

TALES OF
HMS LACONIA

A Prequel to Jane Austen's *Persuasion*

JACK CALDWELL

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Story One: The Taking of The *Laconia*

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Story One:

The Taking of The *Laconia*

Background -

The West Indies Campaign of 1804–10 was a series of military contests mainly in the Caribbean, spanning the Napoleonic Wars, involving the European powers of Napoleonic France, the Batavian Republic, Spain, the Kingdom of Portugal, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

French naval power after Trafalgar in 1805 was weak. The big ships that had survived were trapped by the Royal Navy's blockade of French and Spanish ports in Europe. Therefore, France and Spain used smaller, fast ships, such as frigates, in the Caribbean to harass British trade. They also made extensive use of privateers under letters of marque.

The French occupation of Santo Domingo started in 1795 when France came to own the whole island of Hispaniola when Spain ceded the eastern part, Santo Domingo, by the Treaty of Basel. At the time, French Saint-Domingue, the western part of the island, was in revolt against France, led by Toussaint Louverture. In 1801, Louverture captured Santo Domingo from the French and took control of Hispaniola.

In 1802, an army sent by Napoleon captured Louverture and sent him to France as a prisoner, where he died. His successors and yellow fever succeeded in expelling the French again from Saint-Domingue, and the new country of Haiti declared its independence in 1804. However, France kept Santo Domingo (now known as the Dominican Republic).

In 1808, following Napoleon's invasion of Spain and the end of their alliance, the criollos of Santo Domingo revolted against French rule, an event known as the Reconquista. It was fought between November 7, 1808 and July 9, 1809, when the French were finally expelled with British help.

Eventually British naval forces dominated the seas, and by 1810 every single French, Dutch, and Danish colony was firmly under allied (mainly British) control.

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Autumn of 1807 – off Santo Domingo in the West Indies

COMMANDER FREDERICK WENTWORTH, SEATED in the bow of his captain's launch, raised a telescope towards the target for tonight as the boat glided gently through the calm Caribbean waters. He could just make out the lights adorning the frigate in the gloom of this warm, moonless night. It was a delightful night for murder and mayhem.

Suddenly, there was a splash behind him. Wentworth turned, but his rebuke died on his tongue. Stokes, at the tiller, was already admonishing the perpetrator.

"Mind the noise, damn you," was the boatswain's harsh whisper. "Pull soft, like the Cap'n said." The sailors manning the oars redoubled their effort to row the little boat quietly. The crews in the other boats were silent, as well.

They had to be; their lives depended on it. One mistake and they would all die. Such were the risks of this feat of maritime crime.

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Commander Wentworth's orders from the fleet admiral in Port Royal, Jamaica, were to scout and seek out the enemy, harass them if he could, and report back their location. It was about the only duty appropriate for Wentworth's command. *HMS Asp* was a broken down, 18-gun sloop. Marvelous in its day, after thirty years of service it was better fit for the breaker's yard than sailing thousands of miles from Portsmouth.

Wentworth cared not. Last year, in the aftermath of his betrayal and rejection by the woman he loved, he was desperate for employment. A newly minted Master and Commander, he should have been like most of his fellows, stranded on shore for lack of a ship. But Lord Keith had been kind—the Good Lord knew why—and Wentworth had been given the *Asp*. The jealousy in the port had been high, for many other officers with seniority had been passed over. Wentworth felt his luck, and vowed to show them all he deserved it. The Admiralty had given him the tool to advance his career and he was going to make the most of it, or go down trying.

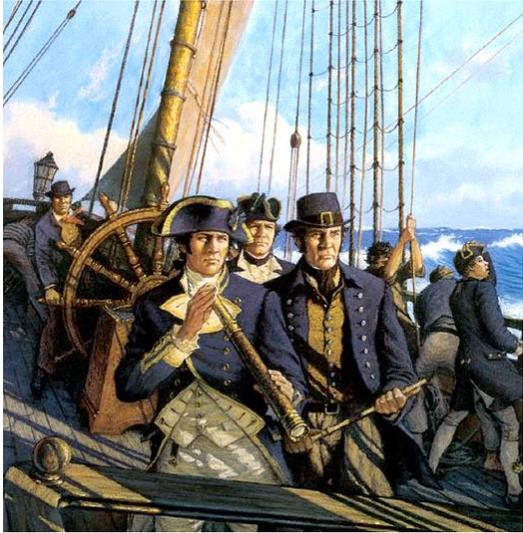
The *Laconia* was a French frigate manned by privateers sailing under letters of marque. Prowling the waters between Florida, Bahama, and Hispaniola for the last half-year, it had taken several British merchant ships. The situation was intolerable, the admiral said. It was a priority that the *Laconia* be found and either captured or sunk.

Again, luck was with Wentworth. He had been on his last patrol, preparing to return to England, when he stumbled across the French frigate. He had the weather gage and was able to flee, for the poor, pitiful *Asp's* six-pound cannons were no match for the twelve-pounders aboard the *Laconia*. The French had twice their men and threw four times their weight in metal. It would be suicide to attack the *Laconia* straight on.

But Wentworth knew his chance was upon him. He was determined to take that frigate. He was not going to give the glory to anyone else. He just had to figure out how.

Carefully, using all his skill in seamanship, the *Asp* shadowed the *Laconia*. Wentworth's expectation that the privateers would not be as disciplined as the regular French Navy was proved correct. He soon discovered the frigate's hiding place: a heretofore unknown bay on the north coast of French-occupied Santo Domingo. Hidden from view by a cape, the ship

could sit at anchor and replenish at leisure, all the time keeping look out for any straggling merchantman that might lose the safety of its convoy.



Wentworth and a small party had gone ashore, and for three days together spied on the privateers. He quickly observed that the enemy made the first mistake of a warship at anchor—they thought they were safe. Wentworth planned to take advantage of that.

Back in his tiny cabin aboard the *Asp*, Wentworth planned and schemed, aided by his able first lieutenant and good friend, Timothy Harville. What Wentworth devised was audacious. If he could not beat the *Laconia*, he would steal her.

The operation was known as a “cutting-out expedition.” The object was to take a ship whole and sail her away—in effect, to commit grand larceny. To do so was extremely dangerous. It required that the attacking force sneak up on the ship, overpower the guard, lock the rest of the enemy’s crew below decks, cut the anchor cable, and drop sail—all while under fire from shore batteries and other ships. If they could manage it, the successful crew would share in the prize money the navy offered. Fail and they would be prisoners or dead.

What made the operation even more difficult was that the only way to approach a ship unseen was to do so at night. That in itself was difficult. To successfully complete an operation that required complete surprise, split-second timing, and close-coordination in darkness required boldness, training, and luck. They also needed the target to be inattentive. Wentworth was counting on all of it.

The *Asp* slowly drew close to shore after dark, launching all its boats. The tide would turn shortly after midnight, and by then, Wentworth needed to be in control of the frigate so that the outgoing tide would help them escape. If they attacked too soon, they would remain an easy target for a counter attack until the zenith of high tide.

Half the crew of the *Asp* was assembled in the boats. Wentworth was in his launch and planned to attack by the stern. He had the boatswain, Stokes, and much of his larboard gun crews with him. Harville and the marines would hit the starboard side, while a party in the jolly boat would go to the chains in the bow, cut the cable, and make for the sails. The *Asp* would be under the command of the second lieutenant, James Benwick. It was unusual for the captain of the ship to be involved in such an operation, but Wentworth would not send

anyone else to do something so dangerous. He was not called “Fightin’ Freddie” by his crew for nothing.

Luck remained with Wentworth. The sea was relatively calm, with only a ripple of a wave—enough noise to cover them, without a rough sea to hinder their progress. The breeze was coming out of the southeast, another stroke of good fortune. Should it hold, it would blow their prize right out of the bay, and the *Laconia* was the only enemy ship on hand. The only anxiety was the clear skies. Would the stars give enough light to alert the guard? They would soon learn.

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As the little flotilla drew close, they could hear the sounds of celebration from the shore. Wentworth had noted that the crew tended to leave the ship to carouse in the small, rough camp that had been built on the beach. The camp contained stores of food, ammunition, and “entertainments” for the men. Wentworth did not know if the women ashore were slaves, whores, or wives, and he did not care. What he depended on was that they would distract the enemy. Wine, women, and song had been the downfall of many a sailor, and he hoped tonight would be no exception.



The *Laconia* lay at anchor about three cable lengths from the breakers—over a quarter mile. It was positioned to sail out, useful in case of emergency, and played right into Wentworth’s hands. The starboard side would be hidden from shore. Unfortunately, the stern was in clear sight. There was nothing for it.

Things are going too smoothly, Wentworth thought. What would go wrong?

Just as the flotilla reached its target, a bell rung out from the *Laconia*. *Midnight,* thought Wentworth. *Everything is going to plan.*

The launch was about a hundred yards away. The crew had raised oars, allowing the boat’s momentum to complete its journey. Wentworth, fingering his sabre, watched the French quarterdeck closely. As far as he could tell, only two men were upon it. Unsteady French voices could be heard singing from below decks. Apparently, carousing was not lim-

ited to shore. Wentworth's military mind was disgusted by the enemy's lack of professionalism, even though their sloppiness was to his advantage. A dim light glowed from the stern windows. Was the privateer captain aboard?

Another moment, and he would be there...

"Qui est là?"

The shout came from the frigate's bows. Wentworth, startled, hesitated. Meanwhile, the men on the quarterdeck seemed equally surprised.

"Qu'est-ce que c'est? Que voyez-vous?"

Wentworth was out of time. He gave a hand signal, and the men began to row again. They had to move quickly, stealth be damned.

"Ho! Sonner l'alarme! Vite! Sonner—"



Abruptly, the man's cries ceased. At that instant, Wentworth's hand grasped the side of the ship. Quickly, he climbed the wooden wall, his years of experience serving him well. He reached the deck and vaulted over the rail. He drew his sword as he crouched low, taking in his surroundings.

The scene was illuminated by a single lantern stationed next to the compass by the ship's wheel. Two other men were on the quarterdeck: an ordinary sailor, probably a boatswain's mate, and a young man wearing the insignia of a *lieutenant de frigate*. Both men's attention was towards the bow.

The boatswain's mate was the first to turn and see him. He cried out and took to his heels. Wentworth charged forward as the privateer officer pulled his sword. He was young, he was brave, and after a couple of passes, he was dead, Wentworth's cutlass making quick work of it.

Wentworth sensed more than saw his men dashing past him. Gunshots barked at the waist as the marines with Harville assaulted the frigate's small guard.

"Get below! The noise will raise the crew!" he bellowed to Harville. They needed to trap the privateers below the gun deck, or all would be lost. "Stokes, see to the sails! The rest of you—follow me!"



Wentworth and his men dashed down the ladder to the gun deck. Already, Harville and the marines were in a desperate fight with the privateers. Wentworth grabbed one of his men by the arm.

“Eades, lock down the hatches to the ladders below. Quickly now!” The sailor and another man ran forward while the others joined the battle. Wentworth prepared to join

them when he heard a noise behind. A half-dressed man armed with a sword emerged from behind a door.

“Look out, Cap’n!” someone cried.

Wentworth did not hesitate. He drew the pistol stuck in his belt and fired directly into the privateer’s chest. The man fell in a heap. Wentworth turned back to the fight along the gun deck, only to have Harville grasp his arm.

“We have things in hand here, Captain,” his friend cried.

“Right.” Wentworth ran up the ladder to the deck above. The topsails were just falling, he saw. “Stokes! Have we cut loose that blasted anchor yet?”

Stokes had only gone a few steps forward when the ship started to swing around. The boatswain had to steady himself against the mainmast. “I think she’s free, sir!”

Wentworth nodded and made for the ship’s wheel while Stokes cried out orders to the makeshift crew. Sailors and marines secured the rigging, and the sails filled in the wind. Wentworth could feel the ship coming to life under his hands. He strained to remember the course he laid out back in his cabin. Checking the compass, he turned the wheel to starboard.

BOOM! A cannon roared out.

Stokes was at his elbow. “They’re shooting from shore, sir! They’re on to us!”

“Take the helm!” Wentworth commanded. “Make for the middle of the channel. I’ll go forward and guide you.” Without waiting for an acknowledgement of his order, Wentworth made for the bow. A sailor he knew well, Radle, was there, standing over the body of a privateer.

“Hello, Cap’n!” he said good-naturally. “We had a devil o’ a time cuttin’ them cables.”

“Good work, Radle. We’re making for the channel ahead. Relay my directions to Stokes.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

Wentworth glanced down at the body. His throat had been cut; his blood left a trail to the scuppers. “Who’s this, then?”

“This here’s the bugger that spied us. He was at the heads, he was. Bad luck.”

Wentworth did not know whether Radle meant the bad luck was for the British or the dead privateer. Not that it mattered now. “A point to larboard!”

Radle cried out the course correction and the *Laconia* moved ponderously to the left. The cannon fire increased from shore, but there was no damage yet; French sailors were notoriously poor gunners, and privateers even worse, unlike their comrades in Napoleon’s *Le Grande Armée*. Radle turned and patted his rear, taunting the enemy.

“Watch it, Radle—your arse is a big enough target, even for the French.”

The sailor’s answering laugh was cut short. “Boats from shore, sir!”

Cursing, Wentworth left Radle at the bow and returned to the quarterdeck, finding Harville staring aft. A half-dozen rowboats were chasing the ship.

“They’re gaining,” he reported. “I think we’ll need the marines and their muskets.”

Wentworth looked irritably at the impotent stern cannons. The gunpowder was below decks, in the powder room, inaccessible. They would have to go through as many as a hundred trapped privateers to get at it. The aft chasers were useless.

“No, we need more speed. Drop courses.”

Harville nodded and gave the order to lower the main sails. Men scrambled up the shrouds and along the yards. First the mainsail was dropped and secured, and a minute later, so was the foresail. The ship gained speed. Wentworth had taken the wheel again, as Stokes was needed to secure the braces.

“Radle! How are we doing?” he called out.

“Steady as she goes, sir!” was the answering cry. “I spy the old *Asp* dead ahead!”

There was a shuddering crash. A ricocheting cannonball had struck the aft of the ship, below the stern window. The French had gotten lucky—the rudder was jammed.

“Damn!” cried Wentworth. “Stokes, free the rudder!”

Instantly, orders were given. A sailor was sent down with a rope about him to survey the damage.

“How is it, Lauck?”

The man looked up. “Not bad, sir. Give me a bar, an’ I’ll get her free.”

“Mr. Harville, take over.” Wentworth and Eades went below into the captain’s cabin, all the better to pass Lauck a crowbar to pry the ball loose. There they found a hysterical, half-naked, dark-skinned woman cradling the man Wentworth had shot earlier.

“Bastardo asesino! Lo has matado!”

“I have no time for this!” Wentworth pointed at the woman. “Eades, keep her away from me.” Wentworth opened a window and passed the crowbar out. Glancing up, he saw that the rowboats were still following, but seemed to be falling back.

“I got it out, sir!” cried Lauck.

“Good show!” Wentworth’s return to the quarterdeck was stopped by Eades.

“What am I to do with ‘er, sir?” The Spanish woman was crying uncontrollably.

For a savage instant, Wentworth considered throwing her overboard, but dismissed the thought in the next moment. He only shook his head and returned to the helm.

“That did it, Frederick,” shouted Harville excitably. “They’ll never catch us now!”

“I believe you’re right, Tim. Stokes, send a signal to Mr. Benwick—his course is north-northwest.”

“We’re not returning to Port Royal?” asked Harville.

“No. Too many French and Spanish ships between here and there. We’re making for Nassau.”

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A fortnight later, Wentworth took his ease in his cabin aboard the *Asp*. The voyage to Nassau, capital of the Bahamas, was relatively uneventful. Wentworth had left the *Laconia* in Timothy Harville’s hands when he returned to the *Asp* for the remainder of the trip. Not only was it right and proper to do so, he also left Harville the problem of the late privateer captain’s lover. Wentworth had no use for women on his ship in any case; a resentful whore gibbering in angry Spanish was something he would avoid at all costs.

The enemy captain was buried at sea along with the other dead privateers. British losses were comparably light—two dead and three wounded. It was always hard to bury a shipmate, and this occasion was no exception. However, Wentworth felt hardest for the dead

privateer lieutenant. Barely more than a boy, he was struck down just as his life was beginning. This was the evil of war.



Upon dropping anchor in Nassau, a company of Marines was needed to transfer the hungry and thirsty prisoners off the *Laconia*. Fifty-eight privateers had been trapped below decks, and to keep them quiet, Wentworth limited the amount of food they received. The British held the bread room, after all. Without a fire, they could not cook the nearly inedible meat stored in casks in the hold. The prisoners got just enough to eat to keep them worried that Wentworth would simply starve them out, should they make trouble. Wentworth also let the privateers know that while he considered the ship's letter of marque legitimate, should anything happen to him, the British Admiralty might take an opposing view.

Piracy was a hanging offence, after all.

Food and threats worked, and the prisoners were docile as they left the ship.

The woman was a different matter. She was given parole while on board, of course, but she made it her purpose in life to make things miserable for the British. More than once, she had been locked in her cabin for spitting on English sailors. She was set loose in Nassau. *God have mercy on the Bahamians*, Wentworth thought.

The officials in Nassau were overjoyed with the seizure of the *Laconia*. It had been a thorn in the colony's side, and with its capture, the merchants and planters could breathe a little easier. Cargo coming in and goods shipped out had one less threat.

Wentworth had received permission to take the *Laconia* back to Plymouth. This was excellent news to the crew, for it meant that the *Asp* would not have to share the prize money with fleet in Port Royal—something that was in Wentworth's mind when he chose to sail to Nassau. For Wentworth, the *Laconia* would be his ticket to advancement; many a commander had been made post for far less.

Captain Frederick Wentworth—how well that sounded! He wondered whether Anne would be pleased when she heard the news—

Frederick Wentworth frowned, as all his resentful anger and wounded pride resurfaced. Anne Elliot, the only woman he had ever loved, had accepted his marriage proposal, only to betray and renounce him days later. All because of her godmother, Lady Russell—*the bitch!* Anne had been convinced by Lady Russell that Commander Wentworth was not good enough for her. She had been persuaded to give him up.

Well, to hell with it! If *Commander* Wentworth was beneath her, then *she* was too low for *Captain* Wentworth!

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Frederick Wentworth spent the remainder of the night drinking himself into a stupor before his steward had to help him into his cot to sleep it off.

Story Two:

The Wreck of *HMS Asp*

January 1808 – Plymouth, Devonshire

“COMMANDER WENTWORTH,” ANNOUNCED THE marine guard formally, “you are called.”

Wentworth rose smartly to his feet, refusing to show either nervousness or fear, even though his career was at stake. He refused to meet the eyes of Harville, Benwick, Stokes, and the other witnesses from *HMS Asp*. He was immaculate in his Number One uniform. Tucking his hat under his right arm, his left hand instinctively dropped to straighten his sword, but he found nothing. Of course, it was not at his side. One could not wear a sword to one’s court-martial.

Wentworth steadily entered the great cabin of the flagship where the court would consider his fate. The admiral of the port, splendid in his gold-laced uniform and powdered wig, served as the president of the court; several senior captains sat on either side of him. Wentworth’s throat was dry. Hating his weakness, he swallowed before nodding to his superiors assembled.

A clerk in civilian clothes read the charge in a high-pitched, nasal voice. “At a court-martial assembled and held on board His Majesty’s Ship *Triumph* in Plymouth...”

The man droned on while Wentworth’s mind recalled the reason he was there—the wreck of his command: *HMS Asp*.

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It had been a nearly uneventful voyage from Nassau to Plymouth. It was late in the year, quite out of season for hurricanes. Wentworth’s prize, the French frigate *Laconia*, sailed three cable-lengths behind the dear old *Asp*. She cut an imposing sight, particularly with the Union Jack flying pointedly above the Tricolor at the stern, and more than once, Wentworth envied Harville’s assignment of commanding her. But the *Asp* was his command, not the *Laconia*, and it would not do for a ship’s captain to abandon his command, even though the captain’s cabin aboard the frigate was almost twice as large.

That the *Asp* had developed a leak was not surprising. The timbers were ancient, and the sloop was barely fit for home waters, much less traveling across the Atlantic Ocean. Wentworth was happy that she held up during his very profitable voyage. The carpenter had done his best, and an hour at the chain-pumps a day usually handled what water collected in the hold.

Wentworth was as proud as a prince with their welcome at Plymouth. The other ships assembled were stunned at the unlikely sight of a sloop leading a captured frigate and fired salutes in honor of his victory. His men shared in the glory and took pains to appear as smart as possible, dropping anchor in concert. Wentworth immediately sent his official letter ashore while he oversaw preparations for the inspection sure to come the next day.

But what came instead was as bad a storm as Wentworth had ever experienced. A force eleven gale, a hurricane with winds greater than sixty knots, slammed into the port. For four days and nights, the *Asp* took a terrible beating, with giant waves crashing over the sides of the sloop. The repairs to the ship could not hold. Early on the fourth day, the carpenter gave Wentworth the bad news.



“We’re breached proper in several places, sir, and making more water in the hold than the pumps can manage.”

“How much water?” Wentworth had demanded.

“Almost a foot in the last hour, an’ the pumps going as hard as they may. The men, they’re breaking under the strain, sir. They can’t take no

more.”

It did not take long for Wentworth to compute the figures in his head. The *Asp* was doomed.

“Mr. Benwick,” he said in a calm voice, “it would be well to transfer the crew to the *Laconia* as soon as can be accomplished.”

Within the hour, boats had been sent off in the violent sea, filled with terrified sailors. Most could not swim, but their pitiful pleas to remain on the *Asp* were refused. Benwick seemed stunned when he learned of Wentworth’s intentions.

“Sir, I must protest! You cannot remain on board!”

“Mr. Benwick,” Wentworth growled, “the *Asp* is my command and my responsibility. She must be beached. We cannot have her sink and block the channel into Plymouth. It is my intention to steer her into the shoals. I need but a small party to accomplish this.”

“With your permission, I volunteer to remain.”

“Request denied.”

“But, sir—!” Benwick begged.

“Lieutenant Benwick, you have your orders.” Wentworth’s words were a hammer blow. More gently, he added, “Please see that Harville gets my papers and log books. Take care of yourself, James. We shall meet again soon, God willing.”

The wet weather was not the reason James Benwick’s eyes were filled as he ordered the launch lowered into the maelstrom. As soon as the last boat was away, Wentworth ordered that the anchor cable be cut. The steadfast boatswain, Stokes, would not leave his captain and stood ready at the wheel. Wentworth took his place.

“Make certain that all hands are lashed to the ship! Give the signal!” The cable was cut and the sloop was free.

The next twenty minutes were the longest of Wentworth’s life. In the blinding, wind-blown rain, he and Stokes worked together to manhandle the wheel. The storm more than once nearly capsized the sloop, and just when Wentworth feared that the ship was being blown offshore, word was relayed from the lookout in the bow that breakers could be seen dead ahead.

“All right, lads! Prepare to abandon ship!”

The handful of men who remained with their captain, all volunteers, were the best swimmers in the crew. Stokes gave the order, and as one, they dove into the surf. Only Wentworth and Stokes remained.

“Jump for it, Stokes!” ordered Wentworth.

“Not without you, Cap’n!”

With a sickening crash, the *Asp* slammed into a sandbar. The two men remaining were tossed to the deck. The enormous waves pounded the ship, turning her sideways. Wentworth and Stokes unlashed themselves, and the *Asp*’s list was such that the two slid into the freezing cold water. Wentworth was ill-prepared for the shock; he was paralyzed and going under, when Stokes’s strong arm seized him.

“C’mon, Cap’n!” Stokes sputtered. “Swim, damn you!”

Wentworth was able to get his arms to work, and moments later the waves tossed the two ashore.

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The clerk’s voice droned on. “...having examined witnesses on the occasion, and maturely and deliberately considered every circumstance...”

Get on with it, Wentworth's mind raged.

“...the court is of the opinion that Commander Wentworth, his officers, and ship's company used every possible exertion to preserve His Majesty's Sloop *Asp* and, in the most extraordinary circumstances, risked life and limb to preserve the integrity of the anchorage, all without loss of life. Commander Wentworth, his officers, and ship's company are to be commended for their zeal and clear-thinking. The loss of His Majesty's Sloop *Asp*, being unavoidable, Commander Wentworth is hereby honorably acquitted of any suspicion of ineptitude or incompetence.”



The relief Wentworth felt at those words could not be described. He knew he was blameless, but there was no guarantee that a court-martial would agree. His career was safe!

The port admiral rose, Wentworth's sword in hand, the hilt towards him. “It is no small pleasure to me to receive the commands of the court I have the honor to preside at,” he intoned with a smile in his deep voice, “that delivering to you your sword, I should congratulate you upon its being restored by friend and foe alike; hoping ere long you will be called upon to draw it once more in the honorable defense of your country.”

Wentworth, moved, took his sword and gazed at it a moment. It was shabby and worn—all a poor commander could afford—but what it represented was all he lived for: himself, his ship, the Royal Navy, and Britain itself. He slowly slid it home in its scabbard.

The admiral nodded. “This court is dismissed. Wentworth, a moment of your time, please.” The request was an order, of course, and the two waited until the other left the room. The admiral sat and sighed as he removed his wig, his thin, short-cut grey hair now visible.

“Sit down, Wentworth, for heaven's sake. You're far too tall a fellow to look up at. You'll put a creak in my neck. Glad that's over, eh? Bad business, beaching the *Asp*,” he said as he shuffled through some papers. “All that sloop is good for now is the wrecker's yard, but I suppose it couldn't be helped with that damnable storm. Reminds me of a great blow I went through at Port Royal in '92—or was it '93? Thought it was all over for me. Ah, here it is!” He pulled a great envelope from the pile and slid it to Wentworth. “Congratulations.”

Wentworth opened it. It was an official document—his promotion to post-captain, dated two weeks ago. *Post-Captain! I am made post—for this last fortnight!* Wentworth could not believe his eyes.

The admiral caught his expression. “Read the rest, sir.”

All the air left his lungs. "I ... I am given the *Laconia!*"

A small smile graced the admiral's old, ugly face. "You have friends in the fleet, Wentworth. Croft just raised his flag—he's married to your sister, I understand—and he was the one who suggested it. Smart man, Croft. It made perfect sense."

He wagged a finger in Wentworth's direction. "Now listen and listen close. There's a score of fellows who are haunting the halls of the Admiralty for a command—fellows with years of seniority. They have members of Parliament involved. Whig against Tory—you know how that goes. Some are making noise about the budget for the navy. How do you like that, sir? Threatening the navy over who gets what ship! Zounds, politics will be the death of this country.

"But you—you're an innocent babe when it comes to London games. You don't back either horse. You're a hero for that cutting-out trick. Cochrane himself couldn't have done better!

"That was a clever thing you did—sailing to Nassau instead of Port Royal. Admiral Cochrane can't claim any of the prize money for the *Laconia*. But you knew that, didn't you? Don't deny it, Wentworth. I'd have done the same in your place. Cochrane's enemies are laughing in their snuff boxes over that. They would just as soon see he never gets another shilling in prizes.

"So, the least controversial posting is to give His Majesty's newest frigate to His Majesty's newest captain—the man that stole her! That is why you have *HMS Laconia*. Congratulations!

"Now, the bad news. For the next few years, no captain will be scrutinized as closely as you. Every decision you make, every action you take, even the manner you tack ship and set sail will be analyzed and debated. Jealous men would give their right arm to prove you an idiot. This is a reward and a curse. I can't protect you and Croft can't protect you. You are on your own.

"Do you understand me, Captain Wentworth?"

Wentworth nodded. "Aye, sir."

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A month later, Wentworth sat before his desk in the captain's cabin aboard *HMS Laconia*, reading a note from Timothy Harville. It would be weeks yet before they could set sail for Gibraltar and join the Mediterranean fleet. The tyrant, Bonaparte, was threatening to seize the Portuguese navy and using it against England. The Royal Navy would soon put a stop to that.

Laconia was in very good shape upon its arrival at Plymouth, but work needed to be done to turn her into a proper British frigate. She had been repainted, all her sails and cordage replaced, and a new anchor hung. The ship was riding high at dock, for all her guns were gone. The French 12-pound cannons were to be replaced with British 18-pounders, and 32-pound cannonades were intended for the upper deck. All were waiting on the armory—and they were notoriously slow.

Harville had taken the opportunity to marry—thus the note in Wentworth’s hands. He and his dear bride were deliriously happy in Portsmouth, the letter claimed. Wentworth was pleased for him. Timothy had indeed received promotion to Commander because of the *Laconia*, and the rise in pay, along with the prize money, was enough for him and his intended to finally wed. They had been engaged for almost three years.

The note drew Wentworth’s thoughts back to Anne Elliot. A commander’s pay was enough for Mrs. Harville, but not enough for Miss Elliot. Wentworth tried to reach inside his heart for his old resentments but could not. Anne was a baronet’s daughter, after all, not a shopkeeper’s girl like Mrs. Harville.

The only sad news was there was no sloop or brig for Commander Harville. The prize money was enough for the Harvilles to marry, but they needed more to live on. So, he signed on with Wentworth as first lieutenant, in expectation that their cruise would be a profitable one. Wentworth was pleased to have his friend back. James Benwick, who should have been first lieutenant, was relegated to second, but the good fellow had paid no mind and said he was happy to have Harville on board, and Wentworth loved him all the more for it.

In fact, practically all the surviving members of the *Asp* had made their mark on the *Laconia*’s registry. Stokes, Radle, Eades, Lauck—the lot. “Fightin’ Freddie” Wentworth had made them rich and kept them safe to boot, and that was rare in the service of His Majesty. It stood to reason that their luck would continue in the Mediterranean. Seamen were a superstitious lot.

So Wentworth had finally reached the height of his profession. He was now on the great ladder of seniority. Assuming he did not ground his ship or get knocked on the head, he would make admiral one day if it be God’s will. It all depended on the longevity of the fellows above him. But it was a long way up, and he was on the lowest rung. His own death never



occurred to Wentworth—shame or embarrassment, yes, but not his personal destruction. He was careful with his men’s lives, but not his own. He left it to others to determine if that was courage or foolishness.

Wentworth was now a post captain. His professional goal realized, his thoughts returned to his personal ones. He was a captain with a few thousand pounds in the Naval Five Percents. Was that enough for a baronet’s daughter? Did he dare write to Anne Elliot?

Anne’s sweet face was before him. He could taste her lips on his. He ached to explore her curves and discover her secrets. He longed to hear her whisper his name. God help him, he was still in love with her!

He reached for his pen—took it—and let it fall.

It is no use, he told himself. It is not enough. I do not think I will ever have enough. She rejected me! She put more weight in the advice of Lady Russell than in her heart. I will never be good enough for Lady Russell, and Anne will never go against her.

He stared bleakly out the great stern window of the ship he loved. It was a fine, spring day, but he saw none of it.

I must learn to live without Anne Elliot.



Story Three:

The Tale of Dick Musgrove, Scrub

SCRUB – An insignificant or contemptible person; (in sports) a player not among the best or most skilled.

--- Oxford English Dictionary

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Summer of 1812 – HMS Laconia, in the Mediterranean Sea

THIS IS A TALE of a scrub. Not just any scrub. Certainly not your garden-variety scrub. Oh, no! This is a tale of a most complete and damnable scrub.

Now, some of you landlubbers may not be certain what is meant when a man is named a scrub. I shall endeavor to explain.

The first requirement of scrubbery (not “shrubbery”—that is a different story altogether) is that the scrub must be a man. A woman cannot be a scrub. She may display scruberous behavior, but she cannot be a scrub due to the unfortunate state of her sex. There are names for such women other than scrub; names that do not bear repeating here (one rhymes with witch, however).

We have determined that our object must be a man. This man then displays the following behavior, which his fellow men find offensive and irritating, thus the name scrub.

- A scrub is a hypocrite.
- A scrub is forever trying to give his duties to others.
- A scrub informs on his fellows.
- A scrub never takes responsibility for his failings and always demands credit for the accomplishments of others.
- A scrub is a martinet to his subordinates, insufferable to his comrades, and sycophantic to his superiors.
- A scrub despises everyone.



In sum, an unpleasant sort of fellow. Woe to the ship captained by such a man.

Therefore, it was fortunate indeed that the *HMS Laconia* was commanded by a most excellent officer, Captain Frederick “Fightin’ Freddie” Wentworth. His reputation, both before

the mast and around the fleet, was one of dash, courage, ingenuity, prudence, firmness, and fair-mindedness. Wentworth was clear on how he wanted things done on his ship. He could not abide idleness or disorder, but he hated the lash, using it rarely and reluctantly. He was generous in his praise and unselfish with reward. He was also lucky, and his commands took more than their share of prizes. Wentworth's men loved him and would follow the captain to the Gates of Hades itself, trusting that he would get them out again. Captain Wentworth was the furthest thing from a scrub.

Scrubs are an infestation injurious to any organization, but they are particularly irksome on board a warship. One cannot evade a scrub in the middle of the ocean. Port calls are a bit of a reprieve for his fellows but ultimately unsatisfying as they must eventually return to the ship and the company of the scrub. It is extremely difficult to arrange transfer to another ship, and the Admiralty takes a dim view of desertion, so the unlucky sailors are stuck.

Assuming he himself is not a scrub, a ship's captain tries very hard to prevent the infestation of scrubbery, for it has been known to throw off one's appetite and even cause a case of the bloody flux. Very uncomfortable, the bloody flux. Unfortunately, as manpower is always on short supply, once a ship has a scrub aboard, the captain must deal with him as best he can. Copious amounts of wine helps.

Captains have been known to use any trick they can devise to rid themselves of a scrub, should the opportunity arise. Illness is always welcomed as well as friends in the fleet to whom one can pawn off the scrub. That is why in 1812, despite Captain Wentworth's best efforts, the *HMS Laconia* contracted a case of scrubbery on a port visit to Gibraltar, by the name of Richard Musgrove. Wentworth did a favor for a colleague, and his purpose was noble, but all know the destination of that road paved with good intentions.



Richard Musgrove, called Dick for many reasons, was a midshipman of indifferent talents. He was the second son of a county squire, a Charles Musgrove by name, owner of Uppercross Hall in Somersetshire. As there was an older brother, also named Charles, to inherit, Dick Musgrove had the option of the army, navy, or church as a choice for an occupation. His parents chose the Royal Navy. To all they said it was because a man could make his fortune in the navy, and that was so. The real reason, one they were loath to admit even to themselves, was that the navy took their young gentlemen at a tender age—younger than the army.

Young Dick was a bit of a blockhead, so a gentleman's education was right out. And as the boy was a scrub, his loving parents instinctively wanted to rid themselves of him.

By the by, it must be understood that scrubs are born, not made. This is the second requirement.

Scrubs are very versed in hiding their affliction from superiors for a time, usually until the idea of returning to port is impractical. Thus it was that Wentworth did not realize he had a scrub on his hands for nearly a month. After writing and destroying a very rude letter to his colleague, Wentworth set upon the only task available to him: endeavoring to reform the scrub.

This despite the third requirement of scrubs, which is scrubs are hopeless of improvement. Once a scrub, always a scrub.

We now look in on the captain's quarters aboard *HMS Laconia* as Captain Wentworth is having a conversation with Midshipman Musgrove:

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A sweating Wentworth gazed at the young gentleman standing uncomfortably before him. The ship was on an east-northeast course, and the afternoon summer sun was pouring through the stern windows onto the back of Wentworth's neck. It was blasted hot in the cabin.

"Well, Mr. Musgrove, we must have yet another chat."

The man jumped at Wentworth's hard tone. "As you please, sir." There was no air of insubordination—all was proper and correct, even though he held his body in a careless manner. Years at sea, yet Midshipman Musgrove still looked the soft and stupid squire's son the navy had failed to beat out of him. It was a shame. More backbone and candor would have been appreciated.

Wentworth glanced at the papers before him. "You recommend two men from your division for punishment?"

"Yes, sir. They were disrespectful."

"That is ten hands in the last month. What did these men do?"

"They referred to me in an offensive manner, not in accordance with my rank."

"What did they call you?"

Musgrove sniffed. "Little Dickie,' sir."

Wentworth took in the short, heavy teenager, and had to stifle a chuckle. “To your face?”

“Err ... no, sir. I heard them speaking of me while they were swabbing the deck.”

Wentworth frowned. “I know these men—Lauck and Eades. Both right seamen. Please tell me exactly what they said.”

“Well, I was at the waist, supervising the men at their labors, when I overheard Lauck say to Eades, ‘You had better swab that spot again, or Little Dickie will write you up,’ or words to that effect. And Eades replied that ‘Little Dickie—that’s a fit name for him.’”

The captain dropped his face in his hands and sighed. “Do you recall our conversation about what an officer should hear and what he should not?”

The sweating midshipman raised his piggish, fat nose. “Sir, are you saying that it is permitted for a sailor to refer to his superior in such a disrespectful fashion?”

Wentworth almost reminded Musgrove the men’s nickname for the captain of this ship was *Fightin’ Freddie*, but he saw the reference would be pointless. “No, I am not. Well, there is nothing for it as you have indeed written these men up. One week without grog for both of them.”



Musgrove’s disappointment was clear. It was certain he thought they both should have been placed in chains, if not flogged.

“Let us discuss other matters,” continued Wentworth before Musgrove could object to the light punishment. “Have you been diligent in your studies, Mr. Musgrove?”

“Oh, yes, sir.”

“Hmm. The schoolmaster says otherwise. Your figures, for example—”

“Begging the captain’s pardon, but the schoolmaster hates me! He is forever mocking me before the others. And his examinations—trick questions, all of them.”

Wentworth could well understand the strict schoolmaster developing a hatred for Musgrove; his own opinion of the midshipman grew lower by the day. “Nevertheless, sir, I

expect better results in the future! Trick questions or no, you shall never pass for lieutenant unless your marks improve. As a case in point, take your handwriting. Even you must admit it is atrocious.”

“As you say, sir.”

“Practice, sir, is the only way to improve one’s handwriting. Have you been writing to your mother weekly, as I asked?”

“I try, sir,” Musgrove stammered, “but my duties consume so much of my time.”

“For shame, Musgrove! Your poor mother! No letters to her, but you have time to play cards with your fellows!” The midshipman had nothing to say to that. “At least I have no more reports of fights in the midshipmen’s berth. That is progress of a sort.”



Musgrove fidgeted uncomfortably. The last time he had been engaged in a verbal altercation below decks, Wentworth had Musgrove mast-headed—forced to do a watch from the topgallant crosstrees. Spending several hours from the top of the mainmast could be a delightful punishment, but the weather was rough that day and Musgrove was forced to lash himself to the crosstrees. He still lost his breakfast. He had been on his best behavior since.

Wentworth looked Musgrove in the eye. “You will redouble your studies when off duty, Mr. Musgrove. And I want to see a letter to your mother by eight bells in the morning watch tomorrow. Dismissed.”

Midshipman Musgrove nodded, turned on his heel, and left the cabin. He promptly kicked the ship’s dog on his way to the ladder below decks.

The dog’s howl had been heard. “MISTER MUSGROVE!”

The midshipman stifled a curse and hurried back to the captain’s cabin. “I am sorry, sir, but I did not see her and tripped on my way below decks.”

Wentworth silently counted to ten. “Be more careful, Musgrove.”

“Of course, sir.” Musgrove closed the door, sneered at the grinning guard, a marine private, and continued on his way.

Inside, Captain Wentworth called to his steward. “Nowak—Nowak, there! Light down to Dr. Powell and have him bring a dose of the white willow bark. I feel a headache coming on.”

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Thus it was, day upon day, week upon week, aboard the *Laconia*. Dick Musgrove proved himself incapable of improvement for he was truly an excellent specimen of scrub. Cajoling and counseling, pressuring and punishing had no effect on the lad. Wentworth was beside himself. He shipped neither wine nor white willow bark in quantity enough to last a full voyage.

Not all honorable Christian officers were rewarded according to their due, but Wentworth was a lucky man, as we have already observed, and Dame Fortune did not desert him. Dick Musgrove was often afflicted with what was then thought to be colds of the chest. These bouts of illness were formidable enough to send the midshipman to his cot for days at a time. In the decades to come, men of science would come to realize that the malady he suffered was actually due to an allergic reaction his body had to some foreign substance, such as molds or fleas—things plentiful aboard ship. But this was the second decade of the 19th century, and the cause of illness was still a mystery, even to ship’s doctors.

Captain Wentworth knew salvation when he saw it and changed course to Malta.

Therefore, an ill Dick Musgrove was carried off His Majesty's Ship *Laconia* and deposited in the Royal Navy Hospital in the port of Valletta six months to the day after he joined the frigate in Gibraltar. Wentworth left his erstwhile midshipman with a letter of recommendation and a pat on the shoulder, and if the good captain in his letter exaggerated Musgrove’s gifts and abilities and neglected to mention his numerous faults, the reader will surely forgive him. One must do what one must do to eradicate one’s ship from the scourge of scrubbery.

By the time Musgrove could leave his sickbed, *Laconia* was gone a week. Still, the lad did not suffer long, for a fortnight had not passed when *HMS Incredible*, a 74-gun third-rate ship-of-the-line, came in for victuals—supplies, for you landlubbers. She also was in want of men and was not picky about quality. Scrubs have their own luck, you know.

This magnificent two-decker was the flagship of Sir Bartholomew Dester, a rear admiral of the white. Musgrove thought he had made his career. Surely serving under an admiral, even a rear, would lead to quick advancement. As scrubs are wont to do, he made a good

enough impression on the *Incredible's* captain to secure a berth in the midshipmen's quarters. Musgrove ascended the gangplank with a song in his heart, certain he would make lieutenant in no time.

But Dick Musgrove's luck had run out. Admiral Dester's nickname below decks and about his squadron was "Black Bart," and not because he resembled the famous pirate. He did not. Sir Bartholomew was a disciplinarian's disciplinarian. He also enjoyed perfect health and had very little sympathy for those who fell ill. He knew men did not die from trifling colds, and made sure the ship's doctor agreed with him.



So, when Dick Musgrove fell sick a month later, it would be some time before his illness had reached a stage for the doctor to intervene. By then, Musgrove's "cold" had revealed itself to be a putrid infection of the lungs. The good doctor immediately and repeatedly bled his patient, to no avail. Ten days later, the feverish lad slipped away.

Richard Musgrove, midshipman and scrub, was buried at sea with full military honors. I wish I could say he was mourned by his shipmates, but an author should not tell falsehoods. At least they did not steal from his belongings. Let the reader decide whether that was because of gentlemanly honor among his fellows, or whether they feared he had something catching. In any case, a box of Musgrove's belongings would eventually make its way to Uppercross Hall and his grieving parents.

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Thus, ends the tale of Dick Musgrove, scrub. It is strongly suggested by the author that the reader learn well the characteristics of scrubbery so that they may take pains to avoid such people. One does not want the bloody flux, does one?

And as for you scrubs out there who are reading this ... well, *c'est la vie*.

Story Four:

The Musgrove Family Laments Their Poor, Lost Dickie

“And I will tell you our reason,” she added, “and all about it. I am come on to give you notice that Papa and Mamma are out of spirits this evening, especially Mamma. She is thinking so much of poor Richard! And we agreed it would be best to have the harp, for it seems to amuse her more than the pianoforte. I will tell you why she is out of spirits. When the Crofts called this morning, they happened to say that her brother, Captain Wentworth, is just returned to England—or paid off, or something—and is coming to see them almost directly. And most unluckily it came into Mamma’s head when they were gone that Wentworth, or something very like it, was the name of poor Richard’s captain at one time. I do not know when or where, but a great while before he died, poor fellow! And upon looking over his letters and things, she found it was so, and is perfectly sure that this must be the very man, and her head is quite full of it, and of poor Richard! So we must all be as merry as we can, that she may not be dwelling upon such gloomy things.”

--- Louisa Musgrove, *Persuasion*, Chapter 6

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October 1814 – Uppercross Hall, Somersetshire

“THERE, THERE, MAMMA. YOU must not take on so,” begged Charles Musgrove for the third time, patting the good lady’s hand.

“Oh, but I am well, I declare I am,” sobbed Mrs. Musgrove. “I cannot help myself, thinking of your poor, lost brother! Oh, Richard!” The mistress of the Great House at Uppercross could say no more.

The entirety of the Musgrove family, save the younger Mrs. Musgrove, had gathered in the parlor at the request of Mrs. Musgrove—the elder Mrs. Musgrove, it should be made clear. Mrs. Mary Musgrove was invited to the assemblage, but she begged off, her visiting sister, Miss Anne Elliot, being the principal excuse. Besides, the Musgroves were to dine at Uppercross Cottage that evening and, in any case, Mary’s ailments had returned to a small extent.

Mary Musgrove was not missed.



The elder Mrs. Musgrove held station at one end of the settee, her youngest daughter, Louisa, sat next to her, holding her hand, while her son, Charles, knelt at her feet to attend his mother. The eldest daughter, Henrietta, prepared tea for the family.

A moment later, Mr. Charles Musgrove the elder came into the room. In his hands was a small cask.

“I have it here, my dear!”

Mrs. Musgrove tore herself away from her children’s loving attentions.

“Oh! What a precious burden you carry, my dear! Pray give it to me this instant.”

No sooner was the request made than it was accomplished, and the family gathered about the chest containing the last few memories of the late Richard Musgrove, midshipman of the Royal Navy.

Reverently, Mrs. Musgrove opened the box. In it was a miniature of a young man of middling age, looks, and deportment, his naval uniform doing little to improve his appearance. With trembling hands did she raise the icon to her lips.

“Alas, my poor, poor lost Richard!” She kissed it, wetting the miniature with her tears. She handed the object to her husband, who sighed a great, sad sigh before passing it to his surviving son.

Charles scrutinized the painting. “A charitable likeness, to be sure. Dickie never was in good looks.”

“Charles!” cried his mother. “How can you say such a thing?”

“What? Do I say aught but the truth? Dickie could not be called handsome—not with those beady eyes and that weak chin.” He gave the miniature to Henrietta.

“For shame, son.” His father’s scold was mild. “Speak no ill of your brother.”

Louisa gazed at the miniature in Henrietta’s hands. “His uniform fits him ill. Of that there is no doubt.” Noticing the looks of censure from her parents, she quickly added, “I am sure he filled it out admirably as he grew!”

“He was very young when he left us,” observed Henrietta.

“He was indeed, and young still when he fell!” Mrs. Musgrove retrieved the miniature and held it to her chest.

Mr. Musgrove laid a hand on his spouse’s shoulder. “We must be consoled that he gave his life for the king, my dear.”

“He died of a cold,” mumbled Charles.

“What was that, dear?”



“Nothing, Mamma.”

She gingerly returned the portrait to the cask, withdrawing from it an insignificant stack of letters, tied with a navy blue bow.

“Here are his letters—our last words from dear, dear Richard.” She placed the treasured collection the table, undid the bow, and looked through the stack. “I know they are here. Ah! Here are Richard’s letters from his time on the *Laconia*! Read them aloud, my love.”

Mr. Musgrove took two thin letters from his wife’s hand. He opened the first and adjusted his spectacles.

“June 1812, off Gibraltar. Dear Mother & Father. I have had the very great fortune of securing a berth on HMS Laconia, a very fine 36-gun frigate, commanded by Captain Wentworth, renowned for his action off—”

“There, Captain Wentworth!” injected Mrs. Musgrove. “I should have recognized that name from the first instant! The famous Captain Wentworth. Richard served under no better captain than he.”

“Indeed, you are right, my dear,” replied her husband. “Now, where was I? “Ah! ‘Wentworth is known as “Fighting Freddie” in the fleet and has had very good luck in finding and capturing prizes.’ Fighting Freddie? That is a strange name, upon my word. ‘I know I shall make my fortune at last! Therefore, I ask that you send only a few pounds—ten, if you can—by return post.’”

“Would not it have been fine if poor Richard had remained with Captain Wentworth? I am sure he would have been promoted and made rich with prize money!”

Charles picked up the other letters. It was generous to refer to them as such, for there were barely more than four lines inside any of them.



“It would have been good thing indeed, Mamma. It would have saved Papa a considerable amount of money.”

“Take care with Richard’s letters, Charles.”

“Letters! I would not call these demands for my father’s money *letters*.”

“Now, Charles,” said Mr. Musgrove, “a midshipman’s pay is very little. A man needs something to live on.”

Charles huffed. “I do not doubt you, but I observe it would have been better had Dickie peppered his petitions with a few inquiries about his family.”

"A sailor's lot is a hard one," Mr. Musgrove defended his late son. "I am sure Richard had little time for writing."

Charles pointedly turned to the stack of thin missives, raised his eyebrows, and said nothing.

Mr. Musgrove held out the other letter. "You see, he asks most kindly about our health in his second letter from the *Laconia*."

"Poor Richard," lamented Mrs. Musgrove. "He always was a kindhearted boy!"

"Kindhearted?" stammered Charles. "I believe your memories are clouded by sentiment. I would not call Dickie *kindhearted*."

"Remember when he took my dolly?" piped up Henrietta. "It was ages before we found where he had hidden her."

"He used to pull my hair," added Louisa.

"Now, now, girls," replied Mr. Musgrove, "we must make allowances for his young age. The boy always had high spirits!"

"High spirits, indeed!" cried Charles. "Was it high spirits that caused him to ruin my first fowling piece by shooting rocks out of it? The barrel was never right again."

Mrs. Musgrove's crying reached new levels. "Oh, my poor, poor Richard!"

Mr. Musgrove scowled at his eldest. "Now look what you did!"

Charles colored and attempted to make amends. "Mamma, please be easy. We all miss poor Richard exceedingly. Do we not, Sisters?"

Henrietta and Louisa instantly agreed and tenderly consoled their mother. After a few moments, the good lady was able to manage, "We must always remember what a good, loving boy he was. How sad he was buried at sea! Why could the navy not send him home? He could have rested here at Uppercross, and we could visit his grave on Sundays."

"Mamma," said Charles, "the navy does not ship home lost sailors. Besides, there is a certain romance to being buried at sea."

"They do, they do, Charles! What of Lord Nelson? The navy brought him back to England!" she pointed out.

Charles gaped. "Mamma, that was *Nelson*!"

"I see no difference between him and any other mother's son."

Charles circumspectly rolled his eyes. "It is rather a bother to do so in any case, Mamma. They must place the body in a barrel filled with spirits of wine."

Mrs. Musgrove howled in revulsion.

"Of course, they have to eviscerate it first."

"*Charles!*" cried his father.

"Did I say something amiss, Papa?"

Mr. Musgrove hugged his nearly inconsolable wife while glaring at Charles. "That is quite enough of that! Apologize to your mother!"

Charles, while not the keenest wit in the room, was a good son who loved his mother. He professed his most sincere regrets over his unthinking words. Henrietta and Louisa copied their mother, lamenting the loss of "poor Richard," and Mr. Musgrove took away the scarred case of remembrance to better soothe the family's feelings. Soon afterwards, Charles took his leave, expressing pleasant anticipation of seeing them all at the Cottage that evening.

His sisters later conducted a *tête-à-tête*.

"Mamma is so low over this unhappy business of poor Richard," observed Louisa.

Henrietta agreed. "Papa hides it better, but he is sadly affected, too."

A small scowl marred the usual, bubbly expression of the youngest Musgrove sister. "You know how Mary is! She can be disagreeable at the best of times. This melancholy will surely trigger one of her spells!"

"If only there was something we could do!" Henrietta thought for a moment. "I know! Music always makes Mamma feel better. I will bring my harp with us to the Cottage!"

"What an excellent idea!" cried Louisa. "Mamma enjoys music so! Perhaps Miss Anne will join you on the pianoforte in a duet!" The pretty young girl frowned again. "Oh, if only Brother had married Anne instead of Mary!"

"Let us not dwell on that! I have just realized a difficulty to our plan. Should we carry my harp to the Cottage, there will not be enough room for all of us in the coach!"

"Oh, I had not thought of that! You are right."

Henrietta sighed. "I must leave my harp here."

“Nonsense!” exclaimed Louisa. “I will go ahead on foot, announcing our intentions. Mary dislikes surprises unless they are for her own benefit.”

“Such a distance! Oh, kind sister, I cannot ask it of you!”

“It is but a step or two. I have walked there many a time without damage, and I shall do it again. Say nothing more of it; I am determined! Besides, Mamma loves your instrument above all things. It is sure to banish all her gloomy thoughts.”

“Then we are agreed!” The sisters exchanged a kiss on the cheek. “Let us inform Papa of our plans and retire upstairs to dress.”

“Yes, of course!” Louisa grew gloomy again. “Alas, poor Richard—and poor Charles, too! Our brothers have had a sad lot, indeed.”



The End

Jack Caldwell is the author of nine novels, all available from your favorite bookseller:

