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A Knock at The Door

by Richard Rewell

Tom Thornton hung the door to the captain's room and stepped back to his admire his work. He immediately bumped into one of the other artisans who were swarming over the ship like flies on a corpse, endeavouring to finish their fitting out works before the ship's maiden voyage.

"That's oak isn't?"

"It is. A sapling in the times of Richard the Lionheart," said Tom.

The artisan, a ropemaker laughed, "we were fighting the Frenchies with old 'Lionheart' way back then. Weren't we? I love the sun you've carved on your door." And he playfully knocked at the door admiring Tom's craftsmanship but thinking he would steal it before the day's end.

"Thanks," said Tom then a judder turned his world on its side as black saltwater spilled across him and the Marie Rose plummeted to the muddy depths of the Solent. Fortunately, Tom survived. The ropemaker did not.

In 1802 an Irish boat builder called Mullan living in Spanish Cuba assisted the French in building the Santisima Trinidad a colossal battleship that was to join the French Navy in its war against the British.

"Senor Mullan look I find this in the warehouse and the old clerk said they think it was found on a beach just outside Havana, maybe over a hundred years ago," said Mullan's carpentry foreman.

It was a beautiful oak door with a sun carved upon it.

A few miles from Cape Trafalgar the captain of the Santisima Trinidad was thinking about how many English protestants he would hang once they had invaded that land, when he thought he heard a knock at the door, his elegant oak door, with the sun carved upon it. Then he heard the explosion, the screams and the thunderous roar of water as it smashed its way through the wounded ship before sliding below the waves to become the captain's coffin and another victim of Horatio Nelson's British Navy.

Captain Ricardo Gomez sat at his imposing desk about to sign the death warrants of twenty British citizens who had been fighting for the Spanish Republic against General Juan Franco the fascist dictator of Spain and Gomez's boss.

But Gomez could not concentrate. A carpenter in his previous life he stared in wonder at the oak door of his office upon which was displayed a beautifully carved sun. He stood up, turned around and walked out onto the balcony where he took in the landscape of orange tiled roofs and the blue Atlantic beyond the city of La Coruna. He thought he heard a knock at the door.

"Come," he said turning to face the oak door and lean against the balcony's balustrade which immediately gave way and sent the fascist functionary spiralling to his death, five floors below on the cobbles of the Plaza de Union.

No one noticed the death warrants flying out of the balcony doors and up into the azure sky to be lost forever, while twenty Brits never knew how lucky they had been.

In 1944 two Brits blessed that door as they sheltered behind it avoiding German gunfire. They had dashed up a Normandy beach where they tripped over the door hidden in the shingle and where one of them knocked at it jokingly saying "Help. Let us in," just before they borrowed beneath it.

The oak door with the beautifully carved sun saved their lives and to their shock once the battle had finished, there was not a scratch on it, despite enduring relentless enemy gunfire.

One of the two comrades, so grateful for the door's service smuggled it home to Norwich where after his death in 1999 his son, a history lecturer and my close colleague had it dated before embarking upon a long pursuit of its provenance.

Now it is back where it belongs, in the Marie Rose exhibition in Portsmouth.

What I can tell you is that the tree from which it had come was far older than what Tom Thornton had thought. The legend my colleague discovered was that the only trees that old came from a wood north of Portsmouth. Where apparently there lay the unmarked grave of an ancient mystic, Myrddin. We know him as Merlin.