Summary

Sophia Wentworth was devoted to her brothers before she found happiness. Then she wanted the same for Frederick . . .

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Miss Sophia Wentworth shivered, her back pressed against the empty fireplace in what had once been her family’s little sitting room. It was nearly empty of furniture, forcing the mourners to stand. A fresh gust of wind caused the steady rain to tap at the fogging windows, but it was not the damp or the bitter November air that had so thoroughly banished all the cheer from the once-cozy chamber. That was entirely due to those gathered inside.

She could not forebear noticing that her formidable aunts, Henrietta and Charlotte, stood as far from Great-Uncle Bainbridge as they could. Had her brothers been present, she might have pointed it out, and shared a brief respite from the bleak atmosphere. But they followed the cart bearing their mother’s casket to the graveyard next to St. Mary’s, which no respectable lady could be seen doing. Or a respectable daughter, though Sophia had begged and pleaded.

Scolded by both aunts, she had been banished to the fireplace to “recollect herself,” and “cease her unseemly noise, did she wish to bring shame upon the entire family?” No sooner had she mastered the shudders and gulps of grief than she was promptly forgotten, as Sophia’s aunts eyed the old gentleman in the bath chair as if he were about to attack them. And the elderly, frail admiral of the
white glowered back at them from under iron-gray brows.

“My sisters,” Mama had said once, when Sophia had paused in her dusting to gaze up at their framed silhouettes in the stairwell, “increase family-feeling with distance. Which is why they hang here, where we seldom see them, rather than with Papa in our sitting room.”

“Fondness increases at distance?” Sophia had repeated, for she had been only ten at the time.

Mama had tucked her hair back up under her widow’s cap as she laughed, then cocked her head. “It’s true! The nearer they come to East Ilsley, the less fond I am, but oh, when they stay well away in Bath, I can talk of my dear sisters with prodigious charity. Lud! We ought to put Frederick to finding out a mathematical formula for it,” she’d added, and they’d laughed as they continued to sweep and to dust the narrow stair.

Mama had been like that, always joking, the first with a smile, and the first to offer help in the small parish outside of East Isley, where they had lived since Sophia’s father had died, not long after Edward was born. Alas, Mama had been the first to offer to nurse when Farmer Hugh’s family all were taken by a virulent fever, and even the new medical man’s most energetic bleedings, purgings, and French medicines could not save the two smallest Hughs—or Mama.

In one week their once-noisy, cheerful home was nearly empty, most of the furniture gone, and the three of them left orphans. The reminder caused a fresh welling of hot tears, but Sophia knew better by now than to draw attention to herself. She mopped her eyes with her sodden handkerchief as her great-uncle gestured to the servant waiting discreetly in the hallway.

He was wheeled out, the room so silent that one wheel squeak-squeaked on the gleaming floorboards that Sophia had scrubbed herself while Mama lay feverish upstairs, and as the door closed behind him, one of her aunts (she could not tell the difference between them) said to the other, “And so it comes to this.”

“Yes, Sister,” came the sanctimonious response. “Well, as I always said, Caroline was ever a monstrous wild piece.”

“True, very true, Sister.”

“I told her to her face, she ought to consider us. But she didn’t give us a thought, did she, and now look what comes of it. She had only herself to blame.”

“Just so, Sister.”

“I told her, we both told her, no good can come of a woman nearly forty, marrying so suddenly. She might have considered what was due to the memory of our sainted mother. Making us a laughingstock!”

“She was ever heedless,” was the immediate rejoinder.

“Three children. Three! The boys can be disposed of, but what do we do with a portionless girl, as plain as a pudding? There will be no hope of a husband for her.”

The second aunt was moved to exclaim, “Through no fault of our own, and with scarce means to hold up our heads as gentlewomen, there will be an endless charge upon our purse . . .”

Sophia’s fingers tightened on the handkerchief. She might even have spoken—though she had gained enough acquaintance with her aunts by now to know she would regret it—had not the wheel squeaked again, and the aunts fell silent.
Great-Uncle Bainbridge reappeared, pushed by the servant. He brought with him a waft of cold air that smelled strongly of spirituous liquor. “I’ve been taking a caulk,” he announced, his withered cheeks flushed. “And in doing so, I observed the funeral party exiting the gate at the top of the hill.”

The aunts murmured something indistinguishable as they looked at one another, mittened hands pulling reticules in tightly, as if Great-Uncle Bainbridge were about to leap from his bath chair and demand the contents.

“We must,” he said, “decide between us what is to be done before the boys are among us once again.”

The aunts exchanged another look, and one of them—Charlotte, perhaps?—spoke in a firm voice, as if they stood at either end of a cricket pitch, and not in a very small room, “Our sister, I apprehend, left nothing but her portion.”

“Small, I grant you,” Great-Uncle Bainbridge began. “But scarcely a—”

“My sister is correct,” Henrietta stated. “It being a mere pittance, we are hard put to think what is to be done. There is no room for two great boys in our home in Bath, and who is to support them?”

“That is the question we must—”

Charlotte said, “We have put our heads together, and believe it is best to prentice them out to anyone who will take them. A respectable calling, of course. That much is due to our name.”

“Ladies, if—”

“The girl, needless to say, must bide with us,” Henrietta stated. “Let it not be said that we are deficient in charity, in particular toward those with whom we share blood. And as it transpires, our maid-of-work recently gave notice, so there is even an empty bed in the attic—”

Great-Uncle Bainbridge began coughing. The coughs thundered forth as loud as any summer storm, and rumbled away slowly.

The aunts were silenced.

He did not stop until the door opened—whirling in a blast of rainy air that caused the aunts to twitter in dismay. Sophia’s heart harrowed when she saw the grief in Frederick’s tightly compressed mouth, and the puffy redness of Edward’s eyes. The boys held each other’s hands tightly.

They made their bows, then Great-Uncle Bainbridge said, “Master Frederick. Master Edward. Speaking as executor of your mother’s will, brief as it is, I believe it falls to me to confer with you. Have you another room where we might be comfortable?”

The aunts united in expostulations.

“We must hear anything touching on our own sister’s—”

“We will not be spoken for, without consultation—”

This time it was they who must be interrupted. “As executor,” Admiral Bainbridge thundered once more, “I believe it falls to me to designate witnesses to this hearing. And as neither of you ladies is so much as mentioned in Mrs. Wentworth’s will, I trust you will honor me by awaiting us here, if you please.” He extended a hand, and the servant stepped up to turn the bath chair. “Young gentlemen?”
“Not without Sophia,” Frederick said fiercely, tugging at his tight coat, which had been ill-dyed, the fabric stiff. “Mama said, Sophia was to take her place, sir.”

“Miss Sophia may accompany you,” their great-uncle said, causing twin gasps from the two by the window. “This matter concerns her as well.”

Sophia hated to enter the tiny chamber off the kitchen where she and her mother had sat sewing during wintry days, warmed by the oven on the other side of the back wall. Though it was entirely bare, she could feel her mother’s presence, could almost see her looking through the clouded glass into the kitchen garden.

Great-Uncle Bainbridge dismissed the servant, and stared at the three faces before him, all strongly resembling one another. The eldest boy, who looked no more than eleven or twelve, was handsomely made, dark of hair. He had inherited the Wentworth looks, that one, and possibly the younger boy as well, though he was still round-faced as an urchin, so only time would tell. But those same lineaments were far less flattering on the girl. Much as he despised those two dried-up old maids, he had to concur with what he’d overheard: they’d never be able to marry Sophia off without a sizable dowry, and there was nothing.

He had no notion what to do; he had never wed. It was his youngest sister who had married a handsome but luckless naval captain, producing the father of these children, himself gone into the navy and lost somewhere in the North Sea.

The admiral, on hearing of the death of his niece-by-marriage, had assumed that the children’s mother had people to take them in, until he received a grubby missive sent on by the local curate. He had been designated executor, which duty he took seriously; half an hour with those sour old spinsters made it plain that their notion of ‘charity’ extended no farther than turning the boys off to the first rascal who would take them, and making a servant of the girl—probably unpaid. Devil fly away with them and their gabble about being gentlewomen!

“There’s little enough business to conclude,” he said slowly to those waiting faces, the younger and the elder tear-stained, Frederick pale, his chin lifted. “I do not rightly know how to talk to children, but I would want things made plain. There is nothing left but your mother’s portion, which had been put into the funds for her, and which will bring scarcely ten pounds a year. You must see that this is not nearly enough due your birth.”

He turned to Frederick. “These aunts of yours would put you to clerk for some respectable merchant—”

“I beg your pardon,” the boy responded, striving to keep his voice even. “But I should run away if you did.”

Admiral Bainbridge gave a crack of laughter. “Proud as Lucifer, eh? And where would you run to, Master Cocksure?”

“I would run to sea,” Frederick stated, his voice trembling slightly on the last word. “My father was a ship captain, and I would as lief go aboard as an officer, but I would sign on as anything they will take.”

“So you’ve planned it, have you?” The admiral continued to chuckle. “Proud as Lucifer indeed. Well, if you can carry that fire aboard a Frenchman’s deck, damme, the navy is the very place for you. But can you be got ready?”
“Mama knew what a midshipman wants in his trunk, and she and Sophia have set about making my things.”

“I see! Very industrious indeed, and that suffices for you. But Master Edward there is far too young —”

Edward looked up at this, and blinked near-sightedly. “I should not wish to go to sea, sir,” he said in a soft treble. “The curate, Mr. Gregory, said I might come to his brother, who is a crammer, if Sophia would also come, and run the house, his wife being ill.”

Sophia felt it was time to speak up. “Mr. Gregory spoke for us, and we were all agreed upon it, if we would be let, until Edward can be got ready for school.”

Great-Uncle Bainbridge turned his bushy brows toward her. “You appear monstrous young for such responsibility. What is your age?”

He did not know their ages! “Near sixteen,” she said, and it was not quite a lie—she had not said what ‘near’ meant. Fourteen was, after all, nearer than twelve or ten.

He considered the life she was likely to lead under the constant command of that pair of pinch-faced parrots in the sitting room. Hard work lay ahead of young Miss Sophia no matter what was settled on, but if this curate turned out to be a decent man, perhaps she would fare better with the crammer’s household.

He clapped his gnarled hands flat on the arms of his chair. “I am deuced glad to hear what you say. It appears you’ve talked it out amongst yourselves, which indicates at least one level head. I like that, damme if I don’t. Master Frederick, let us look into your mathematics, and if I like what I hear, well, as it happens I will help you to your mess indent . . . “

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Dear Sophia and Edward:

Here you shall find this my first letter. At last I have got time to write it, though I might not be able to in one go.

I shall begin as promised from when we parted. There I was, with a pound note the Admiral gave me at the last moment, and my trunk on the cart. After I lost sight of you I was sent down to embark in a cutter en route to join the Olympus, which was lying in the Channel to watch the French coast.

From the first moment on board I saw that the other boys regarded me as an "unlicked cub" and I knew I was for it. But a Midshipman is never left alone long, I was to discover. I was introduced to my fellow mess mates and brought into the midshipmen's berth.

The first thing I was told was it was the custom of the Captain to invite the new midshipman to dinner, and my mess mates took care to warn me that the last midshipman had been flogged and turned out of the fleet for bad manners at the captain's table.

They then proceeded, under the notion of helping me, to turn out everything you had so carefully packed into my trunk. They display'd all these Contents after passing critical Remarks upon each one, and then handed me what they deemed necessary to prepare for this Dinner. I discovered that the cloathes you made were not Good enough for said dinner, and I was expected to wear Satin knee breeches, which I possessed not, your having made mine out of kerseymere. This Article was produced—though an uglier, dirtier, more scabrous piece of Satin could surely nowhere be Found in Nature—and handed me, which nearly eclipsed me. The upper part of the Abominable things fit
close under my arms, and the knee buckles dangled about my ankles.

My appearance afforded my new companions unqualified Mirth. Once they had provided me with a different waistcoat as well—which had not been brushed these ten ages, from the Smell—they proclaimed that I was perfect, once I had armed myself with my Dirk. At least I possessed that!

I marched out, hoping that the waistcoat would keep the Breeches in place, but not trusting it, I kept my arms tight against my sides as I presented myself to Gough, the second lieutenant. He looked at me and then exclaimed in a loud voice, “Why, what the d— have we here? He seems to have been swallowed and thrown up again!”

The other officers scarce had time to laugh, and then he roared, “What is this? A weapon worn to the captain’s table? Are you going to challenge him to a duel, then?”

I wished straight away to take it off my belt, though knowing that those Monstrous breeches would never stay up, when the bell rang and it was time to pass inside. Gough let out a “Hah!” and seemed to forget my Dirk, and though my heart pounded as the captain took Notice of me, he merely bowed and Greeted me as if Nothing were Amiss.

As I took my seat I thought the worst had passed, but I was wrong. I was surrounded by the premier and Gough, Lt. Pascal, the third, being on watch, the Sergeant of Marines, and the Chaplain. They, especially Gough, had sharp elbows, and between dodging which and my futile attempts to keep my Dishes from sliding, I was scarcely able to gain much more than a bite. When the covers were removed, Gough turned to me during the general Noise, and said, "A glass of wine with you, sir."

Recollecting my promises to Mama, I said with all the politeness I could muster, "No thank you, sir."

Whereupon he shouted, "D—l take it, do you mean to insult me?"

In haste I grabbed up the wine and coughed down the contents. It tasted vile, and made my head swim.

He then roared out, "Now then, sir, do you ever drink grog?"

"No, sir, never."

"Why, then, I shall give orders that you are to drink some every day. You look as if you need it. Ah ha ha!” He bawled a great laugh, setting the others to laughing at my Expense.

When the torment was at last over, the Captain seemed to notice me once again. "You, Sir, must have a fathom cut off those infernal tails of yours before I see you next. Why is it the midshipmen never come to my Table fit to be seen?"

This Ordeal over, I repaired once more to the midshipman's berth to find them all cock-a-hoop at my Expense. I was rising angry, but I soon learnt that every new Man has been put through the same experience, and so I forced myself to pretend it was all a joke. But I made a Resolve that if I am ever to attain any Rank, I will look out for boys like me. I do not at all see the Benefit in making someone suffer because, “Well, we all have been put through it.”

I know this letter is Prodigious long, for my fingers feel it, and I have mended this pen half a dozen times already. Suffice it to say, that one of my mess mates was kindhearted and gentlemanly, and soon made me understand what was expected of me.

He was as good as another was a vile rascal. This tyrannical fellow bullied the rest, and was feared by all the midshipmen. He considered himself cock of the walk.
It was he, I am certain, who saw fit to steal the new clasp-knife that Admiral Bainbridge gave me along with my pound note, which I keep hidden. The following day, my meals now to be taken in the regular way, I discovered that for midshipmen there was nothing but a large wooden bowl atop the trunks bound together that formed our table.

The Food being placed on this table, I found we had to get at it any way we could, clasp-knives being necessary for the cutting of Meat. Not having one, I grabbed with my hands. I found myself summarily denounced by the others, this being conduct unbecoming to Gentlemen, and I was told that Gough would at the very least chalk my fingers if he heard of my Manners, but more likely have me bound over a cannon and drubbed. Gough is a Tyrant, everyone said, as if I did not already know it. What I did not know at first, but have come to see, is that if we do our duty and stay out of his way life for us is good, but he makes life a misery for Pascal, the third lieutenant.

But however, I was soon befriended by the Sergeant of Marines, who charitably lent me a knife and spoon until such time as I might be able to procure my own out of my pound note.

I know I promised that I would not get into fights, as I had promised not to drink wine, but on board ship, I have discovered that the Rules of Life are not always obtaining in the same way as it is on Land. Perhaps the details would grieve you, so I will not retail them. Suffice it to say that my friends warned me against Bevan, said cock of the walk, so that when I was following him up to the weather deck one day, and he turned to kick me in the face, I was waiting for him, grabbed his Ankle, and though he being fifteen years old and a hand span larger than I, as well as several stone heavier, I found that determination in a scrap soon ended the Affray.

Afterward, though he ever sought an opportunity for Revenge, my friends looked out for me, as I have for them. United, we were able to avoid the worst of him, and as he had been caught twice stealing extra grog, I am glad to say when again we touched into port, he was exchanged out, a new third lieutenant bringing in, as well as a replacement for Bevan.

The new fellow, a large master’s mate already shaving, we thought might cut up rough but he proved to be an excellent Fellow. He knows his Duty through and through, but having no Influence, has not got Promotion. I am afraid when I look at him I see where I will be in five years, but I will not repine. He and the new Third are great friends, and he has taught us to Whittle.

I see I have nearly reached the end of my Paper, and as I do not wish you to pay Extra I will bring this to a close. Pray give my best to Edward, and I look forward to receiving letters from home.

Your loving brother, Frederick

Sophia read this letter over three times, then carefully folded it and laid it inside her mother’s old huswife, which was all that remained of her things. Sophia had long since transferred all her mother’s needles, thread, and scraps to her own work basket, and kept the worn bag with its old-fashioned embroidered decorations as a precious keepsake.

She straightened up, her breath catching when she felt the familiar pull under her arms. Her mourning dress was nearly grown out of, but she had less than a month to go before she would be expected to lay it aside. She had already remade two of her mother’s gowns for herself; she was grown so tall that they had not required vast alteration of seams.

A pounding noise directly overhead startled her. The dishes on their shelves rattled as boys thundered down the stairs and erupted into the room. Sophia clutched her belongings to her and backed away as they raced through the door into the garden, as if released from a catapult.

Always at the last came Edward, the smallest and the most short-sighted of Mr. Gregory’s pupils. He
squinted in her direction, and she bit her lip against admonishing him about that squint. He bore
enough teasing as it was—and anyway she was six shillings three-pence away from being able to
buy his spectacles. She saved every penny she could.

“Sophia?” Edward paused. “You are waiting for me?”

“It’s Frederick’s first letter, arrived with the morning post. He is safe, on board a ship called
Olympus.” Sophia carefully opened the letter to show him.


“Miss Wentworth!” a woman’s voice cried peevishly from down the hall.

Brother and sister turned their heads guiltily, and Sophia grabbed up her precious letter in its worn
huswife. “The beans,” she breathed. “They are not snapped. I’ll read it to you before bedtime. Go
outside, do, with the others. You may read it later.”

Edward sighed, and turned his steps obediently toward the door, though he loathed cricket, and any
other game that imposed on the blurry, vague world beyond arm’s length.

Sophia tucked her huswife under her apron as she scratched gently at Mrs. Gregory’s door. Though
the curate’s wife could yell as loud as a goose honked when moved to do so, she complained that the
least noise (that she did not make herself) shattered her head.

“What are you about, Miss Wentworth?” came the fretful voice as soon as Sophia was bade enter.

“Sally is alone in the kitchen. If the dinner is not got ready, those dreadful boys will set up a howl,
and I am already so ill.”

“I will be there directly, Mrs. Gregory,” Sophia said.

She shut the door noiselessly and as she sped back down the hall, which smelled of medicine, old
cabbage, and boys, she made herself count up her blessings. She would soon be able to lay aside this
horrid mourning gown. She could be toiling under the horrid scolding aunts. They would not grant
her the dignity of ‘Miss Wentworth,’ for certain.

Sophia picked up the basket of beans that she had picked before breakfast, reflecting that another
blessing was having Edward right there with her. And if she were very, very careful, perhaps by
year’s end she might be able to save out that six shillings three-pence . . .

Dear Sophia and Edward:

Gough decided we were too Easy in our duty, and put us in charge of the new ratings to train them
in small arms. I thought I was obliged to tell him that I had never fired pistol in my life, but
O’Malley, my particular friend, grabbed me and constrained me to “tace.”

He said we were better off figuring out on our own then catching the punishment the second
lieutenant which surely land on us for not “knowing our duty.” And sure enough, we were saved by
our new Third Lieutenant, who took it upon himself to instruct us as well as the men.

When I got over my fear, I could see that nothing was more Diverting than the Blunders we made.
We were arranged in two lines on the Forecastle, with the foremost jacks looking down and grinning
at us. Some put their muskets on the wrong shoulder, some let the butt fall on their next neighbors’
toes. Some could not stand with their backs straight up, and looked in fright when the foremost jacks
threaten’d to lash a crossbar to their shoulders. Lt. Croft did take a chalk to some, on the shoulder, that they might know right from left, until he saw that it only bothered them more.

In short, this Exercise was performed early every morning once the afterguard had holy-stoned the deck, and before we were even given our breakfast. But Lt. Croft kept at it, taking us midshipman aside to teach us the pistol until we could not only load it in under a minute, but we had a fair chance of hitting a bottle strung from the yardarm. He is a Capital fellow, is Lt. Croft, not only a fine shot, but he is not at all like our old lieutenant. He will not take snuff from Gough, not if it was ever so.

We have rec’d orders to chase after the frigate Bien Aimee, a Frenchman sent, it is rumored, by the National Convention to arrange for grain from the Americas. It is to be all hands soon. I will take up my pen again when I can.

This was in a sense a prevarication. Though it was true that the Olympus had received orders, and that the captain would soon order the ship to be put about as soon as the tide began its outward flow, Frederick was not certain how much of the truth was proper to retail to a sister.

He sat back in the frowsty midshipmen’s berth, squinting against the swing of lamplight at O’Malley, groaning in his bed as shadows painted long stripes over him, then took them away again in the heeling of the ship.

Ought he to describe how Gough and his particular cronies had made O’Malley drunk, then attempted to send him aloft as lookout? Then how Croft had insisted that something was amiss down in the hold that only the second lieutenant could pronounce upon, the premier being busy with the captain?

He knew he could not tell Sophia how the midshipmen (except for Tompkin, who held O’Malley’s head while he was sick) watched gleefully through the scuttles. First Croft had challenged Gough, who tried to bluster and threaten, until he noticed the captain’s favorite topman watching the hatch, and the two burly forecastlemen waiting silently to hold the officers’ coats. Both men Gough had ordered flogged more than once, for mere trifles.

Gough was big and brawny, and relied on strength and certain vicious tricks. He had blackened Croft’s eye before he’d scarcely got his coat off, and bruised his throat by taking hold, but Croft had been taught boxing by someone who knew the art. He flung Gough off again before anyone could interfere.

And so, watched by the row of boys above, and the silent sailors below, Croft thrashed Gough until he fell to hands and knees, moaning.

“Now,” Croft said. “Have we reached a gentlemen’s understanding? Or need we meet again on shore?”

“He means pistols or swords,” someone breathed into Frederick’s ear. “Zounds! How I should like to witness that.”

“I know what he means. Tace!”

Gough growled out something unintelligible that Croft appeared to accept, and a sailor silently brought a pail of water so that Gough could dunk his head to wash the blood off his face.

Afterward, the captain only said, “Mr. Croft? An accident?” Indicating the third lieutenant’s eye.

“Tripped, sir.”
“Mr. Gough?”

A thrilling silence gripped the entire crew, then Gough mumbled, “Tripped and fell.”

The captain paced the length of the quarterdeck, his back turned to his crew; when he turned back again, his face was scrupulously blank. “I trust my officers will hitherto be more careful.”

Frederick smiled at the memory, then shook his head. No, you didn’t write that kind of thing to a sister.

The expected call came. He capped his ink bottle, threw pen, paper, and ink into his trunk, and grabbed his hat before racing out.

When he returned to his missive, a packet newly hove alongside to bring the last of the captain’s supplies and to take the post before they crossed the Atlantic, Frederick had time enough to write hastily:

This letter must be sent at once. The captain had Occasion to invite Lt. Croft to dinner, and it was my turn to be invited also—and now I know enough how to go on. The captain asked all manner of questions about where Croft comes from and who are his people, what ships he has served on, and what stations. So I will finish by saying that Lt. Croft is from Somersetshire, and has an Uncle he stays with near Taunton. Fancy meeting someone at all this distance who knows the country where you and Edward now live!

They are ringing the bell, so I must seal this up and direct it.

Your loving Brother, Frederick.

o0o

It was another long year before Sophia heard anything, and then the letters came in a bunch, some so waterlogged the writing was barely visible.

But by now Edward had obtained his spectacles. He and Sophia crouched over a lamp late that night, as a snowstorm howled its way around the house, and patiently examined each, Edward writing what they descried above the faint brown words, that the letters could more easily be read again and again.

“North American station!” Edward said at last, hugging his knees against his thin body. “Fancy seeing the falls of the Niagara, and penguins, and maybe even pirates, all in one place.”

“I’d as lief he never caught a glimpse of a pirate,” Sophia rejoined.

“But these dangers are long got over,” Edward said, smoothing the crackling paper.

“Yes, and who knows what dangers he is undergoing at this very minute? Well, I must not borrow trouble, I can hear Mama’s voice as if she sat with us. Come, it’s getting colder. You go off to bed. I will secure these with the others. We shall read them again on the morrow, if I can get ahead in my work.”

Edward flitted downstairs in his nightgown, and Sophia began to put the letters away, then turned back to reread certain passages. These letters were all significantly shorter than his first ones had been.

The thought formed in her head that O’Malley and Frederick’s other friends had become in a sense
brothers—that she was only catching the merest glimpse of his life in the great world among unimaginable sights. She and Edward had only what he chose to share. Whenever he was able to come home again, would anything remain of his family feeling?

The winter passed, and with it spring, summer, and another autumn. When Mr. Gregory set the tone at dinner by talking of world events with his pupils, those events seemed ever more alarming, especially that news arriving out of France. Robespierre and his compatriots apparently had set themselves the task of beheading everyone in their kingdom without a king—except for the soldiers and sailors sent out to make war.

Sophia was only able to leave the house to go to church, following behind the quiet pairs of boys, the two housemaids behind her. At church they sat isolated in the gallery so that she looked down on Dr. Gregory’s bewigged head. After divine service, Mrs. Gregory saw to it that they marched straight back again, without the maids or Sophia having an opportunity to disgrace the household by dawdling.

Sophia might also be sent to the butcher’s or the fishmonger’s, but Mrs. Gregory always watched the clock. Consequently Sophia knew no one outside the household.

And so another year wound its way through the seasons.

Edward unexpectedly shot up so that the top of his head nearly reached Sophia’s nose, and his limbs, once so neat and childlike, had begun to lengthen so that all his shirt sleeves had to be reset. And it was not only his clothes. Sophie had had to let out the seams in two dresses, and from the uncomfortable fit, it was clear that it was all to be done again, but when would she find the time? That pile of mending seemed to have no bottom. The pupils wore out their stockings and rent their shirts faster than she could set them to rights. How she loathed sitting in a stuffy corner plying her needle for endless hours!

At least spring ripened into beautiful weather, and she could open a window to glance outside. And every retort Sophia bit back, every extra dish washed and scuff mark scrubbed—why was it that boys saw fit to leap up and strike the lintel above the door with their grubby hands whenever they came or went?—was deemed worth her effort one day.

Mr. Gregory entered the schoolroom, waving a letter, and interrupted the boys at their translation of Thucydides. “Now, this is what comes of diligence and attention to duty,” he announced as the boys threw down their pens, glad for any excuse not to be construing. “Master Wentworth hath earned a scholarship at St. Winstan’s!”

He read out the letter, pausing after every fulsome phrase to observe the effect on his pupils. At the end, he declared, “You know our custom. I have given orders for a celebration, after which you boys will gain a free afternoon. And tomorrow, I expect a renewed attention to diligence in the rest of you!”

Even Mrs. Gregory emerged from her bed long enough to partake of the seed cakes, ratafia biscuits, and the precious Yellow Escubac only brought out for the most special occasions. The boys heartily enjoyed the repast, and then escaped out to play, sweeping Edward with them, as Mr. Gregory observed with satisfaction, “That makes the tenth scholarship we’ve accomplished. Ten is a number that looks well in advertisements.”

“Indeed, Gregory,” his wife said plaintively, looking around at the faded, much-cleaned hangings. “It warrants a raise in our fees, do you not agree? The house is growing sadly shabby, and I don’t mean to complain, as I believe I know my wifely duty as well as anyone, but I can scarcely hold up my head in your father’s church, wearing that old bonnet of mine, and if Dr. Gregory can look upon that
“We have conversed on this head,” Mr. Gregory rejoined dully. “My father has done everything he can, but with seven of us all with equal claims, and that does not even count my sisters . . .”

They went off talking, leaving Sophia and Sally with all the dirty dishes.

It was only then that Sophia discovered that Mr. Gregory, in his excitement, had forgotten the rest of the post, among which was another packet of letters directed to the Wentworths. This packet, the thinnest yet, was easily overlooked.

Sophia’s fingers were well wrinkled when she called Edward inside, and together they retreated to the empty schoolroom, with its rays of strong sunlight slanting in and turning the swirls of chalk dust to tiny fires. They dropped on the battered form and began opening the seals, each noticing that the letters were a single sheet only, and though writ on back and front, not even crossed.

Edward began reading aloud the topmost letter. He and Sophia both suppressed their impatience at Frederick’s responses to news that had been old when it reached him. It seemed like ancient history.

“I wonder how long it will be until he discovers I’m gone to school,” Edward remarked, holding the second letter, which smelled strongly of brine, up to the window and squinting. “This one appears to have fallen directly into the sea. I cannot make out but a word here and there.”

“Do they dunk these into the brine before sealing them?” Sophia rejoined, examining the third.

Neither expected an answer from the other. They were too busy trying to decipher the words. Sophia found herself bent over until her nose nearly touched the smudged paper, before she had to give up entirely on her letter, and she turned to the fourth.

“Near shipwreck,” Edward exclaimed suddenly, looking up from the fifth. “Here is an apology, but he is sending it anyway in case we can make it out.”

“Shipwreck! Upon my word!” Sophia pounced on the sixth, breaking the seal with rare impatience.

“And hurricano,” Edward exclaimed. “And . . . I think he is now in another ship altogether. But only a line. “

They looked at one another, neither wanting to admit to a vast disappointment. Even if they had had all the words, these letters altogether barely made the sum of Frederick’s first after he left home.

Sophia opened the last one and sat back at the pungent odor of mildew. It seemed that Frederick, in his haste, had put wet paper with dry. Or someone had. They looked at one another in disappointment. Six letters—six short letters, and only half of one and a few lines of another were legible.

Sophia set down the last and wiped her fingers on her apron. “What do we write to him? I hardly know what to say,” Sophia remarked.

Edward shook his head. “It is not his fault about the mildew. And though he is writing less, he might not think that a fault at all. He might not have occasion to write as much.”

Sophia straightened up, shaking out her mildew-smeared apron, and impatiently shoved back her tousled hair. The jerky movement caused a straining seam under her arm to give way.

“Oh, look at that,” she exclaimed. “This gown was meant to have seen me out the season. I am
Edward paused in the act of painstakingly collecting their brother’s letters. “Too stout?” he repeated, as if the words had no meaning. His eyes, made larger by the winking spectacles, blinked in puzzlement.

Sophia bit her lip. Mrs. Gregory, in her more peevish moments, had taken to commenting upon how gentlemen preferred an elegant, sylph-like form—such as her own—and that it was a shame when girls got themselves overgrown. But Sophia had never forgotten her aunts’ disparaging remarks, and subsequently had not reached the age of seventeen without an unflinching assessment taken in the tiny looking glass up in that small attic chamber that she shared with Sally the kitchen maid and Molly, the housemaid.

She had formed the resolution that she would never marry—that Mrs. Gregory was right in hinting that she was unmarriageable—but it was just as well. Who would keep house for Edward if she abandoned him, only to be keeping house for some unknown gentleman? Edward was a fine scholar, but unworldly; though he was still full young, already he was strongly disinclined to become a schoolmaster, still less a barrister. His strongest motivation was toward the church.

So she said nothing in answer to his question, but held out her hand. “I will put these with the others. Unreadable as they are, I cannot bring myself to throw them away.”

Edward opened his mouth to agree, but turned his head when red-cheeked Sally appeared at the door, her cap askew. “The missus sent me to bring o’you to the front parlor,” she said breathlessly, eyes wide. “There’s someone come along for to see you!”

Edward and Sophia turned toward one another, each puzzled who it might be. Neither had ever had a caller; boys did not get callers, and though Sophia had reached the age where it might be thought of, she had never met any females of any rank, and as for young men, Mrs. Gregory had made plain that hers was a respectable house, and any female who dared to walk out with a young man would be dismissed instantly.

“It seems odd that the school would send someone hard on their letter,” Edward observed.

“Well, go and find out,” Sophia said. “I will put these away while you wait upon your caller.”

They parted, but Sophia was not halfway up the narrow staircase to the attic when Edward’s voice reached her. “Sophia!”

The crack in his voice sped her feet; she clutched the letters to her bosom and raced back down, bursting into the parlor, where she came to an abrupt stop when she spied two unfamiliar figures wearing the blue coats of the navy, one with the white collar patch of the midshipman, the other the buttons of a lieutenant.

The short, thin midshipman gazed at her in with such intensity from dark eyes—familiar eyes—

“Sophia,” Edward exclaimed, his finger pressing his spectacles to his nose as if he could not believe the witness of his eyes. “Do you not see? It is Frederick!”

The letters dropped unnoticed to the floor. With a cry of joy she hurled herself into her brother’s arms, the seam beneath her arm ripping even further.

Frederick hugged her crushingly, then set her back and she looked at him with all her eyes. He was so deeply tanned, and looked so . . . not old, for he was no more than fifteen, but so, so grown, even manly. “Frederick? How comes it that you are here?”
“We exchanged into Bucephalus, which on reaching Portsmouth, we were paid off. Then Croft here, oh! Lt. Croft, may I present my sister Soph—Miss Wentworth? Well, he was on his way home, and that being not far outside of Taunton, kindly offered me a place in the shay, or I would still be toiling up the London road on the mail coach.”

Sophia’s astonished gaze transferred to the tall, strongly built young man whose blue eyes were well spaced, his brown skin a healthy contrast to his powdered wig. He smiled genially.

Suddenly conscious of her apron covered with mildew, her wild hair, and the horrid rip under her arm, she clutched her hands to her sides and curtseyed stiffly.

Frederick let out an exclamation. “Ho! I recognize those. My letters—Jupiter! I sent them into a passing whaler six, eight months ago. They swore they would touch at Portsmouth by Christmas. Well!”

Sophie dipped her knees to pick them up, but the seam ripped more with an audible sound, and she shot upright, blushing hotly; her brothers laughed, which caused her to laugh as well. Edward dove at her feet and scrambled them together, saying easily to their brother, “We were attempting to decipher them not an hour ago. They seem the worse for a sea bathe.”

Frederick threw up his hands. “All I can say is, they were wrapped in good canvas before I sent them. I suspect some pair of hands along the way decided my canvas suited his purpose better. Hey day, I’ll know better another time!”

Sophia said, “We were just celebrating Edward’s good news, and there are seed cakes and the Escubac we put up this summer, if you would care to partake.”

“I am confounded hungry,” Frederick said.

Lt. Croft bowed. “I wish I could accept, Miss Wentworth, but I’m on my way to my uncle, who keeps early hours. If I may call again?”

“You would be most welcome,” she said easily, for she was accustomed to the company of young men—before she remembered Mrs. Gregory’s rules. Though surely this gentleman would be considered her brother’s caller?

Mrs. Gregory was not pleased. The delight in those fees had faded with the reflection that they were far from being money in hand, whereas here in person was yet another ravenous young master, on top of a house full of them.

No sooner had Sophia set down plates before her brothers than the querulous cry “Miss Wentworth” echoed along the passage. Frederick immediately understood from the face that Edward pulled that something was amiss. At Edward’s beckon, they tiptoed to the door.

The narrow hallway conducted sound excellently, enabling the boys to hear Mrs. Gregory’s disinquisition on exactly how much boys ate, and how little profit was to be made when members of the household practiced upon her generosity. There was more—a great deal more—in a similar vein, after which Sophia was sent to get dinner begun.

When she rejoined the boys, “I shall shift myself to the Badgers Three,” Frederick said low-voiced. “I can dine in ordinary. What do you think of the people there?”

Sophia might have no friends or callers, but she knew what was said about all the shopkeepers along the street, including Mrs. Ingle, who kept the Badgers Three inn. “Mrs. Ingle is sister to the baker, and knows some of his secrets, for her tarts are excellent, and she has a way with fishcakes that
brings her custom.”

“Good,” Frederick said. “Come to me tomorrow at dinner—oh, dash it, I did not think. Will you be
let come?”

“Oh, I believe so, as long as my work is done,” Sophia said confident that Mrs. Gregory would
welcome the opportunity to feed two fewer.

“Capital! And if I should be late, just wait for me.”

On this somewhat mysterious note he picked up his dunnage, which he carried in a canvas
receptacle, and let himself out the kitchen way, so as to avoid the family at the front of the house.

Sophia put the untouched seed cakes back into the pantry, and whisked away the evidence of the
would-be party. As she set about the preparations for dinner, she resolved to rise before dawn, that
she could have all her share of the work well in hand by dinner time.

Mrs. Gregory was thus content to let them go, and so Sophia, self-conscious in the least
objectionable of her old gowns, paced by Edward’s side, their steps matching under their shared
umbrella as rain poured down all around them.

They walked into the warm inn, breathing in the welcoming aromas of braised meats and blackberry
pie. Frederick rubbed his hands, grinning very much like the little boy she had hid her tears from on
his departure so long ago.

“Here you are, Edward. Sophia. Come, come. Here is Croft to meet you,” he added, leading the way
to a little side chamber in which a table had been prepared.

For Frederick, nothing seemed more natural than to invite his generous friend once he discovered
that Croft, whose old uncle had taken to his bed, was left with time on his hands and nothing to do.
His uncle’s kitchen was entirely organized around the needs of an elderly man with an uncertain
appetite, the main dish being gruel. Of course he must share the dinner Frederick had so grandly
ordered—just as Frederick had been invited when they touched at the Cape, Gib, or Portsmouth.

Sophia had to suppress a sense of sharp disappointment. She had not been prepared to share
Frederick with a stranger. But in the time it took to set aside the umbrella and divest themselves of
coats and gloves, she scolded herself silently. She must remember her earlier resolve: his shipmates
were become his brethren. It was they, and not she and Edward, with whom he had been sharing all
the dangers and joys of his life. She must take them as she found them.

At least she was decently dressed, she reflected as Lt. Croft came forward to shake hands. He looked
less imposing than the day previous; Sophia saw that he now wore his own hair, instead of the
regulation wig. His hair was ordinary brown, but it waved over his brow, and framed his face just so.
He wore a plain brown coat, well-made, but without gigantic buttons, or any of the accoutrements of
the popinjay, such as many of Mr. Gregory’s pupils had favored.

Somehow, the plainness of Lt. Croft’s coat made him look taller, and broader, and older than any of
the students she had known (a couple of whom had left Mr. Gregory past the age of twenty)—no, he
did not look old, as one should say an old man, but . . . she peered uncertainly at him again, to find
him smiling right at her. That smile was so reassuring, so kindly, so . . . warm.

She sat abruptly upon her chair.

As the dressed meats were bringing out, followed by four side dishes, Frederick looked upon each
with the delight and pride of a father, greatly diverting Sophia. Ordinarily she would have asked who
was to pay for so grand a meal, but she determined not to say anything before the fascinating stranger that did not accord with company manners.

Edward had no compunctions. He shoved his spectacles up his nose as he gazed with open glee at the feast before them.

“Come,” Frederick said, gesturing grandly. “Sophia, may I help you to some of this ham?”

The conscious way he carved and served made Sophia wonder if he was aping the manners of his captain. It was odd to see a fifteen-year-old boy hosting as if he’d been doing so for these twenty years, but she had to admit he did it well. How many captain’s dinners had taught him the niceties, and in what strange places?

“So, Edward, you are to go up to St. Winstan’s?”

“As soon as the long vac is over,” Edward said thickly around a mouthful of ham.

“And our sister?” Frederick turned from him to Sophia. “Did you think to remain as housekeeper for the Gregorys?”

“There is nowhere else for me,” she said with surprise, sending another peek at Lt. Croft to see how he reacted to these personal tidings, which did not accord with company manners. She caught another of those smiles that warmed her inside as surely as the merry fire toasted her outside, before he turned to her brother.

Frederick exchanged a meaning look with Lt. Croft that immediately set Sophia to wondering, then he said, “Are you happy there?”

Sophia said, “It’s as good a place as any. I am used to the work.”

“I am wondering,” Frederick said, “if you might want a cottage of your own, so that when Edward comes home, there is somewhere to go, where he will not be stuffed in among a parcel of boys, and your every bite grudged.”

Hope flared inside Sophia, to be instantly quashed. “I may as well wish for the moon,” she said, trying to smile.

Frederick beamed in triumph. “As it happens, I cannot give you the moon, but I can give you the house. Well, a very small cottage. We arranged it, that is, Croft here helped me to it, the landlord not wishing to deal with a fellow my age. It’s not far, closer to St. Winstan’s—a walk no more than three miles, they said. We can go there in the gig tomorrow, if you like, and you can look it over and decide.”

“What?”

“How!”

Frederick greatly enjoyed his brother’s and sister’s surprise. “We arranged it this morning. As it happens, Croft’s uncle knows a land agent, who is acquainted with the landlord. It’s called Widow’s Cottage, untenanted these four years. The rent is eight pounds six a year, and it is a bit cobwebby inside, and needing new hangings and things, but you will not mind that, surely?”

“Oh, to have my own house,” Sophia breathed. “But eight pounds a year? My share of our ten pounds would not cover that, much less leave anything for food.”
“I have arranged it all,” Frederick said grandly. “That is, I will pay down the first two years, out of my prize money. I saved these twenty pounds to bring to you, and the best of it is, there are two little rooms up under the attic, so that when I touch on shore, I could come to you, and of course Edward can stay whenever they let him out of that school.”

Sophia drew in a slow breath of sheer joy. Edward dropped his fork. “You’re a regular trump, Frederick!”

The boys and the young man toasted the event with porter, and Sophia joined them with Mrs. Ingle’s best dandelion wine.

Before the month was out, Edward and Sophia had made their move. Mrs. Gregory, appalled at the notion of losing an excellent housekeeper in Sophia, brought herself to offer real wages. To this Sophia turned away, temptation successfully overcome by the thought that Mrs. Gregory might have offered that at any time previously.

Sally was also made happy, as it seemed likely that Mrs. Gregory’s parsimony would mean a rise in her own standing—and she intended to see that her wages rose as well. Molly in her own turn hoped to step up into Sally’s place, and had a young cousin going into service who could replace her. If Mrs. Gregory did not try to cheat her.

Mrs. Gregory was so peeved at this domestic revolt that she absented herself when at last the cart came to take away the Wentworths’ few belongings. But Sophia never looked back.

Once the carter had helped Edward carry the things in and had been paid off, Sophia picked up her bonnet and basket and walked into the village to become acquainted with the shops, and to take a look at the church they would be attending. This latter was a cheerful building, if small, built during the Tudor times, boasting a single fine window dedicated to the wife of the Squire Forsham during Queen Anne’s day.

While Edward diligently studied his Greek in his fear that in making the drastic change from pupil to scholar he might be derided as ignorant, she worked on furbishing up his wardrobe so that he would be able to hold up his head among the sons of wealthy gentry-folk and the occasional scions of baronets and knights.

In due time Edward and his trunk were carried off to St. Winstan’s, leaving Sophia alone in her house, the nights steadily closing in.

For the first time in her life, she felt the long evenings lying heavily on her. She set herself to read some of Edward’s books until her eyes burned. She repapered the walls, weeded diligently in the small kitchen garden, worked new rugs, and hung new curtains.

As autumn began to wane, she found herself growing morose. It did not help that her nearest neighbors were a pair of spinsters who brought her aunts very much to mind. Priding themselves upon their connection through a great-aunt with an earl, they held themselves even above the company of the local squire, who was friendly enough after church, though his wife walked by with her nose in the air.

Occasionally Sophia looked out into the road when grand carriages rolled by on their way to the squire’s for the hunting season, and then back again when the party broke up.

November arrived, bleak and cold, and Sophia had yet to receive one letter. This was not
unexpected. In fact, she did not count upon any word from Frederick until next spring at least, so she was astonished one day to hear a gig on the road.

She went to the window, for any change was welcome, however brief—and instead of seeing the gig turn off toward the grand avenue leading to the squire’s seat, she was astonished to observe it coming toward the cottage.

The horse pulled up, tossing its head. As Sophia opened her door, to her delight, none other than Frederick leaped down, holding the horse’s reins awkwardly in one hand. “Hey day, Sophia,” he called. “I will have to return this gig directly, but I wanted to drop my dunnage first, and make sure you was at home.”

“Where did you hire it?”

“In Taunton, but I arranged to leave it with the George. If I jump to it, I might even get back before this wind freshens.” He pointed northward.

“Why, I shall walk with you, then,” Sophia said. “Bide a moment. I’ll fetch my bonnet and pelisse.”

“It might turn ugly,” Frederick warned.

“I would rather get a little wet than miss any of your visit,” she declared. “I did not think to see you for another several years—or even to get a letter! How does this come about?”

“Croft is running one of the packets to Gib,” Frederick said. “He’s allowed two mids, and being a great gun, put in for O’Malley and me to serve. We sail the dispatches, with occasional passengers and whatever else Whitehall sees fit to send, and then, why, we come back.”

Sophia clapped her hands. “Oh, that is capital! I hope and trust that you are able to remain with this duty until the war is safely over.”

Frederick forbore telling her that they had all put in for ship duty, as there was no chance of prizes (and for the mids, gaining their step) unless they were to see action. But that was the sort of thing you did not tell your sister, he thought wisely. “And so, how often does Edward come down to see you?”

“He walked over of a Sunday at first, but now that the days have drawn in, he cannot. I do not look for him before Christmas. Tell me about your travels!”

Frederick was nothing loth. He whiled away the brief drive by descriptions of the Mediterranean, and as they tramped back together down the lane, it was her turn to relate to him what little she had gleaned from Edward about his life at St. Winstan’s. She said nothing of her low spirits or boredom; she despised herself for such gooseish emotions, and knew she ought to be grateful for his generosity.

As soon as they reached the cottage, she bustled about preparing a meal, to which they soon sat down. After they had eaten, Frederick said, “And now for my surprises. First, Lt. Croft invited us as his guests to an assembly in Taunton, while everyone else is burning guys and dancing around the bonfires. He says it is good practice for me, as some captains will require their officers to act as escorts at diplomatic or admirals’ balls and routs.” His expression changed. “I never thought to ask until just now, but do you know how to dance?”

Sophia laughed. “As it happens—yes. The Gregories offered for their fees to teach gentlemen’s deportment, which included dancing. And as Mrs. Gregory found it inconvenient to tromp around the parlor floor with what she called spotty, smelly boys, it fell to me to partner them one by one. I know Sir Roger de Coverley, and any number of country dances, and round dances, and the gavotte
as well as the minuet, though I have never actually attended even a vestige of a rout.” She shook her head. “And I have nothing to wear to one.”

“There, you are wrong,” he said, laughing with anticipatory delight. “And now to my second surprise. I bought it at Gib.” He reached for his canvas bag. “This is why I did not want to risk the rain. Captain Graves’ wife told me when I was looking at a fine length of scarlet silk that unmarried girls cannot wear such, and directed me to this white muslin with these flowers and stems printed on it. I thought it sad stuff compared to the silk, but I hope you will like it.” He held out the folded fabric with its tiny clusters of pale rose berries and spiky leaves and stems.

“Oh, it is lovely,” she exclaimed. “But . . . November 5th is tomorrow. I cannot possibly get up a gown in a day!”

“You can if I help you,” he said. “Who do you think mends my clothes? I have become mighty deedy with needle and thread. You have only to cut it out, and show me what you want sewn, and together we ought to get along, and I’ll tell you all about O’Malley’s monkey, and the hurricane off Jamaica . . .”

The next evening, Sophia clutched her best gloves tightly as she tripped in her new gown up the stairs to the ballroom. Over it she wore mother’s old coat, brushed worn, the sash tied round her waist had been a ribbon on Mama’s wedding gown—well soaked in milk, carefully washed and aired all night and day—and under her mother’s old calash her headdress was formed simply of the last bits of Mama’s old-fashioned lace, but she felt new and fresh and light as thistledown.

She had never had so much as a look into a ballroom, but her expectations were exceedingly modest: perhaps a dance with her brother and his friend. Otherwise she had every expectation of sitting aside to watch and thus be highly entertained.

She and Frederick, whose uniform was neatly brushed, eased past the crush in the outer room once they had shed outer wear and she had exchanged her walking shoes for the plain dancing slippers she had worn for all those lessons in Mr. Gregory’s best parlor.

They entered the long room, which smelled of beeswax candles, pomade, and perfume. Sophia looked about her in wonder, the many candles so brilliant that they dimmed almost to invisibility the dark marks on the high walls above the candle sconces, the old-fashioned rococo plaster festoons under the ceiling, and the many little gilt chairs, rather scuffed. To Sophia it was all new and wondrous.

Lt. Croft had been waiting for them. The moment she saw him, there was that warm smile again, and the warmth glowed inside her every bit as bright as the beeswax candles lighting the room. He advanced forward to greet them—and there came a glad shout.

“Miss Wentworth!”

From the milling crowd in their fine clothes emerged a pair of young gentlemen. Sophie recognized in them two of the older pupils from the Gregorys, both of whom had left her second year in order to begin their lives. “Bartholomew—that is, Mr. Bartholomew, and Mr. Herrick!”

Edward Bartholomew, a short, stocky young man who had recently attained his nineteenth year, flushed with pleasure, and knocked his oldest friend in the arm before saying, “Hey day, it sounds dashed odd, hearing you say Mr. Bartholomew like that—brings me right back to that ugly rug in Gregory’s parlor, don’t it, Harry?”

“Barney’s right. I never thought the Old Ghost would let you free for an evening—or are you sprung
from her clutches?"

“Old Ghost?” Frederick asked as Lt. Croft looked on, delighting in Miss Wentworth’s unshadowed smile. It was just as he’d remembered it from their dinner at the inn, only somehow brighter. She was so confounded pretty, with that lace crowning her hair that waved so entrancingly, and quite the handsomest gown in the room.

He had proposed the party thinking that all girls loved a ball, but when Frederick had earlier in the day mentioned that this would be her first, he’d puzzled himself how to rescue a situation that he himself was not all that accustomed to. He did know it would be wrong to dance every dance with her, though that was exactly what he desired most.

“Oh, I beg your pardon,” Sophie said, pleasantly conscious of him standing nearby, and quickly performed introductions. The young gentlemen scrupulously bowed, and then Herrick lowered his voice as he said, “What we called the missus. Always moaning and wailing—all she wanted was a set of chains to clank.”

Frederick gave a crack of laughter, clearly delighted with these new acquaintances, and listened with pleasure as Sophie asked how they had been since leaving Mr. Gregory’s establishment. Mr. Bartholomew, it turned out, was now a rising clerk under a prominent solicitor, and Mr. Herrick having failed in two endeavors, was waiting for his orders, his father, a knight living in a fine house north of Taunton, having decided to buy him a cornetcy in the army.

“And the thing is, when it comes to land, all the sines and co-sines suddenly make sense,” Mr. Herrick said. “I can see myself heading a party of redcoats as we dash about the countryside scouting out likely battlefields. Only it’s unlikely we’ll be seeing any action, this fellow Bunniport, or Bonynpear, you know, the Corsican they say the French Directors have made such a favorite—”

“Buonaparte,” Lt. Croft offered, the name having of late been talked of around the Admiralty.

To which Mr. Bartholomew, who was rather inclined toward pedantry, could not help adding, “The family is Italian in origin, but fled to Corsica on account of the Ghibelline troubles.”

“Yes, that,” Mr. Herrick said with a trace of impatience, and seeing little interest from his auditors, Mr. Bartholomew gave up the Guelphs and the Ghibellines with a faint sigh.

Mr. Herrick went on, “This fellow, whoever he is, has been rampaging all over Italy and parts south. We’ll never get a sniff of battle, lest we’re sent to the islands to die of the Yellow Jack, my brother says, for the French are making all manner of trouble there. But I’m off as soon as the pater stumps up.”

He became aware that he had seized hold of the conversation to talk about himself, and so he took Sophia’s hand with all the old familiarity of those hours in Mrs. Gregory’s stuffy parlor, and said, “Look there, the band is striking up at last. Come on, let’s see how we do when we’re not knocking elbows into the green walls at Gregory’s!”

Sophia, remembering that she and Frederick were strictly speaking Lt. Croft’s guests, turned doubtfully toward this gentleman, to see him smiling with encouragement, like a good host.

She held out her hand with every expectation of enjoyment. And so, though she had come with the modest expectation of sitting in her new gown and gaining pleasure from watching the company dance, she found herself in demand for the entire evening.

Both Bartholomew and Herrick were well known in Taunton’s society, their fathers well respected;
they, in turn, introduced Sophia to their especial cronies, and thence to acquaintances who turned up curious about the brown-haired girl in the old-fashioned gown whom no one seemed to know, but everyone wanted to dance with.

Perforce this included Squire Forsham’s heir, a shy and somewhat morose young gentleman, the squire feeling that duty required the august presence of the Forsham family at this assembly—against the wishes of his wife and daughter, who lamented that they were forced into proximity with every vulgar person whom they least wished to see.

Sophia was in fact utterly unaware that she had become the belle of the ball; because she knew none of the young ladies standing around in clusters whispering and plying their fans, she was blithely ignorant of their criticisms of her plain gown two years out of fashion, her headdress never in fashion, her compete want of elegance in either form or manner, features undistinguished—her **tout ensemble** utterly unworthy of the male attention she had so mysteriously attracted.

Because Sophia had been told all her life she was unmarriageable, and because she was ignorant of all the little female arts that fashionable life mandated were necessary to attract notice, she was unselfconscious, and of course completely accustomed to the company of young gentlemen.

It can safely be said that not a single young gentleman that night thought of Cupid, darted arrows, or eternal passions as they danced with Sophia in turn—and neither did she. They were grateful for her ease when they were not quite sure of themselves in the dance figures, and appreciated her lack of pretended shock if words like ‘devilish’ would slip out after a misstep.

As for Sophia herself, though she loved every dance, and enjoyed the prattle of her partners, she found the pinnacle of pleasure in her two dances with Lt. Croft—though by the second dance, the room had become so crowded they were scarce about to move. But they were able to talk the more; Lt. Croft readily answered her questions about Frederick’s doings.

It was so very fine to be able to talk about Frederick to someone who also had his interests at heart! “Pray believe me when I say I do not cast any aspersions—far from it—but his letters have grown so short,” she finally confided. “There is less description, and then Frederick never brags. Indeed, he scarcely talks about himself at all, so it is difficult to form an idea of his motions. It was a different case when he first went to sea, and perhaps I was foolish to expect it would always be that way.”

“In my experience, the youngest mids come aboard vilely homesick,” Lt. Croft said as the round dance ended at last. “The boys who come aboard their first ship, and who miss their homes, are inclined to write reams, if they are let.”

“Homesick!” Sophia repeated in dismayed tones. “He never said a word of it. I know those letters by heart, I read them so many times.”

“Boys won’t, in my experience, they are so afraid to run aground with the others. In part it’s because they must wear a hat like officers, and have charge of gun crews; they are anxious to be taken as men, though their voices are so high we call them squeakers at least as often as reefer. And then again, some officers, in trying to toughen them the faster, handle them roughly, so the boys don’t dare to admit to any feelings.”

Sophia said with some heat, “I think you credit their motivation more than it deserves. To me, persons such as that horrid Gough are blackguards and rascals, using their rank against those who cannot answer back.”

“There is some of that, too,” Lt. Croft said, guiding them to a seat and then staring at the wall in a musing fashion, as if he did not see the dripping wax or the scuff marks on the floor, but something
else entirely. He was thinking that Frederick Wentworth, though very much his friend, and sound through and through, was a proud little devil; he seemed incapable to admitting to any sensibility that he had decided at the great age of fifteen was weak.

But he forbore pointing that out to Frederick’s sister, perched on her chair so anxiously, and so he said only, “I believe using ’em kindly brings them around the faster, and the good ones, like your brother, prove their worth time and again. Between the guns of the enemy and the weather, the service is rough enough, truth to tell. But I am not to be talking all night, and occupying your attention when you ought to be dancing.”

“No, no, pray speak,” Sophia said earnestly. “I don’t mind standing out, now it is so crowded, and the heat is becoming insupportable. I am so glad to hear what you tell me, though it is no more than I expected, about him proving himself. He was ever so, defending Edward against loutish village boys who thought it was funny to shove a small, short-sighted boy into ditches, and the like. Mama was used to say that our father was a dashing hero, and Frederick was bidding fair to be just like him . . .” She stopped, giving her head a little shake.

Lt. Croft said, “Shall we walk about, then, and perhaps get a little air?” When she rose very readily, he tucked her arm under his, and smiled to find it fit so naturally. “Your brother, I do not mind telling you, is rising fast as a natural leader. Three times, now, he’s cut out gunboats, right under the artillery emplacements of the French. You can’t say fairer than to predict that he’ll make captain before he’s twenty-five, influence or no.”

“Captain! But he is not yet a lieutenant.”

“No.” Lt. Croft thought about it, then looked about him as they strolled the perimeter of the room. Frederick sat with several other boys his own age in a far corner, talking and laughing. “I know he’s said nothing, because if it don’t answer, the disappointment will be the sharper. He is very hard on himself—has one standard for himself, and a more generous one for everyone else—but the fact is, we’re here because the Admiralty Board is in sitting next week. He’s to be examined, on the recommendation of Captain Bradshaw and Admiral Graves, who are well in with the First Lord.”

Sophia clasped her hands, and was about to utter a string of questions when a tall, thin figure in an exquisite coat confronted them. Crofts perforce had to introduce them, presenting Mr. George Forsham to Sophia, whereupon the squire’s heir said, “May I request this dance?”

There was nothing to do but thank him, curtsey, and suppress her impatience. Lt. Croft bowed and moved away, soon losing himself in the crowd.

Sophia made an effort to smile politely at her partner, reflecting that she would be able to speak with the lieutenant again—at which time would have her questions all in order.

She was not at all aware that the hour was already advanced. This was the supper dance, which meant, she discovered, she was expected to remain with her partner and walk into the next room, where refreshments had been laid out. Here she made painstaking conversation with young Mr. Forsham; on his asking about Frederick’s adventures, she was very ready to talk.

After that, there were only two more dances remaining, and both were claimed by her first friends, Herrick and Bartholomew. After that everyone was in motion toward the cloakroom.

Sophia, afraid to lose the lieutenant, managed to find him while Frederick was conscientiously procuring their wraps, and she said, “Pray, Lt. Croft, if you have no other claims on your time, might you write to me sometimes? About Frederick? I fear that his becoming more active is going to bring him to less time for letters, and I would not tax him about it for the world.”
Lt. Croft would like nothing better!

He looked down at her wide gaze, words about propriety on his lips. But then, he reflected, who would kick up a dust if he sometimes added a line to one of Frederick’s letters, or even asked to include a scribble under the same seal?

He knew that she had no friends looking after her welfare save her brothers, and as for him, after his mother had remarried and begun a second family, though she remained fond of him, it was at a distance. She had become a Delafield, with Delafield children and interests. He would inherit nothing; his old uncle, the retired curate, was a second son, his married cousin having inherited the family property. No one would concern themselves about his doings. His fate and fortune rested solely in his own hands.

“I will,” he promised.

Late in November Sophia received a hasty note from Frederick:

*I am made! I passed the Admiralty Board—I am going out as fourth lieutenant aboard a third-rate—*the Phoebus* of 74 guns—to the Mediterranean Sea. . .

She also received her first visitor, none other than George Forsham, who had not forgotten the friendly young lady from the dance who all the fellows had been wild after, who had twirled no fan, or giggled, or pressed with artificial languishing for the flattery and compliments that his sister and her friends seemed to demand as their due.

He spied her in church one Sunday, sitting alone. The day being fine, and he disinclined to sit with his mother’s company and listen to their dull talk, which had never changed all twenty of his years, the impulse moved him to walk across the park, over the bridge, and through his father’s fields to the Widow’s Cottage.

He had taken care to provide himself with an excuse. He carried the morning papers, with their columns of naval news. Sophia received him with surprise, and the newspapers with honestly expressed gratitude.

She had little to offer him, being used to cooking only for herself, and this a Sunday, but he would not listen to her apologies—“I have a long dinner of at least six courses and as many removes awaiting me at home,” he said earnestly. “My mother having decided that cold food on Sundays is for the likes of Methodists, and if God had wanted His people not to eat well on Sunday, He would not have given them the means to make fire.”

At the end of his speech he blushed violently, recollecting that this was exactly the sort of thing his sister taxed him for, saying that it was infinitely tedious, and could he not say anything with *bon ton*?

But Sophia accepted his words as unremarkable, saying that her brothers were partial to goose when they could get it, and ham, and did he agree?

He remained no more than a proper quarter hour. But she was so easy to speak to, so free of the vapid titters and languishing utterances of Amelia’s friends, that he found himself well pleased. Even better, she was plain—as plain as mud, the girls had said disparagingly after the assembly that they had all pronounced the dullest duty in a thousand eras—but that was all right with him. He would be in no danger of falling in love.

Before he left, therefore, he took care to engage himself for another visit. “For there will be fresh
news, you know, that I would be honored to bring.”

She expressed her appreciation, and when he was gone, sat down to the newspapers without a second thought to her visitor, except to thank him in her mind for his disinterested generosity.

Her eighteenth birthday thus passed unnoticed, for it never occurred to her to mention it to her single caller.

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Christmas arrived, and with it all its traditional celebrations. Edward returned home for a few days, and ate his way through all the good things she had been putting up in expectation of his visit.

As a gift, Edward gave her a book that had become all the rage, Mr. Lewis’s *The Monk*, and she presented him with a fine new coat, having noticed his wrists extended out of his old one. After Epiphany he duly returned to school, and she resigned herself to another long stretch of loneliness. At least she had this new novel, which she found uncommonly silly.

But loneliness was not to be her lot after all.

By February, George’s calls upon Sophia Wentworth had become a regular thing. She learned to make seed cakes and tarts with damson jam—all the things she knew young men were fond of, that seemed proper for callers.

With no other reading matter save *The Monk*, Edward’s Greek tomes, and heavy works of theology, she read every single word of the newspapers. That furnished plenty of conversational topics; she, freely admitting her total ignorance of the world, asked questions, and he discovered he rather liked being looked up to for his knowledge and experience. He was far used to being told what to think of politics by his good father, the squire, and of people by his mother, who could not forget—and never let her children forget—that she was second cousin to the wife of an earl.

George discovered that he rather liked having a secret from his family, and looked forward to his visits, which he took great care to hide.

Sophia’s supreme delight, however, was occasioned by the receipt of a long letter from Frederick, which included a page in a strange hand, unlike Frederick’s slanted, bold strokes. She liked the even letters, clear to read:

*Miss Wentworth,*

*Your brother having agreed that between the two of us, we can make up a Single capital letter, I am herewith setting myself to write a little each Ev’n before I retire, if I am honor’d with a little time in the Wardroom.*

*Indeed, those first few days we had no time for anything but keeping the Ship afloat. We had taken aboard a great many landsmen—hard Bargains most of them, from the Prison hulks—who knew not starboard from larboard. It fell to me to divide them into Watches and oversee their education, in the course of which we were overtaken by a Storm while still in the Channel.*

*We were taken aback, nearly every article not Battened down swept to sea or broken, including alas in the Wardroom, where we discover’d our new Steward was well to live. As a result every article was broke with the exception of the cover of a very large mess Teapot.*

*This we handed round as a measure to one another with Wine from a black jack, while we waited out the squall. We were thus at it, gunwale under, when we heard a Noise in the after-hold like the*
rush of many waters.

“A butt end has started!”

And from below came many shouts, “We are foundering!”

The bosun gave the alarm, and the captain ordered us to investigate, which we did with Difficulty not only because the ship had turned on its beam, but because the off-watch, including the sick, had hopp’d and hobbl’d out of their hammocks.

Down went the captain, all giving Way before him, us trailing like Ducklings, and abaft us the Carpenter and his mates, their hair standing on End. And what did we find? It was a large Cask of Peas that had broke upon a Bulkhead in a lee lurch, and the Peas rolling madly about made a Noise exactly like the rushing of water.

Whereupon the Captain took snuff and went straight to the cabin, leaving the Carpenter and the Purser blaspheming right and left about the d—’d Peas, each blaming the Other for what no one could help.

The next day—today, before I wrote this, while we dined with the Captain on seas like Glass, he with a knowing look said, “May I help you to pea soup, Captain Croft?”

It was then, after his little joke, that I discover’d I was to be appointed to my first Command, in a sloop-of-war named *Sybil*, attached to the fleet. I am only a master and commander, with a single epaulette on the left, and so can be thrown back onto the Beach as a lieutenant at anyone’s whim, but it is the first Step and as I had always meant to begin as I would go on, the First Order I gave was that my lieutenant and two Reefers need not Powder, for I am giving it over for good, unless order’d by the Admiralty.

For though officers above Commander are exemp’t from the Wretched Tax, it is only the old and the Hidebound who still demand we go into battle with it blowing in our faces and snowing our well-brush’d coats. Whereupon my new officers gave me three cheers.

But here am I writing about myself, when you will be wanting to know the details of your Brother’s examination before the Admiralty. So I am passing this back to him before I depart for my new command, and he will finish and send it on . . .

Sophia smiled. How well that sounded, Captain Croft—even if he were only a commander. She must include congratulations to him when she wrote to Frederick.

After another interminable wait, another letter came. It began in Frederick’s hand with a long description of wind and weather gage, and the sails required to make the most of both, followed by:

. . . I had to lay this aside because no sooner were we attached to the grand fleet than we were sent of chase a French privateer, out but a short time from Brest. *Sybil* was ordered in company with a Brig to the attack. The wind being SSE, directly on her beam where she likes it best, we came up under tops’ls and topgallants . . .

I am dashed tir’d and so I will give you a shot-by-shot Account when next we meet. Suffice it to say we won, though we took significant damage below the water line from Johhny Crapaud’s broadsides, more than at first we knew.

Then it broke off abruptly, and in Croft’s neat hand:

*Your brother being sent aboard after the action, he has begged me to continue the story, as my news*
is the greater. I shall post it for him as promised. To resume: after removing the chief part of the prisoners into my Sybil, I was ordered to stay by the fleet, but on examining her defects I found her in a very bad condition.

After signaling the flag, I was given permission to Part Company upon which we stood for the Channel in very bad weather, it being still mid-January, and we were nearly run down by a three-decker—I believe the Prince George, the night being black as Erebus. We had a narrow Escape.

Portsmouth being the place of Rendezvous, we stood up the Channel with the wind at SW under close-reef’d main tops’l and fores’l.

During the night the wind fell and toward Morning the wind freshened at SE with thick weather. We made for Plymouth, and at my command we hoisted the Union Jack at the gaff, but the Jack blowing away, and the halyards fouling, we could not for some time raise our colors.

That frightened a brig we came near, and a Frigate coming from Torbay under jury masts fired upon us, but from too far away to take Effect. At last we got our colors to rights, hail’d the brig, and all was well, though I and my crew, consequent to the Storm and the hold full of Prisoners, had been on Watch and Watch these many days, and as such were Stupid with lack of sleep.

But scarce had we been put up on shore at Hamaoze, when a Dispatch came, that Capt Basil was D—ish glad to find me there, and to send to the Port Admiral to put me aboard some craft to the Nore, where I discover’d that I have been made Post!

It meant all the world to shift my swab from left shoulder to right. That means I am now on the List—anyone may know it—and nothing can shift me, save cowardice or death. All the old jokes were made at my Expense, which I had heard a thousand times ever since I was a squeaker, but I discovered that when it is you they celebrate, why, the jokes become the best jests the world has ever heard, and I laughed most heartily.

The Port Admiral kindly stood me to dinner in the Traditional Manner, what we call wetting the swab, but scarcely had I swallowed down the last toast I was given orders to take command of a frigate, Adm. Nelson having writ that he was Desperate for same—and I was to rejoin the fleet, your brother having been shifted as third into the Swiftsure, 74, so look for our next letter from the Med . .

For six months now, George Forsham had been bringing newspapers to Sophy, and occasionally he also brought the fashionable novels that his sister Amelia had thrown aside.

These were a disinterested kindness, as he liked most talking over current affairs. He found it exhilarating to talk about the European war, and Bonaparte, Pitt and Parliament to a young lady. Amelia and her friends had been bred to believe that young ladies did not offer opinions on such matters, and he knew that Amelia took no interest whatsoever in politics or the maneuverings of the military.

At country events, he continued to toil his way grimly through the shoals of French-peppered chatter about courtship, and divinities, and being slain by passions; it was such a relief to shake off the company of his mother’s select families and walk to Widow’s Cottage, where he never heard a single insipid word about ravished hearts or Cupid’s darts.

And yet somehow, by degrees, he found his own thoughts bending thither.
As the weather warmed, it gradually dawned upon Sophia that her tiny parlor, so pleasant when Edward came for his rare visits, seemed somehow entirely too small when George sat in the best chair of her three, gazing at her with an expression she could not interpret, but which invariably got her to rise and open the windows to the fresh air, or to move to her small pantry to cut up slices of cake to keep hands and eyes and lips busy.

She suggested one day that the weather being glorious they take a walk, for she liked being outside as often as she could. She found diversion in watching the farmers beating back the thatch after winter’s lifting, and the early peas being planted, and the smell of threshing drifting lazily in the soft spring air.

She had stumbled upon some pleasant lanes, and on discovering that George knew the land far better than she, set off with him on long rambles which he took great care never led them into well-traveled paths, lest they be seen by someone who mattered.

By summer he knew that he was in love, but equally was he aware that there would be a great outcry should he say anything. He had been raised to his mother’s expectation that he would marry her goddaughter Phylida, whose father was a local knight.

George had never wished to marry Phylida. He had regarded himself as safe ever since Phylida’s sixteenth birthday, when she told him plainly that she did not want to marry him. And she meant it. She had no intention of throwing herself away on a mere squire’s son. She would no more deny the countryside the pleasing spectacle of her being introduced as Lady Something than she would cease breathing. To this ambition George had lent enthusiastic support.

All summer George and Sophia rambled over the beautiful countryside, while he wrestled with his passions, and she thought mainly of how many weeks must pass before she could look for the next post.

Summer waned toward autumn, and the squire’s annual shooting party. George was as indifferent to the party as ever—until at dinner one night, his mother said suddenly, “George, I believe the time has come to think of your future. We ought to announce your engagement to dear Phylida before our guests. A betrothal ball at Christmas would be splendid, don’t you think?”

George stared, appalled. Later on, he cornered his sister. “Amelia, I don’t wish to marry Phylida, nor she me. What is this start of Mama’s?”

Amelia sighed. “Are you blind?” she retorted. “Did you not see her flirting with Desmond Cheswick at Lady Wallenden’s rout? For my part, I am quite certain she’s fallen in love with his regimentals. Though his brother is an earl, Desmond hasn’t a ha’penny to call his own, and his brother has three sons already."

“Why should she not marry Cheswick? She is rich enough for two, surely.”

“Do you not know anything to the purpose, George? Desmond Cheswick has a horrid reputation—he is a horrid rake as well as a fortune hunter, with a positive string of mistresses.”

“Devil take the man,” George exclaimed.

Amelia clapped her hands over her ears. “Must you before me?” she shrilled petulantly.

He ignored that, reflecting that her affected pose of missishness was far less convincing after this ready talk of rakes and strings of mistresses. “I thought she intended to marry a duke.” If she attracted a nobleman of that degree, he knew that his mother would be left with nothing to say.
George waited until she was done, then ventured into deep waters for the first time. “I’ve someone else in mind, too.”

Amelia’s interest roused. “Oh? Pray tell.”

“I want you to talk to her. I don’t know if she’ll have me.”

“Who is she?”

“Miss Wentworth. At Widow’s Cottage.”

Amelia stared, stunned. Then she let out a crack of sarcastic laughter that was not the least ladylike. “Her? That awkward, insipid thing, with scarcely two gowns to her back, each uglier than the other? On the catch I should think. Of course she’ll have you. How long has this been going on? She’s mighty sly, is all I can say. She sits there in church all alone, prim as a Quaker.”

“She . . . she isn’t at all like that. I don’t know if she’ll have me. Will you come with me to meet her?”

Amelia was by now intensely curious, though scornful of her brother’s doubt. Any unmarried female living in a horrid cottage would be on the catch for a rich husband, it stood to reason. “I will,” she said.

By the time they made their call, so thoroughly had Amelia come to expect a guilty countenance, perhaps bridling and blustering, that she was disconcerted to be met with a young lady somewhat taller than herself, with a clear, steady gaze out of a pair of dark eyes that betrayed no hint of consciousness. Indeed, though Sophia welcomed the surprise visitor politely enough, her manner revealed nothing stronger than mild question.

Miss Forsham, who was dressed in the height of fashion, glanced about the plain, scrupulously clean cottage with a supercilious eye, her chin back and her upper lip lengthened as if she had detected an unpleasant sight or smell.

Sophia glanced backward, seeing only the scrubbed floor with the old rug well beaten, the three chairs around the table, and her mother’s old clock on the mantelpiece (wound every evening before she retired to bed) set between carved candlesticks that their father had brought back from India, and a blue ceramic pot that Frederick had brought back from Gibraltar.

Her surprise altered to amusement as Miss Forsham stated with intent, “I have seen you in church, but we never have spoken.”

“We have not,” Sophia corroborated, suppressing a laugh at Miss Forsham’s tone. What could be her meaning?

Sophia offered them chairs, sat down before them, and when they had gone through the ritual of refreshments offered and refused, Miss Forsham gave her shoulders a shake, flicked back the downward curling feather from her bonnet with one beautifully gloved finger, and said, “You are not from this neighborhood, I apprehend?”

“I came here to be close to my brother at St. Winstan’s,” Sophia said, and waited for the purpose of
the visit.

“You are keeping house for your brother? Surely so young a lady must have a thought to marriage?”

“I do not intend to marry,” Sophia said, lightly enough, but her smile had vanished at the sneering tone with which her caller had delivered the word lady.

George looked from one stiff young lady to the other, and rose abruptly. “Come, Amelia. Miss Wentworth, here are the newspapers.” He thanked her and ushered his sister out of the cottage.

They walked in silence until George deemed they were well out of earshot, then he burst out, “Why did you ask her right out like that? You were to find out what she thought of me, and you bungled it. Of course she must say that.”

Amelia Forsham was aware that she had bungled the call. More than she hated awkwardness she hated being in the wrong, and so, in the way of human nature, turned her ire onto the easiest target. “Your Miss Wentworth, who is no better than she should be, could have saved her breath,” she retorted. “It means nothing. Females always say something of the sort—until they are secure. Any fool can plainly see she has set her cap for you. I only hope for your sake you know what you are about, and as for that, you asked me to come. I had no interest in tramping across this vile field and being bored to the brink of extinction by some jumped-up lady’s maid in a laborer’s cottage.”

She stalked on ahead, leaving George to no very pleasant thoughts.

Behind them, Sophia wondered why such a very refined person would lower herself to call when she clearly did not wish to, then she shrugged it off for the more interesting task of scanning the newsprint for naval tidings.

She had all but forgotten Amelia (except to exchange the slightest of curtseys when next they saw one another after church) as autumn brought the Forshams’ annual hunting party together at the squire’s manse.

By mutual unspoken agreement neither brother nor sister referred to the incident. Amelia hoped that George would recollect himself and what was due to his family and position in the community; George alternately dreaded interrogation from his mother if Amelia were to carry a report to her, and Sir Ralph’s broad hints, cast as ponderous jokes, that the families might soon unite in more ways than over the shooting of game.

Of course the knight and his family made up part of the annual party. The squire and his lady were unaware of the fact that each morning began with Phylida violently quarreling with her parents: she would not agree to marry George.

The servants, who saw it all, talked about nothing else for a fortnight.

The party ended with superficial amity, the elder generation united in regarding their various offspring as unaccountably vexatious.

A week later, Edward arrived at the cottage ahead of the first of several long snowstorms. They exchanged letters and gifts; Christmas came and went, Edward as well . . . and by the time the roads had cleared enough for walks, winter was nearly over.

When George reappeared again, more tortured than ever by hopes and doubts, Sophia welcomed him with her customary friendly ease. And though he watched her minutely for signs that she might be setting her cap at him (how would he know?) he could not bring himself to put forward the question that he had been revolving in his mind all winter long.
And so, at the end of his call, he trod home again, baffled as to how to go on, and Sophia finished cooking a meal, cleaned the cottage from top to bottom, and sat down to catch up on all the news she had missed. It seemed that the days of the Terror were over, but this fellow Bonaparte was still rampaging about, which inevitably drew the Navy to the Mediterranean. She hoped to see mention of the *Swiftsure*, that she might guess where her letters had reached.

Things might have gone on in this manner indefinitely had not Sir Ralph’s cook’s daughter, in the village to make purchases for her mother, called on her great-aunt, the village postmistress, the day the winter’s post was collected by Sophia.

“La,” said the niece as she watched Sophia put a thick packet of string tied letters into her basket, then walk out to continue her shopping. “Who would think that her brothers would be such letter writers?”

“Oh,” her great-aunt said, laying a finger beside her nose. “I mention no names, I insinuate nothing, but I could not help notice that the name on one letter was not Wentworth.”

The niece carried this piece of gossip back to Sir Ralph’s, and repeated it to her mother, who promptly forgot about it until spring set in at last. By then George had resumed his weekly habit in so regular a train that he became careless, and was consequently seen by a farmer, by a servant executing an errand for the squire, by the boot boy on the way to the cobbler.

By late April was fairly well known by those beyond the green baize door that the Squire’s son was walking in secret with the female at Widow’s Cottage, and so toplofty was the squire’s wife—so obviously above her company—that the shared joke was the richer.

Then one fine Sunday in May, when Sir Ralph’s cook chanced to meet the Forsham housekeeper at a local wedding, and they sat apart for the comfort of a gossip in the way of acquaintances for fifty years, Sophia’s name came up once again.

“Wentworth?” the cook repeated. “Is that not the same young female who has got a secret correspondent in the navy, who writes reams of love letters?”

From lips to ears the gossip swelled deliciously into scandal, until a fortnight later, when Sophia had turned out all her furniture to scrub out the cottage, she looked up in amazement as a powdered footman drove an elegant closed carriage directly toward her cottage.

Sophie stood at her threshold with her cleaning apron on, her hair bound up in a kerchief, and her worst gown wet to the knees as none other than Squire Forsham’s wife stepped out of the carriage. And, clutching her mittened gloves tight to her chest, she marched up to Sophia, scowled formidably, and stated, “Miss Wentworth, I am to understand? I beg you will honor me with the truth: how long have you been entangled with my son?”

“Damme, Croft has his head a-bandaged, but there he is, at it again. What does he think to do, pen another *Roderick Random*?”

“Oh, he and Wentworth of the *Swiftsure*, between ‘em scribble away, but at all events, they have something to write about this time, eh, ha ha!” The speaker pointed to the new mast being stepped, the workmen banging away at the forecastle, and the deck strewn with cordage, blocks, barrels of pitch, and carpenter’s tools.

“That they do,” the first voice agreed, to general laughter.
Captain Croft barely heard them. He was equally unaware of the stunning heat that caused the white buildings of Gibraltar to reflect back the sun in a blinding glare, and the water in the bay to sparkle with infinite shards of light.

He sat in the cabin of his ship, which was undergoing vast repairs, it having taken tremendous damage from the debris after the explosion of L'Orient at the Nile. He was equally unaware of the bandage over his head, covering the wound caused by falling debris.

Frederick, having sustained a sword thrust in his arm, had requested of him to write out everything that had happened in Akoubir Bay; Croft’s mind had gone back to the heat, the smoke drifting over the water, the faint cries for help as they pulled Frenchman and Englishman alike out of the churning sea, and so he did not heed the brief bustle at the side as someone asked and was given permission to come aboard by the officer of the watch.

Thus he was startled into the present by the appearance of Frederick Wentworth himself, hat under his left arm, as his right was in a sling. As soon as they were alone in the cabin, he said with the familiarity borne of several years of working and fighting side by side, “Croft, did you post one of our letters under your name instead of mine? Because there’s the devil of a scandalbroth.”

“What is this? Scandalbroth? I might have, in my haste—I forget . . .”

Frederick held out a letter, his young face uncharacteristically grim.

*My dearest Frederick:*

*If you are still with Captain Croft, I must trouble you to send your letters directly to Edward, who will bring them to me when he can come to visit.*

*The most vexatious thing! I believe I have mention’d how Mr. Forsham, heir to Squire Forsham, has done me the Kindness to bring the newspapers when his family has done. But Mrs. Forsham is not Agreed that his kindness was Disinterested, and appeared here to accuse me of ill-conduct with respect to her son.*

*Perhaps she believ’d me only because I was Astonish’d, or she might think I am practicing upon them all with my evil wiles. But she made it plain that she will not countenance my receiving letters from gentlemen unrelated to me—it is her Duty to protect the good name of the Neighborhood.*

*Believing myself having become Notorious, I have confin’d myself to going into the village only to buy what is Necessary and when I am at church, I am last in and first Out, so that I may walk directly back to the cottage. . . .*

“Forsham?” Captain Croft said in a heated voice as he handed the letter back. “Damme! And it was I who introduced them. But I had known him for a slow coach, more interested in his horses than in company. Who would have thought that younker would turn into a damned rake?”

Frederick lifted a shoulder. Croft recognized that Frederick had only lately come to the age of noticing such things, and—aware of the ever-listening ears beyond the open skylights of his ship—said only, “Well, well, let us take a turn on the deck. I find myself in need of a breath of air.”

On the quarterdeck, Croft could walk on the windward side and everyone must keep their distance. Frederick followed him in silence, musing that he had known his friend through how many cruises? He had seen Croft keep his temper under drunken first lieutenants, capricious captains, hellish weather, and under fire, but he could not recollect ever seeing him white-lipped with anger.

They reached the taffrail, beyond which seabirds swooped and dived, and a cable’s length away,
voices rose as a party of seamen stepped a new mast into a captured French 74.

Croft turned, and regarding his young friend, said in a low voice, “Wentworth, I would like to marry your sister.”

Frederick was startled into exclaiming, “How is this?” He blushed crimson, then said more quickly, “Capital! Er—is this something Sophia wants?”

“I cannot say,” was the honest answer. “The truth is, I’ve been turning it over in my mind since I first saw her. But she was full young, and I had no prospects. There will be prize money out of the battle at Akoubir Bay, and, well, I thought I would put it to the touch when next we met—and this just determines me to go at ‘em, as Nelson says. Never mind the maneuvering, go up and offer her my hand, everything honorable. If I have your blessing.”

“Of course—of course,” Frederick said in haste, recollecting that he was in some wise the head of the family. But such matters were as ships hull-down on the horizon—far beyond his knowledge. “Though Sophia has been her own mistress since our mother died.”

“I know that,” Croft said, thinking that ‘mistress of herself’ really meant going it alone. But her brothers were in many ways still boys. “Thank you.” He shook Frederick by the hand, and said nothing more, as his clerk, the bosun, and the carpenter stood in view, waiting for his attention.

Within a week Croft petitioned the admiral for leave, and caught the next dispatch packet for England.

He arrived not long after the New Year, when England was still in the grip of celebration over the glorious victory of Nelson’s Battle of the Nile.

In London he was able to arrange his prize money with his agent. Then he set out in a post chaise for Somerset.

Eventually he arrived in Taunton, and changed horses at an inn where he was well known from the days when he’d stayed with his uncle.

He had planned during his long journey how it would be—sweeping up in his full dress uniform to restore Miss Wentworth’s honor and fight the villain who had traduced her. But what he found so right and true in his imagination over the weeks faltered as he jounced over the ruts in the lane to Widow’s Cottage.

He had reduced Miss Wentworth to a small, forlorn figure in his mind, falsely accused by this wicked nabob of a squire’s wife, but when he drew up before Sophia’s cottage the wispy, forlorn maiden of his imagination vanished like smoke after a broadside. Here was Miss Wentworth, strong and upright, smiling with surprise. That smile ignited his heart in a way that made breathing difficult.

His hands shook, his neck heated up and then unaccountably went cold as he climbed down. He scarcely noticed the post boy talking, and consequently it was Sophia who said, “Yes, yes, do walk them, please.” And to Captain Croft, “Unless you are bound somewhere?”

“I—I . . .” He gazed into her expectant gaze, and the honest welcome he saw there enabled him to say (though far less forcefully than he had intended) “This Forsham. The squire’s son—”

Sophia did not hide her disappointment. So he had not come to call upon her after all? “I am sorry to tell you, but I believe he is still in London. But you will find out the details when you call at the manse.”
“I don’t wish to call at the manse,” he said.

Sophia, not understanding anything, but delighted to see him, said, “Pray step inside, Captain Croft.”

He ducked his head and walked into the neat little parlor with its few sticks of furniture, and Frederick’s ceramic on the mantel. He walked to it, touched it, and turned. “I was by when he bought this trumpery thing. He insisted that blue would be your favorite color, though the potter’s assistant claimed that ‘ladies’ all preferred rose, and yellow, and white.”

“Frederick knows that I am partial to eggshell blue,” Sophia said, clasping her hands tightly under her apron, as she tried to divine that Captain Croft was actually standing right there in her cottage, large as life. She fought the instinct to step close to him.

Joy suffused her, making her feel slightly dizzy as she said, “May I pour you some dandelion wine? Or offer you—”

“Nothing, nothing,” he said, hands spread. “Your letter. It said—upon my word, how can I put this? That rantipole George Forsham. He did you an ill turn?”

“Oh! Poor George!” She laughed. “The trouble was entirely due to his mother. My understanding was that he was sent away for wanting to make me his wife, which until Mrs. Forsham troubled herself to come here and accuse me, I hadn’t the least notion was in his head.”

Captain Croft stared at her, his plans for a dramatic rescue withering in the bright sunlight. “I came to see you. And to call him to account. But of course I am dashed late.”

Sophia gazed at him, a new idea blooming—was it possible that he, too, glowed with candlelight whenever they saw one another? Before spring, she had never considered herself in any romantic light. Her life was to be useful, devoted to her brothers. But after Mrs. Forsham’s stunning accusation, she had had a long time to think about her precious letters, and how terrible it would be not to get them.

How terrible life would be if she lost this little connection to Captain Croft.

“You are not late at all,” she said slowly. “If you came to see me.”

The honesty in her countenance, the simple words, heartened him. He stepped toward her, one hand out-held. “Miss Wentworth, I am a sailor, and plain-spoken. And we never have much time to dawdle—it’s touch and sail, tide waiting for no one. I came to offer myself, if you’ll have me. I cannot promise much, and I am willing to wait as long—”

“Yes.”

“—as you need—what?”

“I said, yes. That is, if it is marriage you are offering.”

A broadside had deafened and blinded him, or so it seemed for a long breath. Then the sense of it was borne in on him, and his hand closed gently around her fingers. “You mean that? How long will it take you to pack?”

She put up her chin. “I can be ready in half an hour.”

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It was, in fact, considerably less than that; she walked away from the furnishings, having only taken her few keepsakes. For lack of space her clothes had either remained in her trunk, or had been hung on a clothes peg. It was a mere trifle to whisk them altogether, repack her trunk, and see it lifted up onto the back of the carriage.

And so she turned her back on that cottage, and as the coach rolled through the village, the captain’s buttons a-glitter, his epaulettes gleaming, people stared to see the young lady who had fascinated the squire’s son swept off by a dashing naval captain.

Sophy felt as if she moved in a dream. Afterward, she never remembered the journey to Taunton.

The dream vanished when the innkeeper’s wife stood in the doorway, looking Sophia up and down, taking in her ringless hand and the garb of an unmarried female. Her brow drew together, and she had it on her tongue to ask where the Young Person’s maid was, and to point out that this was a respectable house, when her husband pushed past her, saying loudly, “Will that be two rooms, then, Captain Croft? Yes, yes, the best rooms for a hero of the Nile.”

“Yes,” Captain Croft said, drawing Sophia’s hand within his arm. “For me and Mrs. Croft to be, as soon as we get to Portsmouth.”

Mrs. Innkeeper’s face cleared—the best wine must be brought out to drink the health of the happy couple.

Up in the little parlor between the two bedchambers, the captain and his new betrothed sat at last before a good fire, eating the dinner brought by the innkeeper’s daughter. Over this dinner he told her all about the battle that he’d half-written down before his precipitate departure.

Her interest steadied him; the little kindnesses he performed without thought, from rising to hold the door for the daughter with her tray, to offering Sophia the better cuts of meat first, reassured her.

So she was ready when the food was taken away, and they sat in chairs side by side before the fire, and he said, “I am thinking that I came at you like smoke and oakum. It answers on the stage, and in songs. But here I am, taking you from the only home you know, and what if you should think that we do not suit, after all? My life is not a settled thing. Far from settled. My home is where I lay my head, which most often is in a hammock at sea. What kind of a life is that to offer?”

She understood the real question. “But it was not so abrupt as you think. That is, I believe I have Mrs. Forsham to thank, for until she accused me of something else, I had not thought at all in that way. That is, not about poor George.” She smiled, without affectation or a pretense at maidenly fragility, for she had never learnt such arts. “It was you I thought about.”

He smiled broadly, struck his strong palms on his knees, and said, “Well, well, to hear that makes me happy, Miss—Sophia? May I call you that?”

“Certainly,” she said. “But what would you prefer I say to you?”

“Well, then, the first thing to mind is ‘Croft’ will do. I have heard nothing else since I was a nipper sent off to sea once my father died, and before that I shared my Christian name with two cousins. Hearing my name in your voice is better than ‘prince’ or ‘king,’ is what I’m thinking.”

She laughed. “I like the sound of Captain Croft, and some day, I will like the sound of Admiral Croft the better.”
By the time they reached Portsmouth, she had become Sophy to him, a new name for a new state of being.

Rather than leave her alone in a hotel while he saw to his naval as well as personal affairs, Captain Croft found her lodging in a neat little room rented by the wife of a captain who had had little luck in prize money, and who had no other interests from which to gain funds. She eked out a living by letting rooms to the wives and families of officers.

Mrs. Follett was a cheerful soul when she was not fretting over the price of plaice. Her conversation revolved around her four sons, two of whom were captain’s boys far away at sea, one a purser’s mate aboard an Indiaman, and the fourth, who came over sick at the sight of the heaving billows, had been put to clerk in the victualler’s office.

The women who regularly gathered with her, each with her work in hand, tended to talk mainly about their children, and Sophy discovered that she would much rather have dealt with the boys, noisy as they might be, than to listen to their mothers worry over them and brag about them by turns.

But she kept that to herself. There was plenty to interest her in Portsmouth; every time a ship sailed into the harbor, there was always news to be had, and a swarm of seamen about, bringing with them tales of other parts of the world. Sophy, who had never expected to see the ocean, found herself longing to step aboard a ship herself.

Captain Croft was given leave to go up to London, where he not only obtained a special license, but he executed business for Sophy, arranging her small inheritance so that it was added to Edward’s share. She knew when he went up to Oxford he would have need of it.

On his return, Captain Croft was met with orders to proceed to Great Yarmouth, preparatory to North Seas duty.

Rather than toil overland, he agreed to command a ship for a fellow captain, who would meet them at Yarmouth. They would leave directly the morning after the wedding.

Snow fell gently the day Sophy and Captain Croft, accompanied by Frederick’s old friend Lt. O’Malley and Lady Bickerton, the wife of the new assistant to the port admiral, as witnesses, went off to St. Thomas of Canterbury cathedral.

At first Sophy was intimidated by Lady Bickerton, an older woman beautifully dressed in fine satin of the latest style. Sophy usually gave little thought to clothes, but she felt very dowdy in her by-now much-worm gown that Frederick had helped her make up. But Lady Bickerton proved to be a calm, well-spoken lady, obviously fond of Captain Croft.

They arrived at the cathedral, and were conducted to a small room off the transept altar where the ceremony was to take place. The gentlemen removed greatcoats in one area, the ladies their wraps in another.

Sophy was laying down her umbrella when Lady Bickerton touched her wrist above the buttons on her gloves. “Miss Wentworth,” she murmured. “The captain, a very dear friend of my husband’s, and well-regarded by everyone, I might add, honored me with the information that your dear mother died when you were very young.”

Sophy dipped her head in a slight curtsey.

“Well, then, I felt that in addition to acting as a witness, I took the liberty of suggesting that I might
act in place of a mother. In case you . . . had questions about what we might call the duties, or the responsibilities of marriage.”

Sophy felt a blush rising, but shook her head and smiled. “No one ever told me directly. In fact, I never thought to be married, until the captain came into my life. But however, I spent several years after my mother’s death taking care of boys, and, well, they do not lower their voices when talking about things that interest them. I think—I think I know pretty well what to expect.”

Sophy did not add that in her tramps around the farms and barns neighboring Widow’s Cottage, she had seen farm animals at all stages of mating and birth.

Lady Bickerton cast a quick glance at the gentlemen, who were in conversation with the vicar as they talked over the license. She said to Sophy, “I am delighted to find so sensible an attitude—may I say, it is just what I expected of a young lady with the good taste to choose Captain Croft. I shall ask one more question, if you will permit: do you wish to begin a family right away?”

Sophy stared back, and flushed again. “I had not thought about that,” she admitted. And, seeing no disapproval in the elder lady’s face, she said, low-voiced, “And I’d as lief not. Oh, maybe someday, but . . .” She had always expected to be an aunt, and still hoped to be. But to be a mother? She remembered her own mother’s difficulties after Edward’s birth, and there had been whispers about Mrs. Gregory’s unsuccessful lies-in, which at least in part had explained her constant claims of frail health.

She shook her head firmly. “But however there isn’t anything one can do, is there?”

“There is, it transpires,” the lady said calmly. “Nothing is entirely fool-proof, one might say, but I have been one of those who have benefitted . . .” And, while both kept an eye on the oblivious gentlemen, Lady Bickerton not only disclosed some facts that were entirely new to Sophy, but handed to her certain items that she had brought to the purpose, adding instructions on how to obtain them.

This exchange had just taken place, and Sophy was thanking the lady when the gentlemen turned as one body. Captain Croft approached, hand out-held, his ready smile brightening his face and his eyes.

It was time.

Sophy was mainly aware of the rapid tattoo of her heartbeat, and the warm strength of the captain’s hand closing over her fingers.

Then she heard and was comforted by the familiar rise and fall of the ritual words, her voice sounding in her ears so distant, like someone else’s. It occurred to her that she spoke the same words that her mother had spoken once, and her mother before her, and her mother before—reaching back and back.

Then her hazy thoughts centered around the unfamiliar sensation of a ring pushing over her knuckle. She had never owned any jewelry; the ring felt strange, but not unpleasantly so. It carried the warmth of her husband’s fingers. Her husband!

She looked into his face, and found him looking back at her with an anxiousness that she intuited was twin to hers. She smiled, humor frothing inside her like the bubbles of champagne, and she saw an answering smile in his face. Then he kissed her, and that brought a host of new sensations.

The next thing she knew, they were walking out of the church, everyone talking at once. “Mrs.
Croft. Mrs. Croft.” That was now her name.

“... and if any of you younkers lay on a shivaree, I’ll have you at the grating in a pig’s whisker,” Captain Croft said, eyeing O’Malley, whose round cheeks reddened as he tried to look innocent. He was to serve as second lieutenant for captain waiting at Yarmouth. “So you’ll tell the officers when you report back aboard ship. I’ll not have my wife embarrassed by custom better kept before the mast, do you hear me?”

O’Malley blushed to the ears, and agreed, then grinning, shook the captain’s hand.

“Come,” Captain Croft said, handing his new wife up into the waiting carriage, and Lady Bickerton after. “You are all invited to breakfast.”

The rest of the day passed as swiftly as Sophy’s wedding—a blur of smiling faces and congratulations. Before she quite knew it, she stood alone with her husband in the splendid chamber he had procured in the best Gosport inn.

“Does it suit?” he asked as her gaze traveled from object to object.

She faced him, and noticed his best scraper in his hands, his fingers turning it about and about as he gazed anxiously at her.

The coarse jests of his fellow officers echoed in his ears, the most frequent being, “Board her and carry all before you, ha-ha.” He revolted instinctively against such behavior; he knew exactly how to handle himself on the deck of a French privateer, but his bride, a lady, was not a Tonnant-class 84.

He had had his experiences—he was a sailor after all—but he had always been careful, and treated the women in his encounters as he would wish to be treated. However they had known well what they were about. How was he to begin now?

She closed the distance between them, instinctively comprehending his puzzlement. “I would be content anywhere,” she said, and seeing that his nearly crushed the hat and ruined its lace, she took it from his hands and laid it on a side table. “I am only thinking about how strange I feel. Happy,” she said quickly as she turned back to him. “But . . .”

“Aye,” he corroborated, low-voiced. “I was thinking the same. And so here we are, Mrs. Croft. I like that sound of that,” he added. “There is something I would mention,” he said, looking away and back. “That I learnt while at sea. About . . .”

When he hesitated, she untied her reticule. “About this?” She held up the sewn sheep’s gut. And at his surprise and evident relief, “Lady Bickerton was most enlightening, before we faced the vicar.”

She intuited that he would stand there talking until she did something. And so she reached up to close her own fingers about his face. She ran her fingers over the stubble on his chin. Tenderness became eagerness. She laughed, her body fizzing like bubbles of champagne, and leaned up for her first kiss.

He knew where he was. He saw that she was ready. It was time to set sail, and he was chivalrous enough to let her captain the ship.

At first things were a little awkward, but she laughed, and he laughed to see her laughing, and they soon found satisfactory accommodation, and then more than satisfactory.

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Sophy managed to repair the sadly crushed hat before the captain departed the next morning to make all ready.

An hour later, she sat in a gig hired to take her and her trunk to the sally-port, where the boat was in waiting to row her out to the ship riding anchor at Spithead.

For the first time, she entered a boat. Captain Croft was there to hand her in. Her heart throbbed in her ears. The boat rocked and swayed so abominably, and water entered, swirling about her half-boots. Did that mean it leaked?

But no one seemed upset as the captain placed her in the stern sheets, and sat beside her, with her trunk before her feet. She thrust her hands into her muff as the wintry wind did its best to take away her worn old calash.

“Stretch out!” The coxswain howled, making her jump. But when she saw the captain grinning at her, she did her best to hide her fright and smile back. He was not worried, so she must not be worried.

He said, low-voiced, “At first I was going to go round t’other side, for this is not my command. But no, I’ll be piped up right and proper, with you by me.”

A great deal of this did not make sense to her, but she was content to wait, especially as her lips were rapidly going numb. They tossed up and down what seemed forever, until at last the great ship loomed over them, impossibly high. Incomprehensible shouts resulted in an object being swung down and steadied by the seamen in their embroidered hats and matching coats.

“This is a bosun’s chair,” the captain said to Sophy. “Climb in, and clap on to these ropes.”

Sophy eyed the chair doubtfully, but when she spied the long climb up the tumblehome, which seemed mountainous to her, she vouchsafed no answer, but climbed in, shut her eyes, and gripped the ropes tightly. She jerked and jiggled—held her breath—jiggled some more as her stomach seemed to turn over in her—then an unfamiliar man said hoarsely, “Step smartly, ma’am, and we’ll boom this here chair away so you can join the capting.”

Sophy opened her eyes to discover the ship’s deck below her feet, and the captain climbing over the rail a few steps away as pipes wailed weirdly. A row of red-coated marines stamped and clashed their weapons, and the blue-coated rows beyond all lifted their hats.

Sophy saw her husband salute one of the masts, and she wondered if she was expected to do so as well, but no one seemed to expect anything of her. Captain Croft took her arm, giving her the smile that belonged only to her. “Come, Mrs. Croft, I have the honor of presenting the officers...”

After a positive whirlwind of names in a stream of gold-buttoned coats and laced hats, she was at last led into an oddly shaped space. The ceiling was very low—she was afraid at first her bonnet would scrape it—but the checkerboard canvas tacked on the floor looked clean, and the beautiful row of inward leaning windows all across the back let in plenty of gray wintry light.

She discovered that the captain’s cabin was actually several smaller rooms, all oddly shaped because of the bulkheads, and great covered objects that turned out to be cannon.

Her trunk was set down, and the captain said, “Ordinarily it would be struck into the hold, but as we are only sailing a day and a night, and we do not expect to beat to quarters and clear to fighting sail, well, it can bide here.”

He took her arm and conducted her around the ship. Most of the names of things went straight past
her. Everything was new, and strange, from the sharp smell of the pitch painted over the ropes and fitted between the deck boards to the clackity clack of blocks overhead and the drumming of the sails to the gentle curve of the deck with its dip in the center.

 Everywhere men moved about purposefully; when the sailors caught her eye they knuckled their foreheads and mumbled something. Sophy smiled and dipped her knee each time, for she dreaded being taken for a fine lady above her company. These were the men who risked their lives along with her husband for king and country—she would treat those little boys dashing about behind the jumble of boxes and animals on the deck as well as she would the intimidating officers there on the quarterdeck.

 The weird tweeting pipe, more shouts, and the thunder of running feet heralded some change—the ship gave a lurch, then juddered as the anchor was brought in, men singing out as they bent into the capstan.

 Sophy stayed in the door to the cabin and watched from there, as the marine guard stood silently by. She was fascinated, yet terrified to be considered in the way. But as the ship began to come alive, rising on the swells and plunging down, she began to feel a corresponding rising and plunging in her mid-section, which increased as the motion of the water increased.

 The captain returned, took one look, and said, “Let me show you the hammock. You lie flat, with the stern windows open, and the fresh air will do you good.”

 By then Sophy was shivering, but she consented, was soon snugly tucked up, whereupon she fell asleep.

 She wakened from time to time through the night as unfamiliar noises startled her. The sudden noise of holystoning directly overhead startled her before dawn. She rose, discovered that she had slept in her traveling gown, and shook it out as best she could. It was too cold to change, and her middle was still uncertain.

 When they reached Yarmouth, she was in a fair way to feeling better. And when the ship was steered to the wharf alongside the others gathered there, she was almost sorry to be leaving it. She had not explored at all!

 But somewhere on that peninsula between river and sea lay her new home.

 By nightfall, just as snow began to fall in earnest, Captain Croft and she sat before a fire in their new lodgings. They had been assigned to a small, drafty apartment in an old house in a row directly off the wharf, with a grand view of the line of ships bobbing gently on the swells. She discovered that several other officers were also located in the house.

 “Heh,” the captain said, toasting her with his spiced wine. He smiled, the firelight flickering with ruddy warmth over his handsome face. “A new wife, a new life in a new home, in a new year.”

 “And next year, a new century,” Sophy said, tipping her glass to his. “I wonder what it will bring?”

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 It brought no immediate changes. Time sped for Captain and Mrs. Croft; he busy assisting the port admiral, and she walking over the peninsula, along the wall, and up and down King Street to salute the friends she made among the wives of mariners there. Though she had never found her way among the young ladies of Taunton, among naval wives there appeared to be less strict attention to birth rank.
Naval rank was all, or nearly so; she discovered for the first time in her life she had gained status through marriage. Captain Croft was one of Nelson’s cherished fighting captains, whom everyone expected to reach the admiralty before he got much older.

So she was invited everywhere, and dined often with the port admiral and his lady. But she enjoyed all the people she met with. She explored to the Rows, the close-packed flint-faced houses where mostly dwelled the Scottish fisher folk, whose soft accents Sophy loved to hear. She loved the music many of them shared so freely, and sampled dishes among the many inns that featured northern cooking.

Sophy had never had a maid, but she had had plenty of experience with servants, and because the captain’s position required him to entertain—for naval captains, she found, were social beings when on shore—she eventually hired a man, two maids, and then a cook, all of whom understood the naval ways of touch and go.

The entertainment reached its height when none other than the great Admiral Nelson landed at Yarmouth, with a very large and unwell Lady Hamilton in company, as well as her husband, the frail Sir William.

For two days the town celebrated as the Admiral was feted; Sophy scarcely caught a glimpse of him at the dinner for two hundred, at which he was given Freedom of the Borough. Up and down both sides of the long table in a vast ballroom glittered a sea of gold buttons, braid, and epaulettes on dress uniforms, and each wife had brought out her best, Sophy included, wearing pale rose satin that for the first time in her life, she had ordered to be made up for her by a modiste.

The next morning, the church at St. Nicholas was never more packed than when Nelson attended divine service there. Afterward she was finally presented to him, finding him surprisingly small in comparison with herself, one eye staring into infinity, and one sleeve pinned to his coat with its beautiful medals.

“. . . Admiral Lord Nelson, Duke of Bronte.”

Thoroughly discommoded in that great crowd, with jewels glinting all around, and eyes staring, Sophy could barely force her gaze up as she curtseyed.

But force it she did, and then was glad: his smile wreathed his entire face. Surely he must be tired, living in the public eye with little escape, but when he touched her hand and said, “Charmed. I am happy to meet the wives of my excellent officers, and Croft is among the most excellent. I shall be wanting him when Boney comes north again, as I know he will,” she believed every word.

Then he was gone, and the Hamiltons—who had scarcely been seen—were gone with him, leaving a sense of general emptiness in Yarmouth. Hard on his leaving the news coming northward created urgency, rumors of a French invasion in preparation! Captain Croft was much away from home; contingencies were decided upon then abandoned, as the news changed with every dispatch.

In spring, Croft left for the first time, but only as long as it took to join the attack on Copenhagen. He was given a frigate, with which he, under Nelson’s command, turned a blind eye to Sir Hyde Parker’s order to cease fire. Croft was then put in charge of sailing back one of the few prizes taken, for most of the captured ships were burnt.

And by autumn came the news that Bonaparte was negotiating for peace.
Within a few months, Sophy had gone from the pinnacle of felicity to uncertainty and fear. In spite of that wondrous celebration of Admiral Nelson, Lord Keith’s extreme disapprobation prevailed in Whitehall, and it seemed that Nelson’s career was finished.

Admiral Croft came home one day, his smile gone. “I am ordered to command a fleet in the North Sea,” he said. “We are to shift ourselves to deal. I will go ahead and scout us a house, if you will settle our affairs here.”

“How long do I have?”

“I will be sailing within the month.”

Two weeks later, she sat alone in a house she hated from the first.

Though some of Captain Croft’s things were there, he had never lived in this house, leaving her a sense of emptiness and worry. As the north wind howled and the sky either pressed down in great bands of angry clouds, or else darkened over altogether, she fought against the bleak conviction that she would never see her husband again.

Sleepless nights of worry turned into a nagging cough, and cold hands and feet. She never could get warm; it took all her resources to drag herself to the post to fetch and send letters.

She lived for news. Frederick was now a man grown, and anxious for his captaincy. He had rounded the Horn; he had fought the French off in the West Indies; he had chased pirates off the Madagascar.

Her letters from Edward were longer. He was now ensconced at Oxford, flourishing in his studies. When she, driven to the extremes of loneliness and certain she was dying of consumption, shared a line of her fears, Edward was so alarmed that he made the long journey himself, insisting on summoning a physician.

The medical man spoke a great deal of Latin, and prescribed a regimen of calomel to regulate the humours, a diet of thin broth and fresh eggs and milk, and perhaps a visit to mineral baths; Sophy tried the medicine and the diet for three days, but discovered that she felt infinitely better when she received a hasty letter from Captain Croft, reporting that he was well and had taken three prizes off Sweden.

Sophy’s color bettered—she declared that her only problem was indulging foolish fancies, which turned into megrims—she promised that she would not surrender again to such, and Edward returned to his studies.

One showery day in spring she heard footsteps on the porch, and Captain Croft ducked his head under the low lintel as he pulled off his hat. She flew to him laughing and crying.

“What is this?” he exclaimed. “Have the French attacked? And here I thought of you safe and snug.”

She shook her head, not wanting to complain, but he perceived how thin and wan she had grown, and he said slowly, “Some captains do not like women aboard. But others take their wives, and no one is the worse for it—”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, fervently hugging him. “The very thing!”

“Well, then, that’s settled. But Sophy, I’m obliged to point out, that sailing in a man o’ war, well, the war with Boney seems to be over, but there are always pirates. When we strip to fighting sail and
cast loose the cannon, there is no time for women to be put ashore, most like.”

“But then I will be with you, and perhaps even helpful,” she returned fervently. “Instead of this hideous waiting, and wondering, which is infinitely worse.”

He nodded. “Hah! Then that’s decided. For as soon as we paid off, new orders came in by semaphore. I’m ordered to Bermuda, as they fear the revolts against the French in their islands might spread. I am to take poor old new-razeed Blenheim out there, straight from Peter Bover’s hands, poor soul.”

Sophy did not know what razeed meant, but reflected with satisfaction that she soon would. And, she vowed, whether they faced thirty foot waves in the North Sea or hurricanos in the south, she would never be parted from him again. Another war, she thought privately as they sat down to their first dinner in four endless months, could not possibly be worse than her fears.

o0o

“No, my dear, I’ll take the oars. You’ve enough to do,” Sophie said cheerfully.

It was a brilliant day among the many islands around Bermuda, but all days were brilliant. Sophie had loved spending Christmas wearing the lightest of muslins, and the thinnest cotton gloves that were not made for warmth, but to protect the skin from the fierce sun.

She looked about her with deep pleasure; she had rowed out with the captain, who had taken his midshipmen out to the coral reefs to practice their hydrography by charting.

How could something so beautiful be so dangerous? How could one describe coral? She gazed down through the clear water, once again wishing she had any skills at draughtsmanship, so that she might depict these brilliant colors for Edward. Description was beyond her. “Lace? Snowflakes?” She was certain that any words she chose would read trite to someone far away in England, mucking through the gray, cold winter.

The boat rocked as the captain motioned to the boys to stay in a strict row in their coracles. Most of them paid attention, though sometimes stealing looks at the creatures flashing in and out of the coral. They were a good set of youngsters in the main, given to practical jokes when at liberty. Captain Croft wisely looked the other way, so long as strict attention to duty was paid when it was necessary.

Sophy turned her head, and peered across the water to Ireland Island, where the ships lay, bare poles describing lazy parabolas against the azure brilliance of the sky.

A loud crack in the distance was followed by an echoing boom; the boys glanced up hopefully, reminding Sophy of the bright red birds that hopped about on land, looking for insects and crumbs.

“‘Tis only the packet arriving,” Captain Croft said mildly, “expected these two weeks. Come, boys, you do want to finish for good and all, do you not? Or shall we begin anew tomorrow?”

Horrified at this prospect, the boys assiduously paid attention, and the captain watched them, as Sophy gently corrected their course with a dip and a lean on her oars.

Charting, she had learned, was no idle work, especially in such waters as these. The sea floor changed frequently, which was no problem when there was deep draft, but in shallow waters, with these wicked reefs, the danger was quite desperate, and good navigation as highly valued as good charts.

The boat jiggled again, and Sophy glanced up under her bonnet, aware of the captain sending looks
toward Ireland Island. She suppressed a question. He would speak if needed, and she would not
distract him from finishing the lesson before the sun climbed any higher, and the heat became
unbearable without the relief of shade.

She had discovered that she loved the heat, as long as she could get under cover by afternoon when
the sun glared off the water, creating heat so intense that the air shimmered. She gazed off toward
headquarters, and made out signal flags jerking up the flagpole. When the last reached the top, a gun
banged, sending echoes back and forth across the bay, and from a nearby island, a covey of
cerulean-hued birds fluttered skyward, screeching in protest.

Sophy dipped her bonnet to block the glare of the sun as the captain turned his head and squinted
under his hand.

Sophie said unerringly, "Captains report aboard flag."

"Blast and damn," the captain exclaimed, ignoring the smothered snickers of the middies. "And the
admiral’s own orders to see this charting done."

"Then stay and finish," Sophy suggested. "I’ll row back, and find out from Mrs. Cole what I can. If
you need to make haste, I’ll put up our signal."

"A capital plan, my dear," Captain Croft said, smiling.

Sophy rowed the boat to meet the middle midshipman, who had the largest of the small boats. The
 captain climbed nimbly from the one to the other, and Sophy bent to the oars, sending herself
scudding over the placid waters.

It was hot work, but did not take her long. A servant waited to take charge of the boat. She pressed a
coin into his hand and walked up the shore, under the welcome shade of orange trees. She sniffed in
their sweet scent before passing below a calabash, and thence onto the porch of a whitewashed
building in the Spanish style, with arched doorways.

Mrs. Cole, a young bride newly arrived at the island, had relied upon Sophy to show her how to get
on. Her husband, having like Admiral Nelson lost an arm, could not write, and his wife often acted
as his amanuensis.

She saw Sophy and rushed to her, thin muslin flounces fluttering. She glanced around and
whispered, "The French have ended the peace. The admiral was right—Bonaparte never intended to
keep it. Lord Whitworth is driven out, and your husband is to take command of the four second-rates
and proceed back to Gib, to join the fleet in blockading France. I just wrote out the orders—the ink is
drying."

Sophy thanked her, and rushed to the dwelling she had lived in since their arrival. It had its own
flagpole; to the clips she attached a green cloth, which would bring Captain Croft as quickly as he
knew how.

War! The easy life was over. They would return to military discipline; Mrs. Cole would be relegated
to her salon, and her duties taken over by some young lieutenant. Sophy dreaded the prospect of
being left behind. Suddenly the warm, pleasant breezes seemed hot and cloying, the palm fronds and
banana trees noisome.

But when Captain Croft returned, she discovered that he had no intention of leaving her at Bermuda.
"The admiral is sending his wife back to London, in case Boney has already sent a fleet, so we will
have Mrs. Cole as our guest. It seems the others are following along. We’ll have to spread the wives
out between the four ships.”

“You can safely leave the wives to me,” Sophy promised, to her husband’s relief.

Instead of the old, leaking *Blenheim*, whose grand cabin had been dilapidated before Sophy was born, they had a fine 84 gun ship. Sophy was now an expert in fitting out the cabin the way she and the captain liked it. They sailed within forty-eight hours, the hazy green islands sinking below the horizon.

By the time they reached Gibraltar, they met with the astounding news that Boney had crowned himself not king—as everyone had predicted—but emperor! That meant one thing: he intended conquering more land, for an emperor requires many kingdoms to rule.

So began the grindingly dreary process of blockading, which meant sailing in strict order, two cables’ lengths apart, back and forth, back and forth. They called it “polishing the Cape.”

But though many in the fleet grew to hate this duty, especially as sails became worn from wind and weather, and greenstuffs difficult to procure unless the bumboats brought them, the Crofts were well content. And a content captain, with a vigorous lady who regards the antics of bored young men with humor and understanding instead of shock and affront, guaranteed a happy ship.

“I am well pleased with you, Captain Croft,” Nelson said in private after an all captains conference, for he was once again in charge of the fleet. “I am beset by complaint all around me, but all you ask for is more cordage, and I assure you, that as soon as the dockyard at Gib can supply us, you will be the first in. If we can but bring the French out, I promise you shall gain your promotion. You ought to have had it this two years—if it had not been for Keith being my particular enemy, you would have had, but perhaps the least said the better about that.”

Captain Croft thanked him, and so it came to pass.

When they were ordered in to refit, they took turns peering at the fortress atop the mountain, deciding that they would walk up there the first chance they got.

But scarcely had they dropped anchor when a small boat approached, and to their glad surprise, among those rowing out to see them was Frederick, peering up under his hand.

*Goodness*, Sophy thought. *What a handsome man my brother has grown into.*

At that same moment he spied her, and his face broke into smiles. A short time later the three of them sat in the cabin. “I am here to tell you to avoid coming in, if you can. The Yellow Jack has broken out, and the hospitals are as full as they can hold. We need a few good storms to clean out the city.”

The captain turned to Sophy. “Well, my dear, what say you?”

She patted his hand. “We will not risk it. There will be time enough. And so, Frederick, what news do you bring?”

“A letter is probably in that bag of post I saw sitting at Lt. Fellowes’ feet, but it is just this: Edward has come off with honors. His old friend Dr. Gregory has been looking out for him, and he has the promise of a curacy—two, though the one he hopes to get is at some small town, where he knows the vicar.”

“That requires a toast, do you not think, my dear?” Captain Croft said, ringing for his steward.
As they drank their warm champagne, Sophy prompted Frederick for his own news. He had been serving as premier aboard a 74, but he was hoping to return to frigate duty. “Even a sloop of war would do,” he said, hands on his knees. “If she is fast and weatherly. You may do something for yourself with a frigate if you look about you, whereas these first and second rates, your life will spin away polishing the coast. I am sick of the sight of Cape Sicié.”

“As are we all,” Captain Croft said with feeling.

Frederick soon departed, for he had orders to execute for his captain, who had prudently remained aboard his own ship, preferring to risk the lives of his young officers to the contagion in the harbor.

It was typical of Frederick to be the first volunteer, Sophy thought as she watched him row away.

Their stores replenished, they sailed away, and Captain Croft had time to sort the post. “Here is your letter, my dear, just as Frederick said.”

Sophy broke it open at once, and scanned rapidly down. “Monkford,” she exclaimed finally. “Have you been there? The curacy he desires is at Monkford.”

“I think you had better go below, Sophy.”

She studied her husband’s dear face, and read unerringly the anxiety he would hide. She did not trust herself to words, but kissed him hard, an embrace he returned with such force she felt her spine crepitate under his hands, and the gold braid of his dress uniform pinched her abominably. Neither could acknowledge the intensity of their awareness that it could be their last, and so the strength of their arms must express everything.

The men sent up a rousing cheer to see Mrs. Croft kissing their captain, looking resplendent in full dress, with his Nile medal in his buttonhole as he knew it pleased Nelson.

But one must breathe, and besides, the cabin was gone, the deck full of gun crews stripped to the waist at the ready, the air full of the smell of slow match.

Sophy let him go, did her best to smile at the men, and the midshipmen each at their posts in command of the gun crews. As she walked to the hatch, she sent up a prayer that she would not have to assist in writing letters home to parents of these dear boys. Then she whisked herself down to the orlop deck, as fast and nimble as a reefer, where she found the ship’s wives all gathered.

She drew in a slow breath, for here was another kind of battle, one moreover that had been fought almost silently, not with guns or muskets, swords or knives, but in sharply turned shoulders, little jerks of chins, compressed lips, and sometimes venomous whispers that mostly Sophie had pretended not to hear.

As the surgeon set them to readying the scraped bandages, the lint, and the powder, Sophie reflected on those dear days at Yarmouth. She had believed so blithely that naval wives were above the pettiness of such women as Amelia Forsham, but now she knew better: that benignant atmosphere had been the work of the port admiral’s wife.

Sophie, in finding herself the principal woman aboard a ship of 700 crew members, had striven to model herself on that admired woman. And it had not been easy. The gunner’s wife, there, as broad as she was tall, and smelling of whiskey, was a good-natured soul and handy with the ship’s boys; she was also lucky in that her place had been the gunroom, with the lower officers and the midshipmen.
The wardroom was where the silent battle was fought, the chief enemies Mrs. Groton, wife of the first lieutenant and fourth daughter of the brother of an impecunious earl; Mrs. Gorton, having endured throughout life the smirking superiority of a cousin who had married up in rank, despised Maria West, the pretty eighteen-year-old bride of one of the youngest of the lieutenants, for being a shopkeeper’s daughter. It seemed to make Mrs. Gorton the angrier that Mr. West was the heir to a respectable barony—and so wealthy and generous that the wardroom mess had gained significantly since Mr. West’s coming aboard.

“Mrs. Skipper!” the gunner’s wife declared, her cheeks in a ruddy glow. “Why, here you be at last. What did you see before coming below?”

Mrs. Groton twitched her shoulders and stepped back, away from the waft of spirituous liquor emanating from the gunner’s wife. Sophy pretended not to notice. They all worried in their own way, she thought as her spine throbbed from the captain’s fierce hug.

Mrs. Groton’s forefinger scratched at the reddened skin around her thumb. The pursuer’s timid little wife had her Bible clasped to her bosom. Mrs. West looked subdued, but unafraid though on the other side of the surgery they heard the clink and thud as the surgeon and his mates readied their instruments; obedient to Admiral Nelson’s wishes, the surgeon had a small fire going, that they might warm the saws.

Sophy turned her gaze away from that rusty, naked steel and said, “The Combined Fleet is definitely out, and has begun maneuvering into column. Villeneuve and Gravina are coming to the attack.”

“What’s got into these poxy frogs? Why would they and the dons come out of Cadiz now?” the gunner’s wife asked, wiping a stray gray lock from her damp brow. “The seas are rising. There is bad weather a-coming. We can all feel it.”

“Perhaps it is a mere shift in the winds,” Sophy said, because she felt that something of the sort was required of her with all eyes turned her way. But they all knew that October’s weather, with its occasional extremes of heat and cold, could bring anything.

“As for what I witnessed . . . I must stay out of the way, as do we all, when they beat to quarters, but I stood beside the binnacle, and in the field glass I believe I spied the Santisima Trinidad, for it was quite the largest of those hull up in the horizon.”

“Hundred and forty guns. Moults says it ships 140 guns. Devil take it, what is this world coming to?” The gunner’s wife used her grimy apron to wipe her face.

“It certainly is large,” Sophy said. “Last, before I was sent down, there was a signal from the flag exhorting the men to their duty. You might have heard the cheer for that. And for the next, minutes later—I do not know precisely how many—when the Admiral signaled Temeraire to fall back astern of Victory.”

Mrs. Moults guffawed heartily at that.

“And the final signal was ‘Engage the enemy more closely.’”

“Close! Aye, no need to signal that, is what I think,” Mrs. Moults stated, a finger laid beside her nose. “They’ll be close enough yet, you mark my words.”

She had scarcely drawn breath when the first sounds of gunfire echoed like faint, dull booms. Everyone stilled, eyes turning to Sophy. She understood viscerally what was meant: they wanted her, as wife to the captain, to know what was to be, to restore order to the world.
But that she could not do; she could only pretend that her heart wasn’t knocking against her ribs. “I believe they have commenced firing. Let us look about us, then, and ready ourselves.”

Mrs. Gorton said, “I believe I ought to take the first station here—unless, of course, you feel that your duty, Mrs. Croft. Let it never be said that I do not know my proper place.” And she sent a poisonous glance at Mrs. West, whose fingers gripped tightly.

Sophy knew what was intended, for they had heard often enough how Mrs. Groton had sewn men back together after the Battle of the Nile, whereas Sophy, though a captain’s wife, so far had only witnessed a few chases, two of which had come to exchanges of shots.

Credit where it is due, Sophy thought, pitying Mrs. Groton, whose husband drank twice as much as Moul and his wife—which was probably why he was still a lieutenant at forty. “Why, I believe you should show us the way, Mrs. Groton. Your experience will be invaluable.”

Twin spots of mottled red flew like signal flags in Mrs. Groton’s thin cheeks. “Very well, then. Here is what we did at Akoubir . . .”

Boom! The ship lurched, and again everyone froze, eyes meeting.

“Get ready,” the surgeon called. “They’ll be coming down anon . . .”

And so it was. Suddenly the loblolly boys were there, carrying groaning or insensate sailors. After the first shocking sight of splinter-torn flesh, Sophy was too busy for anything but cleaning, stitching, and bandaging wrapping.

When she saw friction among the women, Sophy stepped between, lending a hand where she could. Time became meaningless, until she was wrapping the head of yet another small boy, who whimpered under her hands, and there was Mrs. West at her shoulder.

Gone was the anxiousness. Bright eyes looked into Sophy’s as she waited for a lull in the roar of artillery, and said, low-voiced, “I am going to run powder.” She cast a quick glance at Mrs. Groton, busy wrapping an arm stump on a sheet anchor man who had just underwent amputation. “They don’t have enough boys—we have most of them here, except for the two dead.”

“Put on West’s trousers,” Sophy whispered.

Mrs. West’s smile flashed, and she flitted away.

After that, the intermittent roar of guns, the jolts and shudders of the ship, the wash of crimson water about their ankles seemed destined never to end . . . until it briefly did. West was second to last to be carried down. Sophy’s heart lurched when she saw his slack face, but he breathed. He breathed. Off came his ruined leg below his knee. He shrieked, “Sally! Sally!”

Black in the face from powder, and filthy from top to toe, Mrs. West was there beside his head. “Here I be, sweeting. Hush, hush. A quick wrap, and Bob’s your uncle. Bide quiet, now . . .”

They faced the door, Sophy aware of a throbbing through her entire body, but the noise of new arrivals caused her to brace and sway. And in came more, these crying, shouting or muttering in incomprehensible languages, most of them sodden, or smelling of smoke: the prisoners, being pulled out of the water, or off burning ships.

When the last wretched prisoners had been seen to, Sophy was free to climb back up the ladders to the quarterdeck. She was shocked by the wreckage strewn about, in an evil greenish sea that promised worse weather to come. But her gaze swept the snarls of cordage, the splintered wood, the
bloodstains and detritus until she found whom she sought: he stood on the poop, a stained rag bound around his left arm.

He turned his head, and the look in his eyes caused her to skip over a fallen yard and run to him.

“Nelson is dead,” he murmured, low-voiced.

“Admiral Lord Nelson?” Sophy repeated. It was impossible! Heroes didn’t die.

“Shot from the upper yard. Probably aiming at his diamond medal,” he added, touching his coat. “Duff is gone as well . . .” He named captains, lieutenants, sailors from other ships, then finished, “And Groton. He may have . . .” He looked away, swallowing. “He may have thrown himself overboard in the extremity, but I will put him down as died in the execution of his duty.”

Sophy could not speak, she could only nod. It meant that Mrs. Groton would receive whatever was to come to her husband—little enough recompense for such a loss. But the woman would not be turned ashore penniless.

She slid his arm into his and stood with him in silence as they oversaw the work that never seemed to promise an end. The mariners labored doggedly, most beyond exhaustion into stupefaction. The sky streaked with ugly clouds above the fiery sunset. Damaged as they were, they were in for another attack, this one from nature, and the ship must be ready or it would founder.

At length Croft took her hand in his good one and led her to the cabin, which had been partly restored, so that they might shift their clothing in decency. Cold food awaited them, but what Sophy craved most after her exertions was watered wine, and after that rest for her stiff knees and aching neck.

“I shall need you,” he said at last.

“I know. Leave the nursing to us.”

“The prisoners as well. I will not have them neglected. They fought a tight battle, Spaniards as well as French.”

Sophy nodded. As she forced herself below to take up her nursing duties, she could not help but note there were no more brags about putting it to ‘em, no ‘Johnny Crapaud’ or other epithets. The angry boast of imminent battle was gone entirely. Now they must all work together to save the ship from sinking.

The hours blended into measureless days, until at last they limped into Gibraltar, itself swept clean of disease by the storm. But the promised liberty was not forthcoming.

A signal from a first rate flying an admiral’s flag forced them to haul their wind and rock upon the water while an admiral and several lieutenants were rowed over.

Admiral Brand strutted aboard, his uniform immaculate in the way only achieved by an officer who had been sitting snugly at Gib while the battle was fought against the enemy and the weather.

“Well, well, Croft,” he said as he tipped his hat briefly at Sophy and smirked in her direction. “I understand I am to congratulate you on a splendid victory! Heh, did you smoke the jest there, ‘Victory’?” When he saw no answering smile in Croft’s rather grim countenance, he hastened on. “Collingwood will no doubt have many compliments for you—but first, I am very much afraid that I am in need of these excellent sailors.”
Sophy sensed the captain stiffening beside her. “I promised them liberty—they have been working watch on watch these six days and more.”

Admiral Brand spread his hands. “Alas, the service waits upon no one, you know that as well as I, and my brother requires a couple hundred good man of war’s men to get well on the way to Halifax. I expected he’ll meet with a few Yankees off the islands so that he can complete his crew, but until then, why, he needs to get the ship there!” He chuckled, but the sound fell into a dead silence.

Sophy felt remonstrance—protest—rise to her lips, but she knew better than to speak. And so she stood beside Croft as Brand expertly picked out the strongest and best of the men and had them rowed, under Marine guard, to a 64 lying a few cables’ lengths off.

The admiral was seen off the ship with rigidly correct protocol, then Croft turned and walked into the cabin. He slammed the door behind Sophy. “Nine months and more, those men will get, under one of the worst captains in the fleet,” he said bitterly.

“Is there nothing you can do?”

“Nothing,” he said. “That treble-shotted coxcomb knew what he was about—he stopped me in the seas, and if I’d known who it was, I could have maneuvered around him—claimed I was under orders from Collingwood, which would supersede his, if I could have signaled—but he knew well what I was about. Why do you think Captain Brand is short of men? Because he flogs half of them to death, and drives the others to run. Well, I hope these men run when they get to Halifax, and go straight to the Yankees.”

He sighed and shook his head, not recovering his equanimity until they were anchored at last, and the prisoners safely discharged and the wounded sent to the hospital, which was packed to overflowing.

As soon as Captain Croft had reported to Collingwood, he came back and he and Sophy sat snug at an inn, the ship being stripped entirely for repairs. The eaves still dripped after the torrential rains, and they drew close to a fire, both so tired they felt as if they still floated on the water.

“Collingwood apologized for Brand’s damned trickery. I knew he would—he would have clapped a stopper over it had he had the chance, but Brand knew what he was about.” He heaved a sigh. “Now for better news, my dear,” he said, brightening. “I am appointed rear admiral.”

Sophy said, “And how I can sew onto your cuffs the stripe that I have been hiding in secret this age!”

“Ha, ha! Second, there is news about Frederick.”

“Frederick! Where is he? Will we see him here?”

The captain smiled. “I do not believe so, for he was sent back to the West Indies, where it is believed that Boney is going to make another try, now that he is winning battles all over Europe. He seems to have forgotten LeClerc’s defeat.”

“Perhaps that will gain Frederick his step,” Sophy said.

The admiral’s smile vanished. “He is aboard one of his beloved frigates—that is good, but under Sails Algernon.”

Sophy, by now, had become acquainted with a great many naval officers, and more by name. “Algernon?” she repeated.
‘Sails’ Algernon was named by that by his fellow officers, but not to his face. The soubriquet derived from ‘Make More Sail,” a signal everyone who had experience with blockading knew. Algernon had a reputation of being timid in action, hanging back with a care to his ship—and his own skin. But he was much cherished in Whitehall because he seldom indented at the overtaxed dockyards for supplies, unlike the more dashing captains whose ‘crack on like smoke and oakum’ actions resulted in much damage.

There was little chance of advancement under such a captain. Sophy thought of Groton, embittered at forty before his death, and shook her head. There was nothing she could do, and so there was no use in repining. She met her husband’s eyes, seeing there that he knew her thoughts, and shared them.

She forced a smile. “Any other news?”

Twice Admiral Croft commanded a fleet that sailed east into the Mediterranean, once to chase marauding French frigates, and once to clean out an infestation of pirates. The first proved to be inconclusive, for the French had melted away, but the second was a smashing success.

Sophie, aboard the flagship, remained on deck so that she could watch the battle through field glasses, her idea to describe it to her brothers. However, what she mainly saw was smoke drifting over the water, with the orange flashes of broadsides briefly demonstrating where the ships lay, followed by the booms of the artillery.

After the smoke cleared, she saw the shocking damage firsthand: fire, debris in the water, swimming figures. The idea of pirates being sunk had given her a pleasure from a distance, for she knew the depredations they wrought, but the destruction in human terms gave her no pleasure.

That action, however, secured to the admiral even more prize money than had the action at Trafalgar, their having recovered treasure that had been stolen from Spanish ships come from the Western Pacific. Sophie, walking off the ship and finding the household awaiting her respectfully, understood for the first time what it meant to be wealthy: gradually over the past year, she had had to accumulate servants for a house suitable for an admiral.

They walked together to the house, where the post lay on a silver salver. Gone were the days when either of them must fetch it in person.

“I am become a vice admiral,” he said, laughing.

At the same moment, Sophie exclaimed, “Frederick has seen action—he is now on his way back to this side of the Atlantic.”

They both stopped, and at the same time, each spoke, “You first!”

That prompted another laugh. The new vice-admiral read out his appointment, with its new orders, following which Sophie sat on the arm of his chair that they might read Frederick’s scribble together.

. . . when the rain clear’d there were two Frenchmen, the first within range of long nines. Algernon was Dumbfounded, for he had not believ’d me, as I had said at the outset. Perhaps he thought that by insisting the 28 was a neutral American it might make it true, though I had seen from the Rigging before the squall was upon us that this was no American.

I am sorry to say that in the subsequent Broadside he was the first to die, but at he was carried off so sudden I do not think he had time but to be surpris’d. Command now falling to me, I was able to
order our own Broadside, for I had instructed the gun captains to see that we were treble-shotted, and a dose of Cannister caused the Frenchman to fall off before the Squall was upon us again.

We being effectively invisible, and I knowing exactly where we lay in reference to the Islands, I proposed a Ruse. I must stop here to add that the officers were to a man Nobly in Support of it, however dangerous it sounded.

And so, the dark falling, we had Doused all our lights and thrown Canvas over everything, as we sailed in what I trust’d to be a position roughly between the enemy ships. When the rain was in clearing, having found ourselves got into proper Position, all tarpaulins over the lanterns and lights were hove off as if by magic, and we luffed to the wind on the Starboard tack, pouring a Broadside into the lead ship before the second could round to.

After half an hour of hot fighting, the first Struck to us, the second listing badly and all but sinking; her masts had gone by the board entirely.

We now found ourselves in a Position with roughly three times the prisoners as we had crew, but they were in the main wounded, aboard ships in danger of foundering. Thus my Prize crews must be sparse. The crew going to the most dangerously damaged ship was headed by our third lieutenant, Harville, a man both zealous and brave. Under his steady guidance, the French threw down their arms and commenced knotting and splicing.

Still, it might have been touch and go, for I did not trust them to keep their Word beyond the immediate danger. What indeed was to keep them from a general mutiny once they had a mast fished, and the shot below the water plugg’d?

But however at that Moment the **Dolphin**, 74, hove up and saw the Situation at once. To be sure, once the French captain aboard me saw the **Dolphin**, he sigh’d, and cursed in French, and my suspicions were confirm’d but as I tried to say something, my tongue was curiously leaden, and next thing I knew, the deck had leap’d up to meet my face. When I woke, it was to discover I had taken a wound that I had not notic’d and had lost a deal of Blood.

Though I feel as right as Rain, the admiral has sent me to carry the Dispatch back to London, and granted me liberty beyond that to Recover, saying that this ought to gain me my step at Last.

And so, by the time you get this, I expect to be in Monkford with Edward. We shall Unite in writing to you once I am there.

Your obedient brother (soon, I trust to be called Captain)

Frederick

My dear Sister:

By now you ought to be well established in Bermuda, where I expect that Admiral Croft is comfortably established as Port Admiral. Frederick is here, and I believe I may fairly state that his health is good. He suffered from Headache at first, though he would deny it, but that has gone off, perhaps in part chased away by the good company in which we find ourselves.

Dr. Hopgood is kindness himself in encouraging us to mingle with the society here. We have got in with a pleasant set of people. There are assemblies in plenty, and it would do you good to see
Frederick looked up to by all the young ladies of this parish and the next. He is a great favorite, invited everywhere. He smiles at everyone, and is agreeable but if I were hard pressed to say he has a favorite, I suspect it would be for one Miss Elliot of Kellynch Hall, which is the seat of Sir Walter Elliot.

More I will not say, but let Vergil say it for me, **Audentis Fortuna iuvat**; he must write himself, but I will add only this. His promised visit of a month has stretch’d to three months, in part because Whitehall has promis’d him a new ship that is now finishing on the docks, and is said to be readying for launch next Spring. He may, as far as I am concerned, stay as long as he likes. No doubt he will tell you more when he knows it.

Your loving brother,

Edward

overe

Frederick Wentworth scraped impatiently at his chin, the water barely lukewarm. Any hour not spent in Anne’s company was an hour wasted.

He peered at himself in the clouded looking glass propped on the shelf over the washstand in the Hopgoods’ small guest chamber, then shook his head. What could an Anne Elliot—gentle, elegant, well-read, and above all true—see in him?

But so it was! So it had been from the very first meeting; she had caught his eye immediately, so great a contrast she made against the shrill voices of the other girls, the fan-flirting and arch poses. Anne glided quietly like the finest cutter, sails aloft and alow, where all around her minced like over-gilt Dutch traders masquerading as royal yachts.

No, that was scarcely just—he had watched the other fellows exchanging sallies about divine fairs, and being slain with a glance, and throwing in bits of poetry the way he exchanged broadsides with a weatherly French frigate. It was all in how you were bred up, he supposed, but somehow Anne had escaped becoming a haughty stick like her elder sister (met only the once, and that was enough!), or that cold-eyed Lady Russell. While others chattered idle nonsense she asked about his experience, and listened with unfeigned interest. In her turn she shared poetry and prose that raised honest sensibilities about honest things. Every time he saw her, he had thought of a hundred new things to say, and so had she.

He had put his question to her, and received an honest answer, tranquil but with conviction, as happiness glowed in her smile, her cheeks, her eyes. They were to be man and wife, and yet it did not seem quite real. Perhaps because of his sense of liberty running out. He wanted everything settled—bowsed up tight—before he set sail.

He pulled on his single civilian coat, which he knew was at least two years out of fashion—the cuffs all wrong, the short front somehow different from the other coats he saw around him—but it had plenty of good wear left, and anyway, Anne had accepted him. Not his dress.

He hurried down to the dining room, where he found Edward with Dr. Hopgood, each with a book by his plate, the rest of the family having gone off earlier. Both looked up, their spectacles twinkling; Frederick suppressed a laugh, wondering if his brother would resemble the good doctor in twenty years.
And what of it, if he were happy, he thought as he helped himself to toast from the rack. *I suppose I shall look like Nelson did at forty-three, maybe with a missing leg instead of a missing arm, one-eyed, but Anne will stand by me the way she stands by me in my old coat.*

It was a comforting thought, but underneath it he sensed an increased urgency: he was, in a sense, arguing with himself. Why? They both knew what they wanted, and yet somehow the engagement—so real when they were together—felt unanchored when they were apart. Was it because he had no family save Sophia (far away) and Edward busy with his curate’s duties? Aye, he was onto something, he thought as he stepped into the lane, tipping his hat to acquaintances going about their day. When betrothals were made, were there not supposed to be meetings of the families?

The grand Elliots had never returned his call after his single visit to Kellynch Hall, at Anne's request, so that she could present him to her family. He'd been glad of it, for a more unpleasant morning he had scarcely spent outside of battle.

That was it! They hadn't returned the call, and so there had been no invitations either way. Only in the last few weeks had Frederick begun to comprehend some of invisible rules that everyone seemed to know and so no one explained, much like shipboard custom: during those dreadful first days as a reefer he'd had to learn the hard way that on one's first coming aboard one saluted the quarterdeck.

Sophia and Croft had settled their marriage between themselves, had not they? He tried thinking back. Then he recollected Croft aboard the wreckage of his ship after the Battle of the Nile; he had said something or other about asking Frederick's blessing. That was it. He'd neglected a custom, like saluting the quarterdeck. Why had not Edward mentioned it? But he was still young in so many ways, and very unworldly. He knew of the engagement—he had drunk a glass of sherry with Frederick in celebration—but he might not have given it a thought beyond that. As for Anne, perhaps she assumed he knew. He was going to have to present himself at that ice-cold barrack in Kellynch, and address himself to Sir Walter. He grimaced, but he would face any manner of unpleasant duty for Anne's sake.

He crossed the village square with impatient strides, and smiled when he spied Anne's familiar form at the gate to the orchard grove where they customarily met to take their walks. His words—"Ought I to call on your father in form?"—died on his lips when she raised her face, and he saw within the frame of her bonnet that she had been weeping.

His heartbeat quickened as he hastened to close the distance between them, hands out. She reached for him—one warm squeeze palm to palm—then her fingers lifted away. His heart thundered painfully against his ribs. "Anne?"

"I—I am to tell you that it . . . our engagement . . . is off." She barely got the words out before she closed her eyes, her shoulders trembling as she pressed her handkerchief to her face to hide the anguish she could not suppress.

"What have I done?" Frederick swayed on his feet as if he had taken a shot of canister to the chest. "What have I said? I knew it, I was thinking this very morning, I ought to call upon your father. I do not know the proper forms—"

She shook her head. "He might not receive you," she whispered. "He is quite angry with me, saying I have thrown myself away on . . ."

Her lips pressed together as fresh tears flowed.

Frederick sighed. He had heard plenty about Sir Walter, and none of it good. Toplofty old humbug, a careless landlord, a tiresome neighbor always standing on ceremony as if he were Pontius Pilate
himself.

Once again he closed the distance between them, but forbore taking her in his arms, though they ached to hold her. For she held herself a little away, but as a sob shook her frame, he could not keep himself from touching her hand.

Her fingers turned, and her fingers gripped his as he said, “Perhaps we ought to go to your friend Lady Russell. She appears to have influence—”

Anne shook her head, and stepped back, her hands clasped tightly against her. “She was with my father. In the parlor. When they told me I cannot . . .” She shook her head again, too overcome to speak.

“They gave you reasons, I trust?” he asked, the numbness of shock melting into the heat of anger.

She could only nod, still weeping. But she could not bring herself to speak the words.

And he did not have to hear them. His birth was good enough to enable him to become an officer, but that was nothing to the likes of Sir Walter and Lady Russell. No birth, no fortune to wash away the stain of not being born to another spendthrift baronet or wool-witted knight. “Let’s run away,” he began, but when he saw her stiffen, and the fright in her honest eyes, he knew they were the wrong words.

But they should be the right words. “So you’ve chosen between us,” he said angrily.

She drew in a shuddering breath, her soft, dark gaze painful in that dear face now pink and blotchy from many hours of weeping alone and in silence. “You are honorable,” she whispered. “It is one thing I love about you, one of many . . . you strive to do your duty. . . And so must I.”

Her duty was to throw him over for a parcel of puffed-up popinjays?

“I thought our duty was to one another,” he began—but he remembered his earlier desire to have his affairs expeditiously settled before he reported back to Portsmouth.

To say that he had a duty to his profession, but that she owed duty to him, were the words of a coxcomb. He could not speak them. It was for her to speak them, if she truly loved him. Could she really choose duty to those people who cared nothing for her, over him? His own anguish ignited the flames of anger.

He stepped back, and when she remained silent, trembling from head to foot, fury leaped higher. He stepped away from her, willing her to close the distance, to put out her hand, to promise . . . what? He met her imploring gaze, and both stood there breathing hard; when she vouchsafed no word he turned his shoulder and walked off, his single impulse to put as much distance between them as he could.

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Sophy leaned in the open window, breathing the delightful scent of citrus blossoms and watching a pair of bright orange flamingos parading past the profligate beauty of wild orchids, when she heard her husband’s step behind her.

“Dearest,” she said, holding out her hand.

He closed his fingers around hers, and came to join her at the window. “I know how much you love it here, Sophy.”
She did not miss his tone. “Are we off then?” Regret suffused her, but then, she reflected, a change of scenery would be exciting.

“It is the East Indies this time,” he acknowledged. “But to console you, here is a letter.”

“Frederick, at last? What will you wager? Captaincy or marriage?”

“Both, if he gets what he deserves.”

Sophy found that answer excellent, and rewarded him with a kiss as her fingers broke the seal. The handwriting was nearly unreadable. She brought the paper closer to her eyes, and exclaimed in a low voice, “Oh, drat.”

“What is it? Did I bring you bad news?” the admiral asked, his smile fading.

Sophy held out the letter.

... I hope and pray this reaches you before Frederick does, for I would not for the world have his sensibilities lacerated by any of what I know would be well-meaned teasing. He insists it is nothing, he pays it no mind, he only wants to be in service to the kingdom.

No one has said anything, least of all Frederick, but from what little I can glean, though he was briefly engaged—the lady had accepted him—it is now all off. He quit Monkford abruptly, saying that he would not wait, he would accept the first thing offered, and as far as may be. As the newspapers report ships being sent near you, I fear he may be on his way thither.

I write this in a hurry, in hopes it gets there before he does. I hardly know what I write, I am so distressed on his behalf.

In haste—

Edward

Sophy lowered the letter. “Well, if he did not arrive with the packet, should we wait?”

The admiral shook his head and smiled. “These young fellows, their flirtations are so often here today and gone tomorrow. He is new to such matters. Let us hope that he finds else ere long. We can wait if you so desire, but I feel obliged to point out that this is your brother, who might take it ill, if we pry into his affairs.”

Sophy let out her breath. “That is well thought. He would hate that. So we will carry on as planned, if he does not arrive before our departure.”

Within three days, they were gone.

Sophy did not hear from Edward again about Frederick, and for the next year, there was no letter from Frederick at all. Sophy’s life was busy and happy, but she was aware of an unspoken worry about her brother, who might never have been the most prolific correspondent, but so far had never permitted more than a year to go by without any word.

Early in November in the year 1807, Admiral and Mrs. Croft touched at Plymouth, where he was to transfer to his new flagship preparatory to setting sail for Ireland.

As they warped into the harbor against a recalcitrant wind, they passed a much-battered French
frigate anchored in the roads. They traded field glasses back and forth, having plenty of time to survey the damage. The admiral observed, “That must have been a fierce fight.”

No sooner did they open the door to the naval office than they nearly walked straight into a tall, handsome officer with a hard face. Indifferent black eyes turned their way—

“Frederick?” Sophy gasped.

Instantly that haughty, cold countenance transformed into a ready smile. He shook hands with the admiral, kissed Sophy, and apologized for nearly knocking them down. Then he turned to indicate the tall man walking at his side. “May I present my premier, Lt. Harville—soon to be commander, I hope and trust.”

Bows, smiles, and Frederick continued, “I’ve been four days bringing the Aout-Dix in,” he said. “I have not slept—I scarcely know where I am at.”

“That Frenchman in the harbor, that was your doing?” the admiral asked. “No, no, do not answer. Go and get your rest. Come aboard us to dinner tomorrow, the both of you. Mind, I shall expect a description of every shot. That must have been warm work.”

“It was warm enough, but the storm afterward was the worst of the bargain,” Frederick said. “I will retail it all when I am not all about in my head.”

Lt. Harville bowed, thanked them, and they were gone in two steps.

Sophy kept her thoughts to herself, hoping that the startling change in her brother was indeed due to arriving fresh from a ship battle followed by a storm.

He and his first lieutenant presented themselves aboard Admiral Croft’s flag the next day, prompt to their time as customary in the navy. Over dinner, they traded in furnishing a vivid description of Asp’s spectacular end, with all the detail anyone could wish.

Sophy listened, gaining more pleasure in the easy camaraderie between the two men than in the exact measure of shots, and the relative impact of canister versus chain and iron balls. She liked Harville; and on discovering that he had left his wife and several small children in Portsmouth, asked civil questions about them.

But Frederick said nothing at all of his life outside the service; there was no mention of Monkford. He might not have been there at all. When Sophy put a tentative question, he replied, “Edward is a capital curate, respected by everybody. He’s been given a strong hope of his own living in a year or two.”

Sophy had it at her tongue’s end to say that was not what she had meant, but his manner gave her pause. She could not define her reluctance to speak. An unfamiliar look to his dark eye, the tightness in his hand, prevented her.

The gentlemen then turned the conversation to the naval list—ships—fellow captains—Frederick’s hope of promotion to post, and Harville to commander—before the last toast was drunk, and they took their departure.

As soon as Sophy and her husband were left alone, she said to him, “Frederick’s reluctance to speak of Monkford seemed significant, did it not?”

“Pho, pho, he has much to do. I showed you the dispatch saying that he’s to get Laconia, all rerove, recoppered, and so sweet in stays. He will be wild to get to sea—thinks nothing of land—I never did,
except when you were there.” He smiled and kissed her.

She returned the kiss, reflecting that the admiral, while excellent as a naval officer, seldom looked into the personal affairs of others. The best of husbands, he had never exhibited the smallest particle of interest in other women, except in the way of benignant friendship. He was sadly puzzled by anything else in return. Sophy had, in consequence, begun to regard as her duty the niceties of social interactions, in particular with wives and other female dependents. The Mrs. Grotons, in short, had fallen to her.

Therefore, though the admiral had not professed to observe anything amiss in Frederick’s countenance, Sophy remained uncertain in her conviction. After some thought, she sat down to her desk.

Dearest Edward:

We encountered Frederick here in Plymouth, fresh from what he described as a tightish ship Battle followed by a storm. That might explain his demeanor, which I can scarcely Characterize, except that he is so changed I might almost have not known him. And this misgives me—you remember how much Mama disliked Hyperbole so you will know I mean what I say when I add that I was never more shocked by a change in anyone.

Can it be he is still mourning what might have been, with this mysterious Miss Elliot? Pray tell me what you can.

We are about to depart for Cork, so you can direct your reply. . .

Letters between England and Ireland being significantly more expeditious than those in other stations, within a few weeks, Sophy received a reply.

Dear Sophia:

I have to begin my letter by apologizing for what I sent you last autumn. I believe I might inadvertently have broken confidence, in that I received a letter from Frederick the very day after I sent mine, or I would have exerted myself to call it back.

In his letter Frederick stated that he had visited the Admiralty and closed with an offer to take the Asp cruising, as I had surmised. But at the end he requested me never to speak of the events of his stay to anyone: he was quit of that part of his life.

I feel honor-bound to heed his wishes, and I will add at risk of sounding officious—but I trust you will acquit me, and accept my motivation in the best light—that any mentions, or references, or attempts to console him on this vexatious Topic would only grieve him.

Further: I had not until that summer spent considerable time in his company since we were boys, and so in essence we were become reacquainted. I need scarcely tell you of Frederick’s excellence in all important Matters, but in addition I came to comprehend that though he feels very deeply, he keeps such sensations to himself. I have since that date exchanged letters with him three or four times, and though he writes of the wind, the weather, his crew, his ship, and what the French are about, there has never been the slightest reference to the above. I take my hint from him.

Sophy lowered the letter.

What he means, but is too kind to say, is that Frederick is still as proud as Lucifer, Sophy thought. She understood. She had her own pride; she had snubbed Admiral Brand when they met at Plymouth, refusing to acknowledge his bow, though she knew it was impolite, even petty. But she
would never forgive him for betraying Admiral Croft’s promise to his men after Trafalgar.

The rest of the letter was strictly about Edward’s affairs. She ran her gaze down it, and set it aside to be answered later. This much was clear: her brothers were united in silence about whatever had happened. So she must do her best to forget it—and hope that Frederick would, too.

There were, after all, plenty of young ladies in the world.

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The rest of the year slid by; in 1808, the admiral received orders to quit Ireland and command the squadron defending the ships carrying Wellesley’s troops to Portugal. Admiral Croft—now Vice Admiral of the Blue—was to take up command at Lisbon, overseeing the defense of troop carriers.

Sophy loved Lisbon, which was considerably warmer than Cork had been, and much of it was new, rebuilt in the fifty years since the terrible earthquake. In an effort to calm the merchants and re-establish life on a civilized footing, wives of military officers of both branches were encouraged to buy and to entertain—and to be seen doing so.

Sophy bought beautiful Portuguese silks, and established a regular salon in the beautiful new marble building assigned to the Crofts. She gave dinners regularly, entertaining not only naval wives, but those of army officers who had come with their families. English was heard everywhere in the great city, which seemed to have three seasons: a brief cool and rainy period, followed by a long spring, and a longer summer that waxed and waned over six months.

Time fled unnoticed as more and more British soldiers poured in to swell Wellesley’s command; the commander himself gained titles from a distance—viscount, earl, and marquess of Wellington—as he shaped his army to strike from the west while Napoleon divested himself of one empress, married another, then set out to conquer the east.

Sophy was ever vigilant in her communication with her brothers, the one carrying out successful raids against the French ships trying to break British naval lines, and the other having at last gained promise of a living.

One day the admiral came to Sophy before the sun had set, looking weary. She knew at once that something was wrong. As soon as they were alone, he said to her, “It’s official—there is war with the American colonials. It’s this damned impressment. I told the First Lord it would not answer, that you cannot get a content ship when a parcel of your men have been dragged aboard against their will, and made to be British again.”

“But some of them are British,” Sophy said. “That is to say, a father and mother in England, a sister or brother in New England, and cousins in both places and Halifax as well.”

“Which brings me to the damnedest part,” the admiral burst out. “We are to hang British sailors who have run to the Yankees. Now, how is that to effectively address the lack of manpower to sail and fight our ships?”

Sophy shook her head. “It will only make you, and the kingdom, further despised.”

“Yet I must pass on these orders.” The admiral took a turn about the room. “What do you think? My idea is to hand on the orders, because I must, but to say nothing to my most trusted captains about how these orders are to be carried out.”

When Sophy concurred, he brightened. “I thought you would agree. And that puts me in mind of the rest of our news. We are off to the East Indies once again, but before my orders were cut, I
succeeded at last in getting Frederick’s orders changed. He shall have a free hand to break those French privateers taking advantage of our being stretched so confounded thin.”

“Frederick!” she exclaimed. “Is he here?”

“He is coming to dinner, he and his friend Harville, who shall have his own ship at last. We will wet Harville’s swab, and send them off in style.”

“Capital!” Sophy exclaimed.

Frederick came to dinner wearing the two epaulettes of a post captain. He came to dine not only with the happy Captain Harville, but brought in addition his new premier, a soft-spoken, elegant young man named James Benwick.

The talk over dinner was all of the war and their determination to dismantle the French naval lines themselves. Lt. Benwick demonstrated the same degree of enthusiasm here that characterized Frederick, but when the dinner drew to a close amid the usual toasts, there was one added with meaning, by this gentleman, “To Miss Harville.”

And Frederick was the first to raise his glass. They all drank to the unknown Miss Harville, and finally to the king, before the three young officers took their leave.

As soon as they were alone, the admiral surprised Sophy considerably by shaking his head and laughing. “Well, well, I always knew I was no dab hand in that quarter. What a fool I’ve been, but no one the wiser!”

Sophy said, “What is this?”

The admiral sat down beside her on the couch, their arms intertwined comfortably. “I hoped to surprise you—if it answered. But however it did not. Harville’s sister, a capital girl—knows a clew from an earring—fine pair of eyes—well, the short of it is, I’d hoped to do Frederick a good turn when I found lodgings for Harville’s family at Portsmouth, and ordered the Laconia to indent at that dock for repairs. I knew he would stay in the family.”

Sophy said in wonder, “You were matchmaking?”

She was charmed when her husband, so tough on the quarterdeck under fire, blushed and hung his head. “It’s just that your brother did a good turn for me when he said yes to my question about asking you to wife.” He kissed her. “I will be forever grateful. And of late, I bethought me, he don’t seem as happy . . . no, I’ll not venture there, for it is obvious I was wrong. At any event, it was young Benwick who attached Fanny Harville. Not Frederick. Now I am very glad I said nothing to anyone, and I will not make that error again.”

“Oh, my dear, you meant well.”

“Meaning well and doing well are two different things. You can mean to take a ship-rigged brig against a 74, but that doesn’t mean you’ll board and carry her—that doesn’t mean she’ll strike to you because you desire her to. You’re far more likely to find yourself floating in the water with nothing but a two inch plank at hand, for their desire trumps. I was wrong to interfere, and I’ve done meddling in people’s lives. I will confine myself strictly to our profession, because there, I know what I am about.”

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They reached the East Indies. Bad news chased after them: Captain Harville, motivated by
determination to capture a great prize, had attacked a bigger enemy and was badly wounded, which caused him to be laid up at Gib.

Sophy and the admiral were grieved at these tidings, and further by the rest of the world’s news: Napoleon winning battle after battle, seemingly invincible—continued war at sea with the Americans—the navy stretched to its limits—until Napoleon began retreating at last, first Russian and then hard-fought ground here in the west.

In the spring of 1814, Napoleon was sent off to Elba, bringing peace to Europe at last.

The Crofts sailed for England once again, along with the greater part of the kingdom’s military and naval forces. Portsmouth—Plymouth—London brought the speeches, the parades, the awards, and everybody smiled, but for both naval and military officers, the demobilization meant many were beached, whether they liked it or not.

“What shall we do?” The admiral said to Sophy, after yet another great state dinner that ended with multiple toasts of mutual congratulation.

“What do you wish to do?” she countered.

He slapped his hands on his knees. “All I know is how to command a sea battle, but with Boney rolled up and his navy in pieces, why, it seems it is time to turn my hand to something else. I have had my luck, and made my fortune. It might be better to retire and make way for those poor younkers who must still find their way in the world. We’ve enough to settle somewhere, if you like. And if I find myself possessed of a desire to taste the sea air again, and listen to a bosun’s whistle, why I could buy myself a yacht, I suppose. Would you like that? Or should we look abroad—back to Bermuda, perhaps?”

“Do you have your heart set on Bermuda, then, love?” she asked.

“No. Truth to tell, I find it devilish hot, and the insects vile. And the troubles among the French are in course going to happen to us. You know I had little stomach for putting down rebelling slaves—the whole business . . . well, I agreed with Charles James Fox about it, bless his memory. Politics aside, I thought you were partial to the place.”

“I was happy everywhere we went, but I agree about Bermuda. Truly I would settle in preference for familiar surroundings. Perhaps we might visit Edward—call upon his new bride, which is only proper—and look about us. What say you?”

“Well, well.” The admiral laughed, and threw a packet of letters onto the table. “There is this, too. Now that I am a rich man, and Admiral Croft apparently sounds well enough in Taunton society, my Delafield relations have discovered me again, inviting me to visit. It seems that after all these years, they find they cannot do without my august presence at their assemblies. I have not answered any of their letters until we decided what we wanted to do. Shall I give them an answer, then?”

“Taunton?” Sophy said, with other ideas in mind; she knew Frederick must eventually follow them, for where else had he to go? “I confess a desire to see the place again.”

As if to lure her wanderers back home, England displayed under mild skies her most beautiful foliage that June. Everywhere Sophy looked, gardens bloomed, their fragrances reaching back into childhood to awaken memories long buried.

They arrived just before sunset at the ivy-covered vicarage where Edward was staying with his first
patron, elderly Dr. Gregory, while his new vicarage in Shropshire was in preparation. Edward, it transpired, was performing the offices of curate until Septimus Gregory, the last of seven sons, came down from Oxford to work for his father.

Standing side by side in the doorway, wearing equally welcoming smiles, were Edward and his bride. The first thing Sophy noticed were the twin flashes and twinkles of spectacles on both faces. Behind them stood old Dr. Gregory in his powdered wig, speaking those elegant, old-fashioned cadences that had called up images of ladies and gentlemen in silks, satin, and red-heeled shoes.

The elderly vicar, once politesse had been satisfied, excused his wife’s absence—she was staying with her own mother—and then withdrew, leaving the young couple to welcome their guests.

Sophy was charmed to discover that they could not have been more different. Edward, though he had not attained the height or breadth through the shoulders as Frederick, looked taller than he was because he was so thin. In contrast, his wife was short, round as a ball of wool, and blond.

Sophy was dressed plainly but well. Sophy instantly liked her as she conducted them into the low-beamed salon, on whose walls had been built bookcases. “I am truly sorry,” she said, “that the banns were put up the week before the Emperor of the French abdicated. The news reached us the day after we married, or we would have postponed everything so that you could be with us. Mr. Wentworth was certain you would be given liberty directly they sent Bonaparte away, and so it came to pass.”

Sophy smiled at her ‘Mr. Wentworth.’ It was very clear from the slight consciousness with which the bride uttered the words how dear they were to her—and how new. Sophy said, “I would not have postponed your happiness for the world.”

Mrs. Wentworth blushed, smiled without archness, then said quietly, “I could not but feel for him. The entire parish came to Monkford, with all my relations, but he had no one there outside of our friends.”

“We are here now,” Sophy said comfortably. “Will you show me over the house? You must know I once lived in Taunton, but though Frederick was sometimes here, with Mr. James Gregory, I was never inside. It is very beautiful—very much in the style of Queen Elizabeth, if I do not mistake? These diamond panes in the casements, the carving in the beams?” Sophy added as they stepped into a beautiful salon, with high bookcases down either side, “And so many books!” For these cases looked quite new.

“The cases will go with us when we are carried to Shropshire. They are a gift from my own father. We became acquainted over books,” she admitted. “We girls had been strictly enjoined not to get in the way of Papa’s curate, who was living in the family . . .”

As she showed Sophy to a plain but clean guest chamber, she told her story. Sophy could easily imagine the handsome young curate and the vicar’s daughter making conversation over books—hesitant—each scrupulously polite and cautious. It was no sudden romance; what was not said, but Sophy easily filled in, was Dr. Hopgood’s reluctance to permit his eldest daughter to marry an impecunious curate, and so his daughter had set out to earn a living translating Madame de Genlis’s pedagogical works, and other similar items.

However, once the word had come of Edward’s imminent appointment to a very fine living in Shropshire, everything had changed.

They proceeded down a few stairs and up a few stairs. Sophy looked around, liking what she saw, and to make conversation, said, “Monkford! I was never there. Some say it is the pity of marriage, that one is often called upon to quit one’s neighborhood for something strange, and often not an
improvement. I never found it so, but I know myself to be lucky. Tell me a little about what you left behind?"

As Mrs. Wentworth conducted Sophy out into the garden to catch a sight of Mrs. Gregory’s prize roses in the fading light, she readily furnished a description. As must be expected, she had mainly known the local clergy families, but as people will, she offered the names of the great people of the Monkford parish, coming at last to, “… and the Elluits of Kellynch Hall, though of course I was never there. My sister wrote me this very week to say they are renting Kellynch Hall, and retiring to Bath.”

Sophy recollected the name instantly, and stole a glance at the bride, who spoke the words without a shadow of consciousness. Sophy reflected that Edward’s bride must have been a girl of twelve when Frederick made his fateful visit.

Not that she would allude to it by word or deed. She thought as they walked back into the house to change for dinner, she might understand little of what people of a certain rank termed delicacy, but she did thoroughly comprehend honor. She would despise anyone trying to worm old gossip out of a wife, whether she knew it or not. Besides, Frederick had most likely long forgotten the mysterious Miss Elliot.

Over a late dinner, Dr. Gregory asked for the latest continental news, which the admiral was happy to furnish, and then Sophy asked about the extensive library, knowing that that would make an easy topic for the newlyweds.

Edward said proudly, “All those downstairs are ours. One might say we met over books. The ladies sat forward, and Dr. Hopgood’s study was next to the church, so we only encountered one another in the library. But however,” he added proudly, “Mrs. Wentworth is not just a translator and reader, but a writer as well. She is midway through the composition of her own book.”

His wife blushed to the ears, looked down at her plate, and said, “It is only a novel.”

“Novels! We like them right well, did we not, Sophy? Times out of mind, when the wind was bitter, we’d read aloud to one another from Roderick Random, or Humphrey Clinker—lord, were I ever to visit Bath, I would not go near the waters, ha ha!” the admiral exclaimed.

Sophy recollected Mr. Smollett’s novel, and reflected on how it might be considered indelicate, but Dr. Gregory only smiled—his tastes belonged to a more robust era—and neither Edward nor his wife protested, so they finished out the evening talking over favorite books. After that, the Crofts being tired from their long day’s journey, and the elderly vicar keeping early hours, everyone retired.

Sophy was very ready to set aside her questions about Kellynch Hall and its inmates until, a few days later, after their visit to the admiral’s Delafiel half-brother, he said suddenly, “I’ve half a mind to take a house. See how I like the role of fine gentleman, at least for a time, until we decide to buy on our own, before we get ourselves a family of our own.”

“A house?” Sophy repeated, smiling back at him. The family, she was prepared for; they had decided upon that once he retired. But a house?

The admiral chuckled. “I will admit only to you that I think it would do that rantipole some good if he came a-calling into a house bigger than his. There was a little too much of Lord This and Sir That, did you not think?”
Sophy laughed. “I believe your brother was doing his best to impress you because he has never been farther than London, and the closest he came to a battle, or the great men who conducted them, was in newsprint.”

The admiral rubbed his hands. “Nevertheless. If something came my way, I confess it would give me a great deal of pleasure.”

Sophy sent him a thoughtful look as they bumped over the rutted road in their hired chaise.

“And I mean to attend the assizes, and learn the lingo of land,” he added, as the coach rocked violently, nearly sending Sophy through the glass window. As she straightened her hat, he said, “And also learn to drive. I cannot believe I would be as bad a driver as some of these jarveys—why, that lee-lurch was the equivalent of a double-reefed t’gans’l gale, and here there’s nary a breeze.”

Sophy said nothing immediately. Her first concern had been that the admiral, finding himself at loose ends for the first time in his life, might feel cast adrift. If he had a mind to try his hand at managing an estate (and taking the wind out of the eye of his prating brother, whom Sophy had found a sad bore), perhaps it were better so.

“As it happens,” she said on impulse, “Mrs. Wentworth made mention of a very fine estate that is to be let.”

“She did?” The admiral rubbed his hands, and clapped them on his knees. “Capital! How do we go about it?”

It turned out that nothing could be easier. Mrs. Wentworth knew who the land agent was. An application was sent, while the admiral entertained himself with touring several possible houses. Sophy, of course, must be by his side during all these tours.

Nothing they looked at would suit. This one had been left too long, and would require an army to make it livable; that one was far too large for two people; a third was inconveniently distant from Taunton.

Sophy had suspected that after receiving their application Mr. Shepherd, the land agent, would inquire into the admiral’s circumstances at Whitehall, whereupon he would learn that Admiral Croft was a rear-admiral of the white, born a gentleman, and very, very rich. She was therefore not surprised when they received not only a letter but a call from the man himself.

Consequently it was not long until a tour was arranged. Sophy found herself intensely curious by now, a sensation that she kept strictly to herself as Mr. Shepherd described people in Kellynch parish whom they would be expected to meet if they took Kellynch Hall—fine titles and ancient families—until they rolled up the drive to a house that was well-built, though to Sophy’s eye was in want of a better gardener, and perhaps fresh paint.

They were conducted into a well-lit sitting room built to noble proportions, though the hangings were sadly shabby. Here a handsome man in his fifties waited in a rather grand pose by the fireplace for Mr. Shepherd to perform the office of introduction, which he did.

And then, Sophy at last, found herself face to face with Miss Elliot.

Her first impression was good: Miss Elliot was exceedingly handsome, her manners assured as she stepped forward to welcome them. But as they passed from room to room, every condescending utterance, every supercilious glance from those fine eyes, engendered in Sophy a fresh wonder not that this lady would turn down an offer from Frederick, but that she had been interested in him at all.
Still less that he had had any interest in her.

But beauty could sometimes carry all, she reminded herself as they proceeded down the hall, and then all her assumptions fled when Miss Elliot waved an elegant hand in a dismissive gesture. “This back bedchamber belongs to my younger sister. As you can see, it might be suitable for some guest, though of course the principal guest room is at this end . . .”

There were two Miss Ellots?

The question remained unanswered as they finished the circuit at a small bedchamber, Miss Elliot saying, “And if you were to entertain a considerable party, there is always this chamber, which belonged once to my youngest sister, now Mrs. Musgrove, who will one day be mistress of Uppercross, a respectable estate three miles distant. They are congenial people, not of course belonging to the best circles, but suitable enough for—and here, you see, are the guest rooms down this hall . . .”

No, three Elliot sisters, one married. Which of these three possible ladies had been the one to throw over Frederick back in 1806? Sophy did not know what she dreaded worse: that this cold, arrogant Miss Elliot had been she, or that Mrs. Musgrove, now forever out of reach, had been the one.

She must be certain; as they descended the last staircase, she threw out a compliment to the parish, saying that her brother, who had lived at Monkford, had much to say in its praise, and should Miss Elliot wish her to carry back any greeting?

Miss Elliot heard these words with a face of unconcern, saying, “I do not believe I was acquainted with the gentleman, except to exchange the time of day. One of my sisters was used at one time to visit in Monkford, I believe. But that was long ago. I may forget.”

Sophy accepted this repulsive politeness with a strong sense of relief.

As soon as the ladies rejoined the gentlemen, who had just come in from a walk about the gardens, to Sophy’s astonishment, the admiral looked about the sitting room with a decided air and then said to Sir Walter, “I find myself amazed that you wish to leave this fine house, but then a man requires a change of scenery, I can well understand that, ha ha! Name your price, and I will meet it. Let us close at once; in the navy we are trained to board and carry . . .”

Sophy listened in astonishment. She was left with nothing to say, until later, when they once again sat in their chaise, she turned to him in wonder.

The admiral met her gaze with a happy smile. “Next, I must learn to drive. As well he seems willing to leave his horses. Lord, what a dressy man! Did you see the mirrors in that dressing room?”

“Is this the house you want?” she asked.

He looked a question. “I thought you were as pleased as I, or was that all smoke? Say the word, and we can undo it."

“No, no, if you are happy—I am merely caught by surprise.”

“You know me, Sophy. When I see the thing I want, why, there is no purpose in wasting time. It was that way when I first saw you. There would never be anyone else. But when that mumping scrub Forsham—ah, that ship is long sailed. Did you hear that he’s been married these ten years? A handsome Irish lass he met in London, is what my cousin said. She takes snuff from no one, least of all the squire’s wife. Where was I? Ah, Kellynch.”
He glanced out the window at the last of the estate fading from view. Sophy had to admit that it looked fine, a beautiful house set in the middle of English verdure. “It is well-built, and comes with servants so we will not have to trouble ourselves. It is comfortably worn, so I may sit as I please—no finicking French chairs, or Egyptian fashions that a man feels he cannot touch lest it fly to flinders. Finally, it is larger than my brother Delafield’s house by at least half again as much.” He chuckled to himself. “It will do very well for a year or two. What say you?”

He was happy. That was what mattered. As for the house, Sophy decided that there were enough things to occupy her, beginning with that wretched paper in the best sitting room.

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When they arrived back in Taunton, Dr. Gregory was away on parish business. Edward met them with a letter, and a sober countenance.

“Is aught amiss with Frederick?” was Sophy’s first question before she had even removed hat or gloves.

“Yes. That is, no,” Edward said. “Not with him. My letter was brief. I do not know the individuals in the case. I expect yours explains more.” He proffered it.

Standing inside the vestibule, for Sophy could not wait longer, she and the admiral put their heads together over the letter. It was reassuring to see Frederick’s familiar dashing letters. Nothing was amiss with his hands, or his intellects, at the least.

She ran her gaze rapidly over the few sentences there. “Harville... Benwick... oh, dear, this is terrible. Of course it must be Frederick to go to his aid...”

“Damme,” the admiral exclaimed, too overset to recollect Mrs. Wentworth, but neither of his young relatives demurred. “Damme, that is just what I would expect of Frederick, never behind when it comes to facing down a French broadside, or addressing a ticklish affair.”

Sophy had never met Miss Harville, but she had heard a great deal about her, and felt all the regret and sorrow due. “He says he will join us when he can leave Lt. Benwick. We might be moved to Kellynch Hall by then.”

Edward said, “We will have to send him that address, because my friend Septimus will be here by then, and us on our way to Shropshire.”

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As it transpired, Edward and his wife were the first to depart. Promptly on the 29th September, the Crofts took possession of Kellynch Hall. They had ordered some changes, and put in hand others that they could oversee, beginning with the admiral’s dressing room. They had not spent a day before he requested Sophy to help him shift some of the many looking glasses into one of the closets.

Sophy liked the servants, who seemed a quiet, attentive set of people; she gave few orders outside of changing the hangings in the sitting room. She preferred to leave the admiral to his own devices, for she could see that he gained a great deal of satisfaction in walking about with the carpenter and—as he put it—banging such things as the laundry door, and other oddments, into shipshape.

Of course they must be called upon, after a decent interval; scarcely had the fresh hangings dried upon the walls when they received their first visitors. The butler announced “Mr. and Mrs. Musgrove.”
The admiral advanced to greet them, saying, “Welcome, welcome. This is indeed a pleasure—this is treating us as neighbors.”

Introductions being got over, Sophy gazed curiously at Mrs. Charles Musgrove, whose age was difficult to determine. She could be anywhere from twenty-five to thirty-five, with what Sophy had come to regard as distinctively English features: hair of an indeterminate brown, a complexion somewhat the color and consistency of dough, and a pair of dark eyes that darted avidly about.

Mrs. Musgrove spoke in a high, somewhat artificial voice as she asked if they were settled in—how they liked the Hall—did the garden please them—could she explain anything. “Though I have not lived here these four years, having, unlike my sisters, been married,” Mrs. Musgrove said, indicating her husband, who had walked out onto the terrace with the admiral.

Mrs. Musgrove then appeared to think that she might have lowered the prestige of her sisters, adding swiftly, “My eldest sister was used to act as mistress since her sixteenth year, and my second divides her time between Lady Russell, her particular friend, and Uppercross.”

The slight emphasis on ‘Lady Russell’ suggested that this unknown second sister might be as pretentious as the elder Miss Elliot had been, but Sophy caught herself there. She must not assume. She had already been wrong about the eldest sister.

Mrs. Musgrove further offered opinions on neighbors of rank, until the gentlemen rejoined them. Before they left, after the admiral promised to return the call, Mrs. Musgrove said that they should find the entire family at their service—including her sister.

Well, then, Sophy thought. The last of the mystery would soon be solved. She would not guess which of the three Miss Elliots had thrown Frederick over until she had met them all.

In due course, the admiral—still waiting for the gig he had ordered—ordered the aging coachman to drive them in the family chaise to Uppercross, and the cottage wherein resided Mr. Charles Musgrove and his family.

They found Mrs. Musgrove at home with the last of the sisters. More quiet and reserved was Miss Elliot—Miss Anne Elliot, as she was presented by her sister—a slender lady with a fine pair of dark eyes, dressed simply and tastefully. Her complexion was wan, her manner gentle.

Sophy, still uncertain, found it easy enough to settle herself by this intriguing Miss Elliot, leaving her husband to entertain the lively young Musgrove boys with sea-faring tales, and the sort of old tricks and jokes he had once used upon homesick midshipmen, as their mother looked on.

Sophy exerted herself to draw Miss Anne Elliot out, first by offering an apology lest reference to Kellynch Hall should be awkward. On hasty and polite assurance to the contrary, she took the opportunity to offer justly deserved praise of the gardens, the situation from the windows, the finest rooms, and watched the wistful expression of Miss Anne’s face.

Miss Anne, in her turn asked no questions outside of the most general politeness, and so Sophy finally brought herself around to Monkford: “It was you, and not your sister, I find, that my brother had the pleasure of being acquainted with, when he was in this country?”

Miss Anne’s wan complexion, if possible, paled further, and Sophy knew that she had struck home. She shifted her gaze away at once, for the shuttered eyelashes, the compressed breathing called instantly to mind Frederick’s shuttered expression. Sophy was curious, but for the world would not give pain.
Therefore, since she had brought up the subject and the lady plainly did not want to be detected, she
must in compassion shift the context to Edward, so she said in her easiest voice, “Perhaps you may
have heard that he is married,” full knowing that Miss Hopgood’s engagement would have been
known to Miss Anne.

It sufficed. Her color betrayed her though her manner did not, and the conventional compliments
were offered and received with thanks, before Mrs. Charles Musgrove broke in to talk about what a
splendid wedding party had been made up, though the neighbors of the first stare had not all
attended.

It was time to bring the call to a close. Sophy signaled the admiral; he rose to leave, then he said to
Mrs. Musgrove, “We are expecting a brother of Mrs. Croft’s here soon; I dare say you know him by
name.”

Mrs. Mary Musgrove began to say, “I have not had the pleasure of—here, Charles, what are you
about?”

The little boys interrupted, and Sophy did not see the effect of these words on Miss Anne. The
admiral must give the boys one last joke, one last story, before they were able to make their departure
at last, and call at the Great House on their way.

Though it transpired the squire was from home, all the rest of the household was there. Sophy was
delighted to discover the kind of noisy, merry gathering she liked the most. The Miss Musgroves,
pretty and friendly, like their mother welcomed the visitors and treated them as old friends. Their
insistence that they call again—and to bring the brother when he came—she accepted as meant.

As they drove away, the admiral said, “I like that family. Young Charles is an affable fellow like his
father. The little boys, I think, would soon learn discipline aboard a ship and be the better for it, ha
ha. Perhaps Frederick will convince them—do you think we ought to introduce him? I am thinking
he might be sadly bored with just the two of us rattling around that large house, and not a drop of
water in sight, much less a boat to sail in it.”

Sophy remembered that shuttered look—almost of pain—in Miss Anne’s face. “Yes,” she said. “I
think we ought.”

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Before Frederick arrived, she had time to consider the situation.

She had learned to be patient. Long ago their Great-Uncle Bainbridge had called Frederick proud,
and there was some justice in that, but Sophy knew that that proud countenance hid profound
sensibilities. There was not a particle of proof, but Sophy was convinced that Frederick had never
recovered from his disappointment, and further, if the impression of a single visit could be counted
upon, neither had Miss Anne.

She must therefore wait, and take her cue from Frederick. He would instantly recognize Kellynch
Hall. If he said anything, she could speak; if he pretended ignorance, she must as well. Therefore,
though she had long been in the habit of sharing most all her thoughts with the admiral, she must
withhold the particulars of this situation. His ignorance would be his protection, in affording him an
easy, natural manner she knew he would not feel if he were told.

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Frederick Wentworth had sustained a difficult time. On his arrival at Plymouth he had discovered the
shocking news about Miss Harville, and had left everything undone to run to Portsmouth. He remained aboard Benwick’s *Grapper*, paying off its crew and seeing to all the necessary trouble of bringing in a ship at the end of a commission, while his friend was prostrate with grief.

When Benwick had at last pronounced himself able to row ashore, Frederick then had to return to Portsmouth and it was all to do again for his own ship. At last he was able to depart for Somerset. He arrived in Taunton to discover his brother had departed, leaving with Dr. Gregory a letter directing him to Kellynch Hall.

Kellynch Hall?

He had sworn never to set foot in that parish again. His luck, so excellent for so long, seemed to have turned for the worse: Harville laid up somewhere beyond reach, Benwick struck down by grief. And now his sister had somehow ended up in the place he least expected to find her—and least wanted.

He could see how it came about by accident: Edward’s bride came from that neighborhood—Sir Walter had run aground and decided to let it—the admiral hears about it from the new Mrs. Wentworth—the house was very handsome—yes, it was a comedy of errors, but only for him. To the world it would seem natural enough, therefore there was nothing for it but to pretend that it was no matter for him either.

Still, his spirits were in turmoil, throwing him back to the grief and anger of those days eight years previous when he had last traveled the familiar road.

He was spared memories of the house, for he had never seen any of the place but the formal drawing room, and that on a single visit. He found Sophy and the admiral happily ensconced. As the admiral conducted him from room to room, pointing out small improvements (“Just as we did aboard the *Athena*, you’ll remember, nothing could be more neat and complete, eh?”) all Frederick could think was how once Anne had lived and worked here, and he knew she had not been happy since her mother’s last illness.

He did not want to think about Anne. But he must, for over dinner the admiral offered the information he refused to ask: “ . . . and you will like the Musgroves, I venture to say, with one of the daughters of this house among ’em. No, I mistake.”

“Two, Admiral,” Sophy said. “Frederick, may I help you to some more strawberries? I loved living aboard a man of war, but I will admit that one thing I sorely missed was vegetables and fruit fresh from the garden.”

“No, thank you.”

The admiral went on. “Lively and noisy, the Musgroves, very much in the style of our most famous gatherings at Gib, and Lisbon, and even Yarmouth, eh, Sophy? Remember when Lord Nelson came among us, the entire city kicked up its heels. Oh, I wonder what he would make of things now.”

Frederick could take this much comfort: the Crofts seemed unaware of his wretched error here. He knew that if he had arrived and found pity and knowing looks, he would have mounted his horse and gone away again—somewhere.

But the admiral spoke again. “I am fairly certain one or other of the Musgroves will call, now you are come. I like the father, and his son as well. Sensible, think just as they ought about matters of land, sheep, and so forth, but not above taking out a pistol for some sport. Hi, Sophy, they were among the first of our callers, eh?”
“Indeed,” Sophy said, always more tranquil—exactly as their mother had been. “And all of them wild for the navy, especially the little boys. You are not wanting to send Frederick to spirit those boys away for the navy’s benefit, are you, my dear?”

The admiral thought this sally the primest of jests, and was still laughing over it from time to time as they walked into the sitting room for coffee.

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The admiral was correct in his prediction. The squire himself came to call, after which the Crofts saw Frederick ride off to make his visit.

He returned promptly with the news that one of those lively boys had fallen out of a tree and broken a bone, but nothing alarming having been found in consequence, he had been pressed to dine the next day.

Sophy would have given anything to be there to see Frederick and Miss Anne together, but it was not to be. She sensed that she must maintain an affect of ignorance equal to the admiral’s real lack of awareness.

The next evening Frederick was gone for a very long time; when he came in late to drink tea before they all retired, he said only that the Musgroves were very good company, and that Mr. Charles Musgrove had invited him to go shooting on the morrow. He did not mention Anne; an innocent question from the admiral elicited the information that Miss Elliot had not been among the company, but had remained with the sick boy.

Late the next day, Sophy saw Frederick’s return from a back window, from which she had been watching. Nothing could be seen of his demeanor below his hat. She waited impatiently for a time, then finally descended swiftly to the laundry room behind the kitchen, from whose wide window she could look into the stable.

There she witnessed Frederick standing very still, his arms extended, hands pressing against the wall. His stillness, his head bent, his entire aspect shocked her nerves. She backed away hastily, as if she had been caught in some act she could ill-define, and without thinking snatched up her hat and shawl and sped out through the terrace door to take a good, brisk ramble through the garden.

She met the gentlemen at dinner. Pressed by the admiral, Frederick readily praised the countryside, and those he’d met.

“I did not think about it until I laid eyes on them,” the admiral said, “but here are young ladies in plenty. What with Boney safe at Elba, why, if you was to get married, who is to stop you? Take these two Musgrove girls, pretty, wild about the navy, and always ready to kick up their heels in a dance at the slightest excuse.”

“That is my object,” Frederick said, with a sardonic curl to his lip. “I shall settle as soon as properly tempted—have a heart for either of your Miss Musgroves if she can catch it. In short, for almost any pleasing young woman.”

“Pleasing?” Sophy asked, having heard his emphasis on the word.

He turned her way, his black eyes a-glitter with warning, though he readily smiled, and his tone was joking. “Yes, here I am, Sophia, quite ready to make a foolish match. Anybody between fifteen and thirty may have me for the asking. A little beauty, and a few smiles, and a few compliments to the navy, and I am a lost man. Should this not be enough for a sailor, who has had no society among
women to make him nice?”

Sophy sensed the challenge there, but she maintained her resolve and looked uncomprehending, only smiled and nodded as the admiral clapped his hands.

“A strong mind,” Frederick said in a lower tone. “With sweetness of manner. This is the woman I want. Something a little inferior I shall of course put up with, but it must not be much. If I am a fool, I shall be a fool indeed, for I have thought on the subject more than most men.”

Sophy kept a prudent silence.

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He rode to Uppercross regularly, for he had a standing invitation. It was soon known in the parish that he was flirting with the Miss Musgroves, who flirted back with happy indiscrimination; as the sisters readily invited all the young ladies within riding distance to impromptu dances, there was no whispering beyond smiling wagers on which one he might pick.

Sophy saw Frederick drawn back again and again, though there appeared to be no desire to exchange flirtation for courtship, that is, to walk alone with one or other of the Miss Musgroves in the apple orchard, or along a lonely road.

More important to Sophy, though he flirted readily and openly with the Musgrove sisters, her brother did not behave like a man in love. She knew that love manifested in many ways, and she had never seen Frederick in love, still, her vast experience of young men had led her to expect some discussion, at least, however trivial: “Miss Harriet looked especially charming last night, I thought,” or “Miss Louisa expressed a partiality for Mozart. I will look out the music to a melody of his I once heard in Naples.” There was none of that, and even less the gaiety of a man about to make a choice, certain of his reward (for the young ladies did everything to encourage the connection).

That was as much as she could observe from a distance, until the little boy was deemed recovered enough for the Musgroves to invite the Crofts as well as Captain Wentworth to dine. At last Sophy would see Frederick in company with Anne Elliot; she had hopes she would understand more.

Initially she had little enough to go on. Anne Elliot was so quiet and retiring, and the others so boisterous, that her voice was never heard.

During and after the dinner the Miss Musgroves united in arch displays of naval ignorance, prompting Frederick for details of shipboard life, and afterward with a shared air of triumph produced the navy list, and with inviting smiles sat on a couch—with a space left between them—with the stated wish to look out his own ships.

Sophy watched Miss Anne, whose dark gaze darted from speaker to speaker as the Musgrove girls commented and Frederick answered; the subject of the navy list roused the admiral’s attention, and he gave over talking of sport with the Musgrove gentlemen to laugh, and expostulate.

“Pho! Pho! What stuff these young fellows talk,” said he, and more besides.

Sophy looked for an opportunity to guide the talk in such a way as to draw Miss Anne into contributing, but hard on the admiral’s well-intentioned “What should a young fellow like you do ashore for half a year together? If a man has not a wife, he soon wants to be afloat again.” Sophy felt all the danger that these easy words brought.

She saw the impact in the tightening of Frederick’s lips, and Anne Elliot’s getting up to move to the farther sofa, where Mrs. Musgrove sat with a complacent air, obviously following little of the
And here was Miss Louisa, equally unaware of any currents but her own, crying archly with a play of pretty eyes, “But Captain Wentworth, how vexed you must have been when you came to the Asp, to see what an old thing they had given you.”

Frederick was the first to recollect himself; and as he went on to relate some his exploits—rendered suitable for present company—loudly did the sisters unite in their pretense of shock and horror. Sophy saw the real emotion in Anne’s paled complexion.

Mrs. Musgrove interjecting a comment—a mother’s feeling observation about a brother apparently lost at sea, unheeded by both sisters, who were obviously wanting Frederick’s attention back again, as they turned their exclamations to the Laconia.

They did without success; Sophy then understood that the missing son had been one of Frederick’s reefers, moreover, from the way he was avoiding the hints, a troublesome one, however in response to direct appeal from Mrs. Musgrove, he smoothed the derisive curl of his lip, sat down at the farther end of the sofa from Anne, and uttered diplomatic phrases best suited to a grieving parent.

Sophy suspected strongly that the admiral also knew of this troublesome son, for he had taken to walking about the room in his quarterdeck stride. Sophy raised her voice in one of their Yarmouth signals, “Admiral, may I pour you some tea?” whereby he recollected himself.

But in his effort to return to his social duty, he blundered again, all unknowing, “If you had been a week later at Lisbon, last spring, Frederick, you would have been asked to give a passage to Lady Mary Grierson and her daughters.”

Perhaps the admiral meant to be gallant, but he inspired the opposite effect; Sophy was aghast at the anger Frederick masked beneath his cold words about women aboard ship, ending with, “I hate to hear of women on board, or to see them on board; and no ship under my command shall ever convey a family of ladies anywhere, if I can help it.”

“Oh, Frederick!” Sophy frowned his way. “I cannot believe it of you. All idle refinement!” Against whom had that been directed? Though she knew women aplenty who deserved this opprobrium, she could not believe it of Anne Elliot, and she saw how the works struck the young lady. “Women maybe be as comfortable on board as in the best house in England,” she said, and a great deal more to the point.

Proud as Lucifer! He argued right back, until at last she was driven to exclaim,

I hate to hear you talking so, like a fine gentleman.” She saw that strike home, and added, “As if women were all fine ladies, instead of rational creatures. We none of us expect to be in smooth water all our days.”

“Ah, my dear.” The admiral stepped up behind Sophy, taking her hand. “When he has got a wife, he will sing a different tune. When he is married, if we have the good luck to live to another war, we shall see him do as you and I, and a great many others have done. We shall have him very thankful to anybody that will bring him his wife.”

“Ay, that we shall,” she said, relenting.

“Now I have done,” Frederick cried, raising his hands, and the Musgrove girls laughed appreciatively as he spoke rallying words, and moved away, where the gentlemen began to talk of shooting the next morning.
His place was taken by Mrs. Musgrove, stirred to amazement. Sophy was very much amused by this placid, good-natured woman who clearly had not gone farther than her own parish boundaries, excepting to travel as far as Bath. As they spoke about travel and ships, Sophy reflected that her own life might have followed a similar course as housekeeper for Edward, only to be finally superseded by his wife.

Impatient with a conversation that did not devolve around themselves, the Musgrove girls waited for the first decent pause, and called for dancing, which brought Frederick’s attention back to them.

Sophy was grieved to see Anne Elliot, daughter of the refined Sir Walter Elliot, go to the instrument as if she were a governess or a lady’s companion expected to earn her bread. The Musgroves appeared to be fond of her, but not enough to give her another thought as she sat playing and playing, while silent tears dripped down her face.

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Sophy was determined to discover the mystery behind this silent struggle, her brother clearly still angry, the lady so unhappy. Anne Elliot was so gentle-spoken, unlike either of her sisters, that Sophy could not encompass the haughty rejection that the elder Miss Elliot surely would have given him. There was some other cause, some force at work here, and she meant to find it if she could—and somehow alter the situation.

But easy as it is to resolve such a thing, carrying it out is another matter entirely. At long last the admiral’s gig was delivered, and now, between the garden, the sheep, the house, and the stable, he must learn to drive—and because he and Sophy had been going snacks in everything except actually commanding a ship action, perforce she must take her place beside him.

A good, thing, too. His delight in tooling about behind a horse was mitigated by the fact that he drove as if manning the tiller of a boat. But a horse was not a boat, and Sophie—who had learnt rowing, but never manned a tiller—frequently found herself taking the reins while the admiral was distracted by birds, one of the tenants waving from his field, or a new thought he must express.

Divided between her husband and her brother, Sophy felt that she could not give the latter her full attention, the more so because he seemed impatient of her concern. He had no interest in driving, when he could ride; he had less interest in their sheep; he took no interest in the tenants, whose houses the admiral delighted in improving, once he had discovered what a neglectful landlord Sir Walter had been.

It was completely by chance that Sophy was able to see Miss Anne again, after encountering her along with the rest of the young people gathered at the gate leading to the lane below Winthrop.

At a glance Sophy could see that the party was not united; Miss Harriet and the young Hayter parson stood a little apart, talking earnestly; Mrs. Charles looked cross and her husband impatient; only Miss Louisa chattered incessantly to Frederick, who, when Sophy first caught sight of him, was gazing at the horizon. And Miss Anne walked quietly behind everyone, her shoulders sagging, her face hidden by her bonnet as she watched the ground where she stepped.

“Pull up, dear,” Sophy said to the admiral, and to the waiting faces, she called, “Surely someone here is in want of a ride.”

“Not I,” declared Miss Louisa, following Frederick as he stepped into the lane. “I declare I am not in the least tired—I am determined I could walk like this forever.”

“No, thank you,” Miss Henrietta said, blushing as young Mr. Hayter echoed her.
Mrs. Charles stepped back, looking affronted. “I am very well, thank you,” she said in languishing
tones, as her husband gave a little sigh and closed the gate behind Anne, who had stepped last into
the lane, behind everyone else.

The admiral shook the reins, and the horse bobbed its head and had taken a step or two when
Frederick covered the distance in a quick stride, put his hand out to catch the reins, and said, “I
believe there is one here of the party who might welcome a chance to save an extra mile.” He spoke
no name, nor glanced in her direction, but Sophy understood by his manner whom was meant.

To test her supposition, she called with real pleasure, “Miss Elliot, I am sure you are tired. Do let us
have the pleasure of taking you home. Here is excellent room for three, I assure you. If we were all
like you, we might sit four. You must indeed, you must.”

“Come, Miss Elliot,” the admiral called. “See? I have shifted over, and you are so slight the horse
will not notice the extra. He is brisk enough.”

Sophy saw Miss Elliot’s head lift, her manner uncertain until Frederick, without speaking, put his
hand under her elbow. Unresisting she permitted him to guide her the few steps, and he lifted her up.

She sat, she looked down, the admiral let the reins loose, and the horse was in motion.

Sophy sat back in delight. At last, she had got Miss Anne away from the others. “Did you have a
pleasant walk?”

“Yes, thank you.” The low voice sounded a little breathless, as if Miss Anne were winded.

“Fine day for a walk, eh?” the admiral said. “We’ve waited these two days, first for the rain to end,
and then for the lanes to dry out. At all events, someone else certainly seems to think a fine day for a
walk.” He chuckled. “But he might have been equally content to carry an umbrella over his young
ladies.”

“With all the good will in the world,” Sophy said, “I doubt very much that even Frederick can
manage to keep three people dry under a single umbrella.” She felt the slender form next to her
stiffen at the word ‘Frederick.’

“He certainly means to have one or other of those two girls, Sophy, but there is no saying which. He
has been running after them, too, long enough . . .” and the admiral cheerfully carried on in this
manner.

Though Sophy still could not see past the frame of the bonnet next to her, she could feel Miss
Anne’s attention, and she returned an easy answer—a joke, to shift attention away from Frederick.

The admiral appeared at first to accept the alteration in topic, reminiscing about their own marriage,
but hard on that he said, “I wish Frederick would spread a little more canvas, and bring us home one
of these young ladies to Kellynch. Then, there would always be company for them. And very nice
young ladies they both are. I hardly know one from the other.”

Sophy said calmly, “Very good humored, unaffected girls, indeed,” without any further flights of
enthusiasm; she knew that Frederick, were he to marry either of them, would be sadly bored within a
week.

She passed to compliment the family in general, and then took the reins, as she often had to, guiding
the horse past a post the admiral had not noticed; she had to seize them again when they met a dung
cart in the lane, as the admiral reminisced about their early days at Yarmouth.
The good weather vanished again, but that did not stop the admiral from going out at dawn to check on the last of the roof and window repairs of renters’ cottages.

He returned in time for breakfast to find post on the silver platter beside his plate. He was not the only one with post.

Sophy said, “Edward has written, and is beginning to settle in. Frederick, I am to share this with you, and to put a question: when are you to visit?”

Frederick’s color heightened, but he only shook his head. “I have no excuse to offer except idleness. At least until this arrived.” He indicated his own letter. “I did not know that Harville is settled close by—at Lyme! Further, Benwick is with him. I must ride over to visit.”

“Aye, that is excellent,” the admiral exclaimed heartily. “That is doing right by them. And you may let me know if they are in want of anything. I would be most happy—you find it out, and say the word. Benwick has had ill luck, but at least he will inherit one day. And as for Miss Harville, well, time heals all. But Harville, with that leg, and the peace—if there is anything I can help him to, it would make me very happy.”

Frederick nodded, and threw down his napkin. “If I get a start right now, perhaps I will outride the rain.”

There was no saying anything. He would be off. The admiral then sighed, and turned to Sophy. “Well, I was right about Admiral Croft of Kellynch Hall. It seems my sister Delafield deems it necessary for us to grace her wedding up at Minehead, early in December.”

“You do not wish to go?” Sophy asked.

“I’d as lief enjoy the last of the good days before winter sets in,” the admiral said. “I am content here so long as we can get out, but I confess, the idea of being snowed in lays me by a lee shore.”

Perhaps we may find it less irking than we think,” she said.

He shrugged. “I will not borrow trouble. Minehead! Pho!” Rain tapped at the window, and he rose. “Frederick would ride—let me take a glimpse at the barometer. I hope he may not run aground . . .”

The rain did not last long enough to ruin the roads. Sophy decided to call on the Musgroves in hopes of catching Miss Anne again, without all the others by.

But here she was frustrated of her goal, as she arrived to discover Mrs. Musgrove alone.

“You are a welcome visitor,” Mrs. Musgrove exclaimed. “Not a soul is here, and I was sadly puzzled what to do with myself, as the girls have gone off to visit dear Dr. Shirley in company with their cousins, and Charles and my husband are seeing to the last of the thatching. Mrs. Charles is laid up with a cold, I believe, though she may discover it has gone off and walk up here, leaving the children with Anne.”

Sophy said, “Miss Anne is a devoted aunt.”

“Anne,” Mrs. Musgrove said, “is a devoted sister as well as an excellent aunt. If I were an interfering woman, I might venture to give Mrs. Charles a hint; if she but watched Anne’s way with the boys for a morning, an hour, even, she would manage them better, and without stuffing them with things they ought not to eat. But it is ever so. The young people seldom heed us older folk,
though we were all through it.” She sighed, and shook her head. “As for Miss Anne, I must confess when Lady Russell returns to carry her off, we will all miss her sadly.”

“What is this? Miss Anne is to leave Uppercross?”

“It was arranged this month at least—she goes to Bath to join her family, though I fear they do not value her half as much as she deserves. Certainly not as much as we do! But Lady Russell is all-important with Anne, and will carry her off. It has always been that way. She was Lady Elliot’s particular friend, you know, and has had the guiding of Anne since she was a girl of fourteen.”

“I do not believe I have met the lady.”

“She will no doubt call when she returns to Kellynch, for she has very nice manners, I will say that for her. She is a very fine lady—would have made an excellent countess, rather than the wife of a mere knight, some say.” She leaned forward, lowering her voice, though they were completely alone in that great room. “Charles would have preferred Anne, if the truth were known, but we believe Lady Russell prevailed upon her to wait for a better offer. There is some gossip that she had performed that office at least once before, but I do not know the particulars, so it may not even be true.” Mrs. Musgrove sat back. “A very fine lady.”

Sophy said everything that was appropriate, and when she took her leave, she was quite thoughtful. Had she at last got hold of the explanation?

She kept her own counsel as the admiral finished up with his renters, and the laying in of fodder; Frederick returned from Lyme, and was off again to Uppercross as if drawn thence by a cable the way they used to tow dismasted ships.

On his return, he was full of Lyme, Harville, Benwick—and a plan spearheaded by Miss Louisa Musgrove to carry all the young people to Lyme for a visit. The young lady, it seemed, must view the sea, and visit Frederick’s naval friends. She had formed a passion for everything naval; Sophy was convinced that Louisa was more entranced by the idea of being in love, and being perceived as interesting, than she was enamored of Frederick, but to this idea, too, she wisely kept silent.

She had no idea that Frederick returned even that superficial regard: he seemed rather to go through the motions, as if his thoughts—and his heart—lay otherwhere.

And so, one day mid-November, he rode off, promising to return in time for dinner the following day.

But that was not to be. Frederick did not appear at all, only a hasty note in his hand stating that there had been an accident in Lyme, and he the inadvertent cause. They must pardon him, and put questions to Charles Musgrove on his return; he feared that the squire and his lady would be too concerned in the case for interrogation.

Days passed, during which either the admiral or Sophy rode over to inquire if they could do anything to help the afflicted family. Slowly the story came forth out of all the conjecture and exaggeration.

Sophy said all that ought to be said, and kept to herself her own surmises, such as her first idea, that Louisa Musgrove had hurled herself down in a dramatic effort to secure Frederick.

Once the word spread round the neighborhood that Miss Musgrove had recovered her intellects—she was improving apace, though she must not be moved, Sophy acquit her of so wild a machination. It was in truth uncharacteristic, but she knew the source of her ire: how could any
gallant gentleman resist the interesting spectacle of a young lady swooning in a strange place, dependent upon him for succor?

Every day that Frederick was away Sophy dreaded receiving a note that he was an engaged man—the more because the Musgroves readily spoke of such an expectation, though she took comfort from the tenuousness of speculation. There were no words spoken of promises, moreover nothing from the young lady herself.

No note came, but neither did Frederick. To the Crofts’ surprise, he sent for his clothes, and the last they heard was that he had departed from Lyme once the physician had pronounced the young lady out of danger.

A further, more rational account was finally furnished by Mr. Charles Musgrove, who had returned to fetch things needed by his mother. He told his cousins, who in turn spread the word rapidly through the neighborhood: it was Anne Elliott who had done everything needed. She had thought of removal of the patient, of summoning a surgeon, and had consoled the sister and counseled the brother, then returned to aid the shocked parents.

“What would they do without Anne?” she heard repeated many times, Mrs. Hayter adding with meaning, “The Great House as well as the Cottage will have to learn to do without her, as she will be taken soon to Kellynch by Lady Russell, then off to Bath. Lady Russell, you know—she must have everything her own way. It has always been so.”

Sophy kept herself busy as the prediction came to pass, and one morning, as Mrs. Musgrove had predicted, Lady Russell’s carriage was seen coming up the sweep. When the footman handed her down, it became apparent that she had brought a visitor—Miss Anne Elliot.

The admiral, on spying them through an upstairs window, studied the tall lady who held her skirt away from the raked gravel road as if it was bemired, and looked about with an air of one facing an unpleasant duty.

He said with unwonted sobriety, “I like little Miss Anne—like her the best of all those girls, I must confess. They’re preddied up for an admiral’s inspection but you don’t know if they’ll float, whereas she will weather a double-reefed-tops’l gale. No humbug about her.”

“I am entirely of your mind, my dear,” Sophy said heartily.

“But this lady, here, I am sure she is a very good woman, but upon my word, she looks just the sort as sets me at sixes and sevens. I am likely to drop a china dish and let fly an oath, or something shocking, and everything awkward. You will not mind leading the conversation?”

Sophy kissed him. It had ever been so, with those Sophy privately labeled the Amelia Forshams. But she had learnt to point her guns during the trying days with Mrs. Groton, and so, when the butler conducted the visitors into the best drawing room, Sophie came forward in her most stately manner to greet them, though her special smile was reserved for Miss Anne.

And she won one in return, a real smile that reached those sparkling dark eyes. Miss Anne had improved immensely; she had regained the bloom of youth. What was this about? If it was entirely due to this lady, Sophy must internally apologize and admit she had been entirely wrong, and take up an entirely new set of opinions.

She turned her gaze to Lady Russell, who had been eyeing the room. As she sat down, her prim mouth eased slightly in what Sophy guessed was faint approval. The admiral came forward from the fireplace, where he had been standing, to shake hands; his special smile was reserved for Anne,
whose sincerity was obvious in her soft, “How do you do?”

The topic of Lyme must be canvased, until the admiral summed it all up with a joke, “A new sort of way this, for a young fellow to be making love, by breaking his mistress’s head, is it not it, Miss Elliot? This is breaking a head and giving a plaister truly!”

Anne laughed quietly, clearly taking the joke as meant, whereas Lady Russell looked affronted. Sophy could not but notice that the lady primmed up whenever Frederick was mentioned. But the most telling moments were the anxious glances Miss Anne darted Lady Russell’s way at the first mentions of ‘Captain Wentworth.’

No, Sophy thought, she had had it right. Mrs. Musgrove had given her the solution: between Sir Walter and this Lady Russell, Frederick had not had a chance. Miss Anne, at eighteen or nineteen, was too respectful of those who had earliest guided her. That solved the mystery. So the question remained, would they persuade her away from happiness now?

The admiral then recollected that this had been Miss Anne’s house, and there ensued a little dialogue, he expostulating and she forgiving; when they rose to go, Sophy had made a decision.

She accompanied the ladies downstairs, saying, “I trust you will not take it amiss that we are unable to return this most welcome call, but we are leaving almost immediately for a wedding of one of the admiral’s relations, and I am given to understand that you will soon depart for Bath.”

“That is correct,” Lady Russell said, summoning Anne with a glance.

In the exchanges of farewells, this would be the moment for polite greetings to be requested in passing to the absent Frederick. But Lady Russell seemed to recollect no such person in existence, and walked with smiling assurance toward her carriage.

Miss Anne lingered a step, her lips parted—then she darted a glance toward her preceptress, and she said softly, “Pray convey my best greetings to your family.”

She could not bring herself to a name, but Sophy took her meaning just the same, and smiled her readiness to comply. Miss Anne bobbed her head in a little curtsey and her answering smile dimmed as she, too, climbed into the carriage.

As they drove away, the admiral tucked Sophy’s arm under his. “That went off pretty well, don’t you think it? Mind, I’ve been less frightened carrying on against a French first rate that had the wind, but I think it went off well.”

“It did,” Sophy said decidedly. “And now we must prepare for our journeys.”

“Journeys?”

“Yes. We have the wedding, in course, but you have said you mislike the idea of being mired here in winter snows. Therefore I suggest we spend a few weeks in Bath.”

“Bath!” the admiral exclaimed, as if she had suggested a tour to the Antipodes. “Not to drink the waters.”

“Pho, pho. Leave that to the real invalids. You may give it out that you are gouty if you feel some excuse is needed, but I promise, I shall not coax you to go near the waters so vividly depicted by Mr. Smollett.”

The admiral eyed her. “Sophy, what are you about?”
“Do you need to know, my dearest? Or would you be more comfortable visiting with our acquaintances in the place? The newspapers report that Bath is full of the navy.”

“And Frederick?” the admiral asked, chuckling.

“Why,” Sophy said, “I do not believe he would enjoy being mired here over winter. We shall write to him at Edward’s, in case he wants a room.”

The admiral laughed out loud. “That is a capital notion, my dear, capital. Very well, then, it shall be as old Pearson used to tell us back in Bermuda, remember that? More people die of medicines that of diseases, and the only way to real health was vigorous motion, how he railed on. Well, we shall take his advice then, and walk about Bath. How is that?”

Mr. Shepherd was happy to act for them, finding excellent lodging in Gay Street. Once they reached Bath, the admiral must be doing, and on their very first walk encountered no fewer than six naval acquaintances—one of those being the wretched Admiral Brand, whom they would as lief never seen again.

But Admiral Brand kept a prudent distance—if truth be told, he was not popular there, but then he had never been popular, his principal society being confined to his brother, a yellowed admiral.

The others were happy encounters, just as it always had been at the Cape, or Gib, or the West Indies and East.

Talk, laughter, speculation about what France might be at next—the next Boney—and asking after other acquaintance. At the end of the first day, the admiral said, “This was a very good notion of yours, my dear.”

“We shall see if you feel that way after we call in Camden Place. You know it will be expected.”

“Pshaw! Let Sir Walter play the great man, and come to us first. That will give him something to talk about besides his boot maker and his new coat. He will come, and strut about like the old coxcomb he is, giving us orders how to get on, and then he will go away again.”

Sophy laughed, though when the visit of state was paid, she reflected after that the admiral had been surprisingly acute. He might not comprehend the ways of young women, but men he knew surpassing well.

It was good to see Miss Anne, though Sophy was sorry to observe her looking subdued again. Not just subdued, but earnest, as if she wished to convey some meaning, or some question, without trusting to words. Perhaps there had been something in the letter they had carried to her from her sister? But what could Mrs. Charles have to say to any point?

Sophy was confident that this reticence, at least, was due to the leadening influence that Miss Elizabeth Elliot exerted over any company; oh, to get Miss Anne aboard a ship, where they could talk frankly! She had never forgotten the sheer relief of Lady Bickerton’s calm wise words, and had subsequently had many such exchanges with women on ship or on shore in sight of ships.

And it is not just the naval situation of sudden death, she reflected as she and the admiral set out for a long walk on a fine day later that week. Women had borne most of the burden of nursing for ages—even fine ladies must know something of the sickroom. Or perhaps the Lady Russells and Amelia Forshams insulate themselves with servants, and rooms and rooms of elaborate decoration, as if they can divorce themselves from such details...
She had not realized she had been walking fast until she became aware that her irritation with fine ladies had manifested into a physical irritation, centered around one foot. By the time they reached Gay Street, the irritation had become excruciating.

As soon as they got inside, the admiral helped Sophy pull off the new shoe that she had bought specifically for the Bath pavements. “Well, that was a lesson in vanity,” she said ruefully. “My only thought was how odd it would look, tripping about Bath in my old country shoes. So I bought these fine new ones. What a mistake!”

“And fine they are, Sophy, fine they are. And no mistake. Take a caulk for a day or two, then we’ll tack around the harbor a bit. Break ‘em in before attempting another long cruise. “

“An excellent idea,” Sophy said with a sigh. “Oh, that I had thought of it first.”

“Bide tight. I’ll go check on the post and order us a dinner, and we’ll sit here snug beside the fire, just the two of us, while you put that foot up on the fender.”

He returned a short time later, and sat down beside her. Most of the post could be laid aside, but then he exclaimed, “This is Frederick’s fist!”

“Open it, my dear,” she said, without stopping to ask whom it was directed to.

He slit the seal and spread the sheet, sitting close so that they might both read it.

As always, the letter was short. Frederick apologized for the length of time that post had chased him about from Lyme to Plymouth to Shropshire, and then:

> It was not only your most welcome letter that was unaccountably delayed due to my movements. I also heard from Harville, with nothing short of astonishing News: it seems that Benwick and Louisa Musgrove are to marry. A fine match say I. Her liveliness is just what Benwick needs to conquer his Melancholia, and I trust they will be very happy together.

Edward will probably write to you, so I will not reiterate news from Shropshire . . .

The admiral put the letter down, and shook his head. “And this is what comes about of shilly-shallying. Why did he not speak to the girl before flying off to Plymouth? Quick’s the word and fast the action, as we say in the navy, and Frederick knows that. What?”

To his surprise, Sophy had burst out laughing.

He was thinking about that circumstance the next day, it being fine. Sophy had insisted he take his walk, as it gave him so much pleasure when he encountered old friends. He left, obedient to her wishes, but he thought about these odd circumstances as he stood before a printshop window in Milsom Street. Sophy knew something, that much was clear. Or rather, she had her heart set on something. He also knew he could coax it out of her, but he thought it was better to wait. She would speak up in her own time, and in her own way.

The admiral was content to have it so. He knew he was inclined to blurt out whatever he was thinking. That served well on the quarterdeck of a first rate under fire, but was less so when it came to capering about in the minuet of social expectations.

So Frederick was not to marry either of those Musgrove girls after all! He discovered he was glad of it, if for no other reason than that left a chance for his own particular favorite, though he knew that must be absurd. Miss Anne was probably one of those who chose not to marry. It had to be that—he could not believe all the young men in the neighborhood of Kellynch were a parcel of slow-tops.
Surely they could see that she had quality that trumped the rest, merry as they were, and she was pretty to look at, too—

He turned his head at a quiet step, and to his surprise, there she was! “Ha! Is it you?”

Happy to see her, he exerted himself to be pleasant—and she fell in beside him with all the ease of a Sophy, if rather more pianissimo. But he liked her for all that.

He walked with her all the way to Camden Place, declined an invitation to accompany her inside—he felt he’d done his duty by the others—and made his way back down again.

When he reached Gay Street, he retailed everything to Sophy, adding, “I told her the news about that Miss Musgrove and Benwick, but she did not exhibit the least surprise. She might have known it already, I expect. But I was circumspect. I said nothing about Frederick beyond, we ought to get him to Bath.”

“Excellent,” Sophy exclaimed fondly.

The admiral put his hands behind his back and walked about the room as he had been used on his quarterdeck. “I make no claims to perspicacity, but I would not make that mistake, and I know there is never any use in trying to put people together. Worse than driving cats, and I swore off it, as you know. But I wish your brother, who pegs the rigging of a disguised privateer hull down on the horizon, would look about him more closely—he could not pick a better, were he court every young lady in Bath, I am convinced.”

“Come here and kiss me,” Sophy declared. “I feel just the same.”

Frederick arrived the day after she sent a letter in answer to his. Not that she saw anything of him. He was gone all the day and evening, she knew not where. But she was content. She suspected a purpose, and had hopes as to what it was.

Sophy could walk again when Frederick related over breakfast the delightful news that Captain Harville was in Bath, having traveled with the Musgroves. They were staying at the White Hart. And he finished with a look of consciousness that prompted her to say, “Well, then, I must call.”

The admiral spoke up. “Sophy, I would go with you, but I promised to meet Baldwin and Harvey, and you know this evening we promised to look in at Camden—”

“No, no, you must go. Your friends would be vastly disappointed, were you not there.”

“I will accompany you,” Frederick said immediately, with such intensity that Sophy suspected the crisis had come.

Yet as they walked down to Bath Street, and then skirted the busy thoroughfare full of coaches, Frederick talked of Plymouth, of Edward and his bride, of everything except his purpose in Bath. Sophy listened, and smiled, and posed no questions.

They arrived just ahead of a band of rain, and found the entire company gathered—except Miss Anne Elliot. However, Mrs. Charles and Miss Henrietta had scarcely spoken a greeting to Mrs. Croft before the latter said, “We are off. No, no, I do not mind the rain—see, it is beginning to clear over there, it was only a drop or two. And it is scarcely a step to the linen draper’s. But mind, mother, when Anne comes, you are to keep her here until our return!”
Sophy heard Frederick’s indrawn breath, and could not prevent a smile, but she turned that to good account as she was welcomed by Mrs. Musgrove.

“Yes, here we are, buying bride-clothes,” Mrs. Musgrove said, with a sense of happy importance. “Scarcely three months ago no one talked of marriage, and now both my girls are wild to wed. Well, well, they say it’s the modern age to blame. Do you know how it came about?”

Sophy said a few words about letters, but they were not heeded: Mrs. Musgrove wanted to be talking, to tell it all her own way. So Sophy sat nearby, and composed herself to listen, while she positioned her chair so that she could see the entire room.

Frederick had gone straight to Harville, who stood in the window, looking down at the comers and goers under the dripping eaves. When at last there was a stir at the door, and Miss Anne Elliot arrived, after the bows and the curteys, Frederick announced that he would write Harville’s letter.

What letter? Sophy possessed her impatience, as she watched Miss Anne occupy herself alone. What was he about, all but ignoring her, when they could be speaking?

“At any rate, said I,” Mrs. Musgrove wound up after a long exchange, “it will be better than a long engagement.”

Sophy thought she might have an opportunity to throw in something encouraging here. “That is precisely what I was going to observe . . .” She went on, but without any idea of either Anne or Frederick hearing her meaning words.

They talked at cross-purposes for a short time—Mrs. Musgrove engrossed quite properly with her daughters, whose example must serve for all, and Sophy’s words meant for only two in the room.

The result? Frederick went on writing, as if he sat in his cabin alone aboard his ship, and Miss Anne fell into conversation with Harville, whose countenance was plaintive.

And so it went for a time, Mrs. Musgrove comfortably talking without the least awareness of anybody else, Frederick writing, and the two by the window in earnest conversation, until the former came to the end of her long recitation, then sighed. “I expect I ought to do find out what those girls have done. Wiser heads still have their uses!”

Mrs. Croft sighed inwardly. She had been foolish to expect any change, just because she wanted it. And there was this dreadful party at the Elliots’ that they must get ready for.

“Here, Frederick, you and I part company, I believe,” she said—in part to recall him to his surroundings, though without much hope. “I am going home, and you have an engagement with your friend.” And because she could not prevent herself from a last attempt, she said in Miss Anne’s direction, to recall Frederick to her quiet presence, “Tonight we may have the pleasure of all meeting again, at your party. We had your sister’s card yesterday, and I understood Frederick had a card too, though I did not see it—and you are disengaged, Frederick, are you not, as well as ourselves?”

“Yes,” he said, folding up his letter, and speaking in haste, almost randomly.

Sophy sighed again, said everything polite, and took her leave.

When she emerged from her dressing room, it was to find Frederick and the admiral standing together. They each had a glass of wine in hand. At the sound of her step they turned, Frederick with the unshadowed smile of his boyhood.

“Sophy, come hear the news,” the admiral cried. “You will like this!”
And Frederick said simply, “Anne Elliot has agreed to become my wife.”

Sophy flew to him, and cast herself in his arms, heedless of the new gown her mantua-maker had delivered the day previous. “When? How? Do tell me everything, Frederick.”

Frederick set her back, peering into her face. “I know it might seem sudden. I take it you have no reservations? Warnings? Counsel and advice?”

“Would you listen if I did?” she countered, laughing, and thumbing the spring of tears from her eyes. “Oh, Frederic, you could not bring me happier news. The admiral and I were agreeing that of all our new acquaintance, Miss Elliot is quite our favorite.”

“Anne,” he said quickly. “Miss Elliot is—someone else entirely.”

“Anne, then,” Sophy said. “She will not long retain the name Elliot, and before we leave to attend their party, permit me to observe: the sooner the better.”

There was no time for more. At the elegant, cheerless gathering in Camden Place, there was no opportunity for private speech. It was clear that Anne’s family had yet to hear her news. Sophy could imagine the reasons for reticence, but that prevented her from saying the words she longed to, and she contented herself with a smile whenever Anne turned her way—and smiled the more to see the happy smile that mirrored her own joy.

Anne, in her happiness, was more than pretty, she was quite beautiful. More than one appeared to notice; the handsome Mr. Elliot certainly did, but Anne did not appear to see him, and when she and Frederick were glimpsed together in a corner half-screened by hothouse ferns, Sophy rejoiced to see her brother’s broad smile. For a very long eight years, it had seemed he’d forgotten how.

On a rainy day early in March, not long after the Elliots’ party, Anne and Sophy sat together in Gay Street. The gentlemen had joined several naval friends, going off to some purpose.

By this time, Frederick had willingly paid all the arrears of intelligence. It was exactly as Sophy had expected. From the time he had come to Taunton without telling her that he was shortly to sit before the board of admirals, she had learnt that he could not bear to disclose what mattered to him most, until he proved to be successful.

He finished by begging her pardon, but she assured him, “Your happiness must absolve any blame. You have been hardest on yourself.”

“No,” he said, his gaze dropping to his empty hands. “I find that the worst regret is the anguish I caused Anne. I told myself in anger that she cared not, that she had been weak to listen to these others when she broke our engagement, therefore she must feel the same now—anything but the truth.” He lifted his gaze. “Moreover, if I had come to her in the year eight—well, we could have commenced happiness far earlier.”

“So you must begin as soon as you may,” she rejoined.

“As soon as can be contrived,” he had promised, and the very next day, he brought Anne to her.

Although there must be a tentative beginning, it helped that Sophy appeared to know all, and so Anne was spared having to relate her own history. She had only to begin with the felicity of talking about Frederick.
But Anne’s time was not completely her own; she owed duty to her family, who must exclaim and regret Mr. Elliot’s sudden departure after sending a hasty note of excuse, and she had her invalid friend depending upon her for news, then there was the uncertain weather. Between all these vexations and distractions, the days slipped into a fortnight, until here they sat.

Mr. Elliot had not returned to Bath. Sir Walter and Miss Elliot had flattered themselves that he would return to dance attendance on them any day—until Mr. Shepherd, in his distress, sent a shocking missive, and it was this news that Anne had come to impart.

“We thought that Mrs. Clay had returned home, but she did not. Mr. Shepherd reports that . . .”

Anne blushed and looked away. “That she is gone to London. To—to Mr. Elliot. My father and sister are thrown into confusion.”

“I should say,” Sophy declared. “Upon my word, I should say they might be! Poor woman.”

“Poor woman?” Anne repeated. “My sister?”

“Mrs. Clay,” Sophy said low-voiced, as the fire snapped on the hearth. She paused to observe the effect of these words on Anne, who drew up, her gentle face tightened in a frown, but then her brow puckered.

“You say Mrs. Clay as if she were to be pitied,” Anne said slowly. “And yet no one has forced her into a choice that can only end in her ruin.”

“Oh, it might end in many different ways,” Sophy rejoined. “She is become an expert in flattering and pleasing—who knows but what someday she might become Lady Elliot yet. I cannot imagine she would be any happier, but . . .” At Anne’s quick look, Sophy said gently, “Frederick did me the honor of repeating certain conversations you held. Was it your respected father who once pointed out that one lady was not the only widow in Bath between certain ages, who had to make shift to live?”

Anne’s lips parted. She gazed at Sophy, her expression arrested.

“I apprehend—correct me if I err—the principle difference between the situations of the two women, aside from a long friendship with the one, was a matter of birth. One married a profligate wastrel, and as for the other, who can say, except that he did not provide for his widow and children. No, it seems to me that, aside from old friendship, the one is cherished and the other despised due entirely to circumstances of birth. Am I all out there?”

Anne could not immediately speak. She wanted to remonstrate, to resist, but her own innate honesty forced her to consider how the circumstances must appear to others; as for friendship, yes, she had formed one with her old teacher, but Mrs. Clay was anything but unfriendly. She would have smiled at Anne if she could. A bit as Mrs. Smith had, until at last they had come to the truth.

Sophy went on. “If birth is to become your single criterion for human worth, why are you not at this moment calling upon Lady Dalrymple, and coaxing and flattering the occasional reluctant word out of her daughter?”

Anne’s color rose, but her expression was more reflective than angry. “But Mrs. Clay—my father —”

“She might have succeeded,” Sophy said. “Had she been satisfied to wait. And what a life would she lead then? She would have her title, and a fine address, but the rest of you would despise her, and she would be spending every day in company with your father and his looking glasses, and your sister, who would surely not smile at finding her chief flatterer and follower now taking precedence
of her? What would her life with Miss Elliot be? How might your good friend Lady Russell receive her?"

"I did not think of that," Anne said, low-voiced.

"You saw only the encroachment of a replacement for your excellent mother, which few women could achieve well, birth notwithstanding. That is natural. It is rational. As for the rest, I condition only for this, the adaptation a sailor’s wife must make if she is to be truly happy: that though the world ranks itself as it must, or we would all live in a chaos, we also strive to take people as we find them. Some day I will bore you with the story of Amelia Forshaw, and of Mrs. Groton."

"Oh, please tell me now," Anne said quickly, but at that moment the door was thrust open, and in came the admiral, with Frederick behind him.

"Ha ha," the admiral exclaimed, rubbing his hands. "We might see Frederick an admiral yet—or even titled, if he can bring it off, for what news is arrived? Nothing less than Boney is loose!"

"No!" Anne gasped.

"Say it isn’t so," Sophy exclaimed.

"We wait only to hear it corroborated—you will remember how many times the King of France died in rumor before they finally cut off his head at last. Frederick must get himself down to Portsmouth as quick as he can. Therefore," he looked from one to another, "I suggest a Special License, and Sophy and I can vouch for the excellence of the cathedral in Portsmouth."

Anne murmured, "But the wedding clothes—my family—"

Frederick took her hands. "It shall be however you say. But the admiral is right. I must go. The need will be sharp."

"We might very well be in for another ten years," Sophy said meaningly. "Do you wish to wait?"

Anne rose with alacrity. "I will tell them that any who wish to be there may come to Portsmouth. I know my sister Mary will probably enjoy the bustle, and I would very much have my brother in law there, and the Musgroves as well."

On their wedding day, the news reached Portsmouth that Bonaparte had made his way to Paris. Frederick had been given a fine, fast frigate; the entire family was gathered on the platform gazing out at Spithead where Frederick’s ship lay.

The oars rose and fell in precision aboard the captain’s boat. Sophy could make out the new Mrs. Wentworth sitting in the stern sheets, her face upraised and smiling at Frederick, who lifted his hat one last time toward those on shore.

Then he sat down next to his wife, and presently both heads turned toward the ship they would soon board.

The admiral slid his arm around Sophy and squeezed. She, accustomed by long and dear habit, worked her arm under his and pulled his solid warmth against her. They stood side by side in the buffeting wind, watching the pair dwindle into their future, which they believed—whether this war
lasted ten years or ten days—would vouchsafe the bride and groom the same happiness they were blessed with every day.

End Notes

Because time was short, I adapted a couple of incidents from the lives of real midshipmen, taken from LIFE BEFORE THE MAST, edited by Jon E. Lewis, and EVERY MAN WILL DO HIS DUTY, edited by Dean King. I recommend these highly to anyone who wishes to read about real life aboard the tall ships.

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