clutched tightly on his knee. He too was soberly dressed.

Merriman took one look at this character's unprepossessing appearance and made an immediate judgement. *I wouldn't trust that one further than I could see him.*

In the opposite corner was a young man dressed in full regimentals, scarlet coat with buff and gold facings and buff vest and breeches, obviously an officer and fast asleep in spite of the rattling and bouncing. He snored gently, his wig twisted askew to reveal a short growth of blonde, almost white, hair.

With a sigh, the fat man next to Merriman folded the document and passed it to the little man who carefully placed it in the black bag.

“Impossible to read, sir,” he said, addressing the elderly gentleman opposite him. “As we are likely to spend some hours together in this contraption before we reach our destination, it occurs to me that the time might pass more agreeably if we each knew who the others are.

“Permit me to introduce myself: my name is Jeremiah Robinson, attorney at law. This person beside me is my clerk, Beadle, a man of discretion, having a prodigious memory for suits and torts, precedents and punishments, faces and names, documents, wills and all cases of law. In short, my right arm as it were.”

During this recital of his virtues the little man bobbed his head and smiled slyly.

“We reside in the city of Chester and I shall be heartily pleased to be back there. Too much hustle and bustle in London, sir, too much hustle and bustle. And now, sir, whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?”

The elderly man, as slim as the lawyer was fat, replied “Doctor William Simpson, sir, at your service. Returning home after some twenty four years in India in the employ of The East India Company, or John Company as it is commonly

called." He indicated the young lady next to him. "May I present my daughter, Helen. My only child." The lawyer inclined his head. "Your servant, ma'am. A pleasure to make your acquaintance." He turned to Merriman. "And you, sir, it is obvious from your uniform that you are part of our glorious navy. May we know more?"

"Merriman, sir, James Merriman, Lieutenant in His Majesty's navy. As you see, nursing a small hurt received in a trifling skirmish with corsairs off the coast of Africa."

"Upon my soul," said the doctor. "I am sure that you must have many interesting tales to tell of your experiences. We've all heard about the heroic deeds of our navy but certainly you will be able to give us more details than are conveyed in the dispatches." Merriman shook his head. "I fear that I am but a poor raconteur, sir, a sailor who might know the handling of ships in a gale or in a naval action against the enemy, but one who has difficulty in finding adequate words to describe these things, especially with a lady present. But you, sir, surely you will have many strange stories to relate about your time in India. I for one would be glad to hear them."

There was a general murmur of agreement.

"Well, yes I do have," replied the doctor, "and I would be pleased to tell you but not whilst this infernal contraption is bouncing around so."

“If I may join in?” All heads turned towards the young army officer who sat up and straightened his wig. “I must apologise for falling asleep in your company, but it was late before I saw my bed last night and with the early start this morning, dashed if I could keep my eyes open. Captain Robert Saville, en route by way of Chester, to rejoin my regiment, the 22nd of Foot, in Ireland.”

The conversation became a little more general, even Mr Beadle chancing the odd timid remark. However, as the journey continued, the talking became less animated and each passenger retired into their own small world of discomfort and boredom. The silence lasted until darkness was almost upon them and the coach rattled under the archway and into the yard of the Crown Inn at Oxford.

All was then hustle and bustle, with ostlers and stable hands un-harnessing the sweating, steaming, stamping horses and servants dashing to and fro carrying the passengers’ luggage into the inn, chivvied on by the innkeeper. That person, a large jovial man almost completely bald and of prodigious girth, was there to welcome the weary travellers.

“Welcome, welcome. Come inside, come inside. There’s a grand fire to warm you and my wife will show you to your rooms. Take care with that lady’s

travelling case, Tom, you clumsy oaf, or you'll find yourself in trouble my lad!"

He appeared to say all this and more without once drawing breath. As they descended from the comparative warmth of the interior of the coach, the passengers stretched aching muscles and hurried into the inn. Merriman looked up at the half frozen passengers climbing down from the top of the coach to see his man, Owen, helping the servants with the baggage.

"Inside with you, man, smartly now, and get yourself warm. A hot toddy will do us both good."

"Aye - aye, sir, just the thing," replied the shivering man.

He followed Merriman into a large room with a low ceiling where the other passengers were gathered in front of a roaring, crackling and welcoming log fire. They reveled in the warmth whilst the landlord dispensed hot drinks and urged the servants to help the ladies and gentlemen with their coats, chattering all the while about the dreadful weather and the terrible state of the roads.

Later that evening, well fed and warm, Merriman relaxed in front of the fire. The doctor and his daughter had retired to their rooms, pleading fatigue from the journey. The lawyer and his clerk were in a corner, their heads close together, discussing in whispers several documents spread on the table in front of them. Owen had disappeared

into the kitchens where no doubt he was trying to make himself popular with the serving girls.

The soldier had joined a group of men round a large table in one corner where a game of cards was in progress. One of the men, a tall, lean, hawk-faced individual, was obviously of quality, but the other three appeared to be rougher types although perhaps a little better dressed than one might expect. One of these three was a large, fat man with a pock-marked face. He wore a grey coat and breeches. The table was illuminated by a lantern suspended from one of the overhead beams which did little more than give the players enough light to see their cards while casting heavy shadows beneath the table.

As he watched the men, Merriman saw one of them pass a card to the fat man on his right who surreptitiously slid it into his cuff. It was obvious that the others had not seen this, so Merriman rose to his feet and casually approached the table as a spectator might do.

That the soldier and the hawk-faced man were losing was clear from the small pile of coins before each of them and the larger pile in front of the fat man.

“Come, sir, must we wait all night for you to play?” said one of the ruffians with a sly grin at his fellows. The soldier cursed. “Damn me, it’s no use, you have the better of me again,” he said as he threw down his cards with something like despair.

The fat man placed his cards on the table and reached forward for the pile of coins with a smile of triumph on his face. That disappeared the instant he felt the muzzle of Merriman's pocket pistol pressed below his ear.

"I think, gentlemen, that you should all place your hands on the table or this little toy might go off," Merriman said, his voice calm. For emphasis, he cocked the small double-barreled pistol. He looked the fat man and continued speaking. "You are an honest man and I'm your uncle. That's two lies at once."

"Damn me, Mr Merriman, what's this?" cried the soldier as they all complied with Merriman's command, including the hawk-faced man who smiled briefly, saying nothing.

"If you would feel in this fellow's cuff, I think that is all the explanation you will need."

Saville reached forward and felt in the cuff, pulling out three playing cards.

"By God! A cheat," he cried. "I thought his cards were too damned lucky. Quite plainly you three are together so I think this gentleman and I should share the pot."

The table went over with a crash as the fat man threw himself violently backwards. As he fell, Merriman caught a glimpse of a glittering blade in the man's hand and felt his pistol explode. The man screamed and fell away, then Saville was helping

Merriman to his feet. One of the ruffians was cowering on the floor clutching his arm from which blood was falling in bright drops to the floor. The fat man and the third man had vanished, as had the lawyer and his clerk.

"I'm vastly obliged to you, sir," declared the other gentleman, wiping a long blade on the coat of the man on the floor and then sliding it into his walking cane with a snap. "I'd been losing steadily, as had your friend, but could not see how they were cheating. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Laurence Grahame, travelling independently to Chester as a guest of friends in that city."

Merriman bowed. "Lieutenant Merriman, sir. My friend, though I scarcely know him, is Captain Saville." He turned to the innkeeper who had appeared from somewhere and was wringing his hands and babbling some nonsense about villains using his respectable establishment to try and rob decent people.

"Pull yourself together, man, for goodness sake, and throw out this wretched fellow who is bleeding all over your floor. Then whilst we sit by the fire and discuss these events, you can collect the money scattered about the floor and give it to these gentlemen. Then you can bring each of us a good measure of your best brandy, to my account."

The three of them settled down together and after the usual pleasantries the conversation turned to the

subject of card cheats, general villains, and highwaymen. Coaches were frequently stopped on the more lonely stretches of road by highwaymen looking for easy pickings from wealthy travellers.

“Of course such rogues must be desperate to do what they do, for they would be hanged if caught,” remarked Mr Grahame. “Although I’m sure that some of them do it for pure devilry or the thrill of adventure.”

“Such people are often given the choice between hanging or imprisonment. Or being pressed into the King’s service,” said Merriman. “Heaven knows the navy always needs more men, though I’m not sure that those who choose the navy realise what a hard life they are in for. The punishments at sea can be harsh for any wrong doing.”

The conversation soon became more general with Merriman and Saville finding much in common to discuss. Grahame was more reserved, though when the talk turned to politics and the possibilities of war with France he became quite eloquent.

The following morning, as the passengers gathered for breakfast, the doctor enquired about the shot he had heard the previous evening. “As there was no further disturbance I judged it wiser to stay upstairs after calming my daughter who was rather alarmed.”

“Nonsense, Father. I was not in the least alarmed. Indeed what you did was to stop me coming down to see what was going on.”

There was excited discussion for a few moments while the lawyer explained what had happened. Then, the need to fortify themselves for the continuing journey ahead, meant the hum of voices was replaced by the rattle of cutlery and the scurrying footsteps of the servants bringing more steaming dishes to the table.

Merriman finished his meal, a modest one by the standards of the day, a naval officer’s stomach not being used to such rich fare. He looked up to find the dark eyes of Miss Simpson fixed upon him. She was in no way embarrassed to be seen to be studying him, but having gained his attention immediately spoke. “I am pleased that you and these other gentlemen are none the worse for your adventure of last night, Lieutenant. I’m only sorry that we missed all the excitement.”

“Little enough excitement, ma’am. It was over in a very few moments, really nothing for you to concern yourself with,” replied Merriman with a laugh.

“Maybe, sir, but I believe that if it were not for your actions these two gentlemen would have lost money to those fellows.”

“Indeed you are right, ma’am,” broke in Captain Saville. “I was losing heavily to the rogues, nearly all my allowance in fact. If the Lieutenant here had not

such sharp eyes I would be in the difficult position of asking my father for more. *He* wouldn't be pleased, I assure you."

"There you are then," said the young lady. "Mr Merriman has amply displayed the qualities we have come to expect from our naval heroes."

"Nothing heroic about it," mumbled Merriman. "I took the fellows by surprise and, to quote the proverb, 'A man surprised is half beaten'".

"Come, sir, you are too modest," she replied.

Merriman, beginning to tire of this repartee, rose to his feet and left the room with a muttered excuse, convinced that the woman was laughing at him.

Soon afterwards the passengers all boarded the coach. The driver settled himself on his seat and gathered up the reins and his whip. At his shout, the ostlers released their hold on the horses' bridles and jumped clear. With a crack of the whip over their heads, the eager horses lunged forward and the coach was on its way.