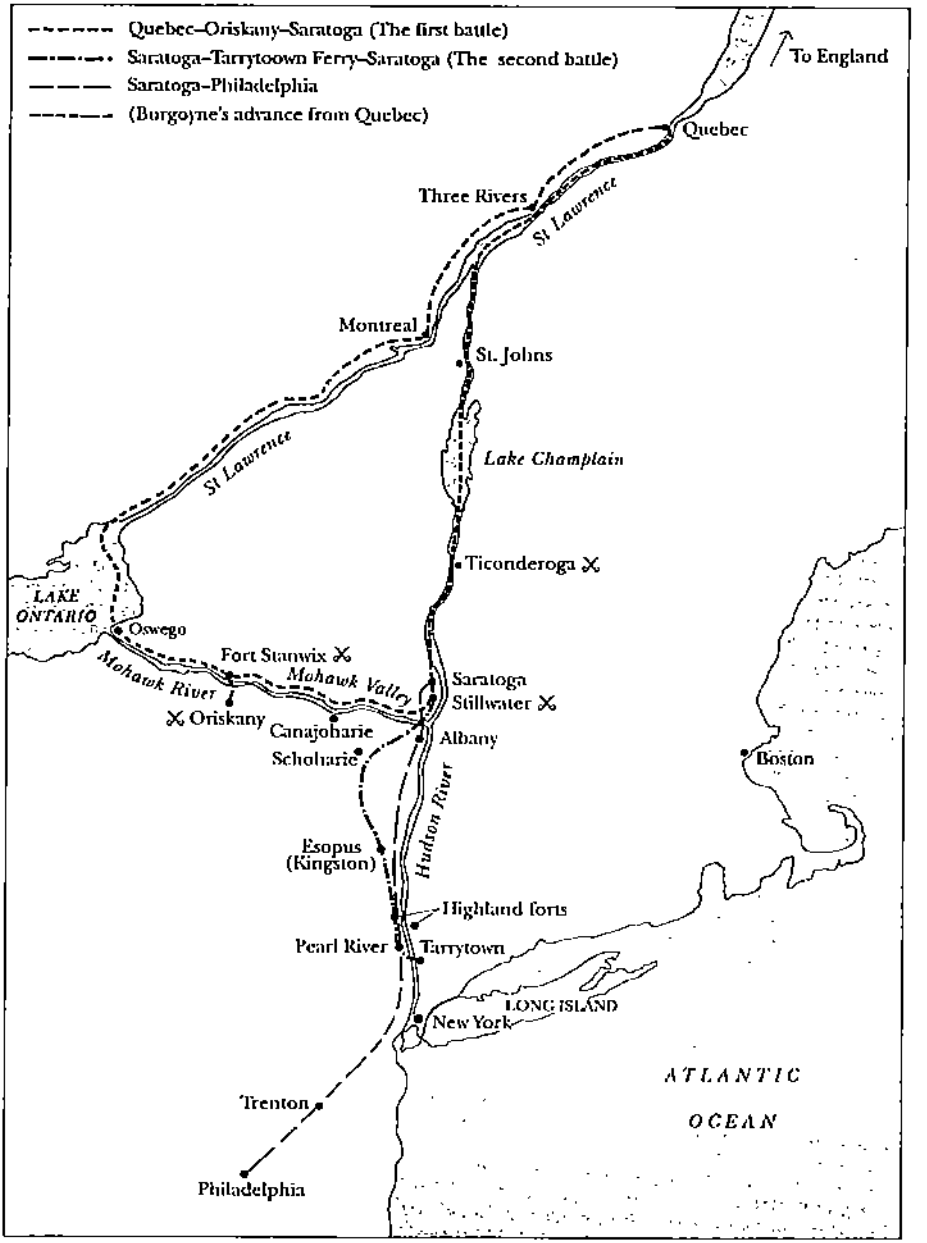
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Pgs 1 - 5

JACK ABSOLUTE

C. C. HUMPHREYS



JACK'S JOURNEYS MAY to NOVEMBER 1777



— ONE —
An Affair of Honour

The snow lay deep over Hounslow Heath and the light was failing fast. They were already late, a double annoyance to Jack Absolute; not only was it considered ungentlemanly to keep people waiting for such an affair, it also meant that by the time the ground had been reached, the Seconds introduced, the area marked out and the formalities dealt with as to wills and burials, it would be too dark for pistols. It would have to be swords; and by the look of him, his opponent was in fighting trim. If he wasn't twenty years younger than Jack he wasn't far off and, as a serving cavalry officer, would be fencing daily; while it was five years at the least since Jack had fought in such a manner. With a variety of other weapons, to be sure. But a tomahawk or a Mysore punch dagger had a very different feel to them than the delicate touch required for the small sword. Of course, one could only be killed with the point, it had no cutting edge. But the point, as Jack knew all too well, was all that was required.

As his feet slipped yet again on the icy bootprints of those that had preceded him, Jack cursed. *How large will the damned crowd be*? The affair could hardly have been announced more publicly, and many would choose to attend such a fashionable fight. Money would already have been staked. He wondered at the odds. Like an older racehorse, Jack had form. He had 'killed his man' – in fact, in the plural, several more than these

gentlemen of London could know about. But his opponent was certainly younger, probably stronger, and above all, inflamed with the passion of wronged ardour. He fought for a cause. For love.

And Jack? Jack fought only because he'd been too stupid to avoid the challenge.

He sniffed. To top it all, he suspected he was getting a cold. He wanted to be warm in the snug at King's Coffee House, a pot of mulled ale in his hand. Not slip-sliding his way across a frozen common to maiming or a possible death.

'Is it five or six duels you have fought, Daganoweda?'

Jack, whose eyes had been fixed on the placing of his own feet, now glanced at the speaker's. Their nakedness seemed like vanity, especially as Jack knew his companion had a fine pair of fleece-lined boots back in their rooms in St Giles. However Até would never pass up such an opportunity to display the superior toughness of the Iroquois Indian. The rest of him would probably have been naked too had Jack not warned him that ladies might attend. The concession had been fawn-skin leggings, beaded and tasselled, and a Chinese silk vest that scarcely concealed his huge chest, nor obscured the tattoos wreathed around his muscles. Midnight black hair fell in waves to his almost bare shoulders. Just looking at him made Jack shiver all the more and he pulled his cloak even tighter around him.

'Six duels, Atédawenete. As I am sure you well remember. Including the one against you.'

'Oh,' Até turned to him, his brown eyes afire, 'you count a fight against a "savage", do you? I am honoured.'

The Indian made the slightest of bows. Iroquois was a language made for irony. Jack had had too much cognac the night before – the first error in an evening of them – and a duel of wits was one conflict he could live without today. So he reverted to English.

'What is it, Até? Homesick again?'

'I was thinking, brother, that if this young brave kills you – as is very likely since he is half your age and looks twice as

vigorous – how then will I buy passage to return to my home across the water, which you have kept me from these eleven years?'

'Don't concern yourself with that, brother. Our friend here will give you the money. It's the least he can do. He owes me after all, don't you, Sherry?'

This last was addressed over his shoulder to the gentleman acting as his First-Second, as the hierarchy of duels had it. The dark-haired young man was struggling to keep pace with his taller companions, his face alternately green and the palest of yellows. The previous evening, Richard Brinsley Sheridan had drunk even more cognac than Jack.

'Ah, money, Jack, yes. Always a wee bit of a problem there.' Though he had left Ireland as a boy, a slight native brogue still crept in, especially in moments of exertion. 'But, of course, you'll be triumphant today, so the need will not arise. And in the meantime, can you and your fine-looking friend speak more of that marvellous language? I may understand not a word, but the cadences are exquisite.'

Jack pulled a large, soiled square of linen from his pocket and blew his nose hard. 'Careful, Até, you'll be in one of his plays next. And we all know where that can lead.'

The playwright wiped an edge of his cloak across a slick brow, sweating despite the chill. 'How many more times can I apologize? As I said, you were thought dead and thus your mellifluous name was free to appropriate.'

'Well, I may be dead soon enough. So your conscience may not be a bother too much longer,' Jack muttered. He had caught sight of movement through a screen of trees ahead.

If the crowd's big enough, he thought, *perhaps even the incompetent Watch might have heard of it and turn up to prevent this illegality.* Once he would have objected vigorously to any attempt by the authorities to restrict his right to fight. Once . . . when he was as young as his adversary, perhaps. Now he could only hope that the Magistrates' intelligence had improved.

But no reassuring Watchmen greeted Jack, just two dozen

gentlemen in cloaks of brown or green, a few redcoated army officers and, in the centre of the party, wearing just a shirt, the man who had challenged him – Banastre Tarleton. Jack was again startled by his face. The youth – he could be no more than eighteen – was possessed of an almost feminine beauty, with thickly lashed eyes and chestnut curls failing to be constrained by a pink ribbon. But there was no hint of a lady's fragility in his movements, laughing as he lunged forward with an imaginary sword.

He looks as if he is on a green about to play a game of cricket, Jack thought, and wondered if it was the cold that made him shrug ever deeper into his cloak. He glanced around the circle of excited faces that turned to him. No women, at least. Not even the cause of this whole affair, that little minx, Elizabeth Farren. The hour was too close to the lighting of the footlights at Drury Lane and her show must go on. Yet how she would have loved playing this scene. The sighs, the sobs wrenched from her troubled – and artfully revealed, carefully highlighted – bosom, as she watched two lovers do battle for her. She would be terribly brave one moment, close to fainting the next.

An actress. He was going to be killed over an actress. It was like one of Sheridan's bloody comedies, not dissimilar to the one in which the playwright had made him the unwitting star. It was an irony perhaps only an Iroquois could fully appreciate. For if Sheridan hadn't used his name in *The Rivals*, if Jack hadn't then felt it necessary to watch some posturing actor play 'him', if he hadn't succumbed, yet again, to the effects of brandy and the actress playing the maid, and if she wasn't already beloved by this brash, stupid, handsome, young officer . . .

Até and Sheridan had moved across to commence the business, and Jack noted the two men with whom his companions were discussing terms. One, an ensign in the resplendent, gold-laced uniform of the Coldstream Guards, was talking loudly and waving his arms about. Yet it was the other, Tarleton's Second-Second, who held Jack's attention.

He was standing behind and slightly to the side, his will seemingly focused, not on the details of the duel, but entirely forward on to Jack, just as it had been the previous night, when his soft whispers had urged Tarleton on. This man had the sober but expensive dress of a rich cleric, the long, pale face of a scholar. And looking now at the man he'd heard named the Count von Schlaben, even in the poor light of a winter sunset, Jack could see that this man desired his death as much as the youth who had challenged him; perhaps even more. And in that moment of recognition, Jack knew that there was more than actresses involved and that honour was only a small part of this affair.

If I am about to die, he thought, looking away and up into the cloud-racked March sky, *the least I can do is to understand why.*

Something had occurred the previous night at the theatre, aside from the play and the challenge. Something that had brought them all here to this snowy common. So it was back to Drury Lane that Jack's mind went, in the few moments before the formalities were settled, and the dying began.

— TWO —

Theatre Royal

Captain Jack Absolute marched forward, his eyes reflecting the flames of a hundred candles.

'There will be light enough; there will, as Sir Lucius says, "be very pretty small-sword light, though it won't do for a long shot."' He raised an imaginary pistol, 'fired' it with a loud vocal 'boom', then added, 'Confound his long shots!'

This last, delivered in an exaggerated Irish brogue, conjured a huge roar of laughter from the pit and a smattering of applause from the galleries. The bold Captain had a way with him!

Or was that just the actor playing him?

In the pit, the real Jack Absolute had suffered more than enough. He rose and squeezed through the tiny gap between knees and the backs of benches, trying to obscure as little of the stage as possible, though his kindly efforts were rewarded with cries of, 'Sit down, sirrah,' and 'Unmannerly dog! Woodward is speaking!' From above, the actors glared down at him before continuing the scene.

The evening had been a nightmare. Only one week back in London, his legs still moving as if the deck of the East India Company sloop and fifty fathoms of water were beneath him, he had been forced to sit and watch this parody of his past. Jack had learned of his new notoriety when, on his first day back, he'd taken a chair from the City to Covent Garden and the chairmen, on discovering his identity from the banker

who'd handed Jack in, had called out to all they passed that they had the 'real' Jack Absolute inside. A crowd had followed, calling out his name. Thereafter, every clerk, innkeeper and trader he'd been introduced to had inevitably said, 'You're not *that* Jack Absolute, are you?' And when, in a fury, he'd tracked his old friend Sheridan down, the rogue had barely blinked at his misappropriation of Jack's name and history.

'But you was gone seven years, Jack. We all thought you was dead. You was lucky, actually. I beat poor Ollie Goldsmith – God bless his memory! – to the name by a hair. He would have used it in *She Stoops to Conquer*. Then you'd have been that st-st-stuttering booby Marlow, rather than the dashing, handsome Captain of my *Rivals*.'

Dashing? Handsome? The ever-popular Mr Woodward, who personated Jack, was sixty if he was a day, and no amount of face paint and kindly, low-level candlelight could conceal the wrinkles. As for the play itself, Jack had to concede that Sheridan had a sharp memory and sharper eye. Jack's youthful escapade had been captured in almost every detail. His on-stage father, Sir Anthony Absolute – at least the playwright had had the minor decency to alter his name from James – was a perfect study of the tyranny, humour, and incipient insanity of the original. The object of desire, Lydia Languish, was modelled on just such a mix of beauty and romantic imbecility. However, Jack knew he needn't stay till the epilogue. This story would resolve in universal reconciliation and joy. Unlike the original. Perhaps that was what galled Jack the most, propelled him now from the auditorium; that Sheridan had usurped his youthful folly for a romantic comedy, when the reality was more of a farce and, in the end, almost a tragedy. The then nineteen-year-old Jack had *not* ended up with the lady – as his stage incarnation undoubtedly would this night – indeed, he had nearly died in his attempt to carry her off. And, having failed, he had begun the first of his many extended exiles from England.

Fortunately, he had good reason not to remain and witness further banality – for another exile would commence tonight.

A coach stayed for him at his inn, as a boat stayed for the tide in Portsmouth. After seven years away, he had been in the realm for as many days, long enough to deal with the affairs that now took him hence again, with a line of credit from Coutts Bank to transform the sugar plantation on Nevis in the Antilles, which his recent skill, acumen, and simple bloody-mindedness in India had won him. He just had two matters to attend to first. Two people to see. A man and a woman.

He gained the side aisle and advanced to the stairs. The first of those people had a box. All that was required was a brief, courteous refusal of that man's offer, followed by a visit backstage for an equally swift, if potentially more passionate, farewell.

Could it have been only one week? In that short time, had one of the most powerful men in the realm sought a favour and one of its most desired ladies sought to seduce him? And now, in the space of five minutes, was he to refuse them both? He could not wait to return to the sea. Life was so much simpler aboard a ship.

A ticket collector tried to halt his progress upstairs, but a coin gained him passage. There was an officer at the box door, wearing the uniform that Jack himself had once worn – ensign of the 16th Light Dragoons, the smartest regiment in the Cavalry. But the young man recognized Jack, and his Commander had obviously left word that he was to be shown in promptly.

Jack would have preferred a moment to ready himself. To refuse the man inside was no light thing. But the heavy-brocade curtain was immediately slid back. Hearty applause seemed to greet his entrance, though, in truth, it was paying farewell to his stage incarnation's exit Stage Left and the end of Act Four. The Theatre Royal immediately filled with the cries of hawkers selling refreshments, while the orchestra struck up an air for the entr'acte, an Italian acrobat team called the Zucchini Brothers, just now making their entrance, Stage Right.

'Faith! There's the finest piece of stage trickery I've seen all night. Jack Absolute's coat-tails are still visible in the wings . . . and here the man stands in my box!'