Come Home to the Sea

by greyathena

Summary

Anne Elliot was taken to the seaside three times.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

"and still descending, soon found themselves on the sea-shore; and lingering only, as all must linger and gaze on a first return to the sea, who ever deserved to look on it at all, proceeded towards the Cobb . . ." Persuasion, chapter 11

Anne Elliot was taken to the seaside three times.

(Anne Wentworth indeed spent as much of her life on the seaside as she spent on the sea itself, which was a great deal; but Anne Elliot visited only thrice.)

The first was in 1788, owing to Lady Elliot's decision to visit Brighton with her friend. Those two dignified ladies had elected to spend the warm months viewing the new Royal Pavilion, and
incidentally taking the opportunity for some sea-bathing.

Sir Walter Elliot refrained from joining them - attempted, in fact, to dissuade them from going at all - due to his horror of the effects of the sun and the sea air on the complexion. Lady Elliot endeavoured to convince her husband that the sun indeed shone just as brightly in Somerset as in Brighton, and that many reputable physicians considered sea air an aid to health - but he would not be persuaded. At Kellynch Hall he would remain, with perhaps a brief visit to Bath for the races.

There were two small Elliots at that time; and as they were both but girls, and as Sir Walter tended to rate the importance of any thing in proportion to the degree by which it advanced his own status, it was the case that - as Lady Elliot remarked in her calm, matter of fact way - "only a lunatic would leave a female infant in his sole custody, nurse or no". Miss Elliot and small Miss Anne, and their nurses, were therefore to travel to Brighton with their mother and god-mother. Perhaps, the ladies considered, Elizabeth might even enjoy the sea.

Elizabeth did not enjoy the sea.

Being somewhat more querulous than the usual three-year-old, rather given to sulks, the chances seemed even that either she would hate the seaside and find something to be irritated by in it, or love the sea on the grounds that it was another loud, angry thing. When it became clear that the result was the former, the child was left more often than not in the house with her nurse to rearrange her blocks and give orders to her dolls.

Anne, on the other hand, was riveted. She could sit quietly on a blanket for hours, clapping her hands as though the waves were there for her personal entertainment. She lifted her small chin so high to follow the flight of the sea birds that she toppled over backward and then lay on her back, little hands reaching up into the wind. Her nurse had little to do; the child was willing to sit between her mother and Lady Russell for hours on end, fussing only a little when she was hungry.

"She will run away and join the navy if you aren't careful," Lady Russell said, smiling fondly at the little girl.

"Or become a mermaid," Lady Elliot said, laughing. "Perhaps she is one already. It's a shame Elizabeth is so unhappy."

"Elizabeth is a hothouse child, that is all," said Lady Russell. "Keep her indoors, or in a nice, orderly garden, that's the place for her."

"Whereas I'm afraid her sister may be a bit wild," said Lady Elliot; then, in a tone that entirely contradicted any worry about the child's wild nature, "Look, do you see the gulls, Nan?"

Anne's babble as yet fell short of the King's English, but her delight as she reached out toward the circling gulls was easy to interpret.

"Sir Walter will be sorry he missed this view," his wife reflected.

"No, he won't," her friend replied.

"No, he won't. But he should. No, darling, don't eat sand." Lady Elliot reached out to brush the handful of damp sand from her daughter's fist, waving the nurse away.

"She's trying to bring the sea home with her," said Lady Russell. "No fear, they'll still be brushing sand out of her frocks by Michaelmas. Half of Brighton will end up in the corners at Kel lynch."

"We will have to come back, when she's older."
Strictly speaking they did, though the fond mother had probably not envisioned waiting until Anne was quite so much older as eleven. But there was another child, a year after their seaside visit, the only son and brother to be granted them, and born still. His mother was still grieving that summer; and then the next summer she was again in no condition to travel a long way; and the next summer there was a little sister Mary, who was fretful and often ill... and so on, and so on. It was summer 1798 by the time Lady Elliot's wishes were realized, and she was finally able to return to Brighton with her daughters.

Two of them. This time Elizabeth was old enough that her strong wish to remain at home with her governess was attended to. But Mary might really benefit from the sea, and their mother had hopes of seeing her quiet Anne rediscover her joy in the waves and the sand and the gulls.

In both of these the mother's hopes were fulfilled. Mary's sallow complexion brightened; she was less thin, her hair more glossy. She was not precisely delighted with the seaside itself, but there was enough in the fresh air, the tea shops serving ices in the afternoon, the change of scene and the new shops and running along the sand without being told to be a lady, to breathe some new life into her. And for Anne, it was as if some spark of the sea had indeed remained inside her, for the moment she alighted from the carriage it was as if she had come home. Though she was quiet and still, her eyes darted this way and that, following the birds, tracking the waves; and her lips parted to allow her to taste the wind.

"It's beautiful," she said after long moments of gazing at the sea; her first sight of it since infancy.

From then, the only challenge was that Anne had no desire to see the Pavilion or the soldiers marching at the barracks, and could barely be tempted inside to eat or to look at books or lace or anything that might amuse her younger sister. Anne wanted only to sit by the sea and gaze toward the waves and look at boats.

It was a two months' sojourn and one that Anne never forgot; not only because it was one of her last very happy memories of her mother, who died two years later, but because of the heartbeat of the waves and the cries of the gulls and the taste of salt on her lips.

Anne had not yet made her third visit to the sea - nor had she any firm reason for believing she would ever do so - when, eight years later, she met Frederick Wentworth in the drawing room of his brother the curate's house in Monkford. It was perhaps a more propitious evening for talking about the sea than it might at first have seemed - a cold, wet night; the rain outside making the little room with its cozy fire feel merrier than a sparsely furnished room in a bachelor curate's house otherwise might. Fire- and candle-light danced in the eyes and on the few jewels of the ladies gathered, and gentlemen and ladies both gathered close around the settee nearest the fire to hear the stories of the curate's brother, newly returned from a sea-battle in the West Indies.

The ladies admired his blue coat and handsome face and form, and shuddered with gleeful horror as he told of guns and fire, ships raking and ramming one another and masts breaking in the fog of cannon fire. They pored over the older brother's copy of the Navy List to find the ships as the dashing young sailor described them: Northumberland, Spencer, Donegal, Atlas. They teased him to explain the difference between a sloop and a ship-of-the-line, to tell them how very horrid it must have been to be in the midst of a real battle with the French, how strong a man must be to handle the lines on a full-rigged ship. If some of the things they said or asked didn't quite make sense, he was kind enough to overlook it.

The others may have been riveted by some idea of drama and heroics, England's brave sailors in
(doubtless pristine) uniform fending off the demon French to protect the lovely ladies waiting for them back home . . . but Anne was staring into the fire, fixated by her memory of tall ships in Brighton harbor, the sound of the waves and the gulls, and a mental image of one of those ships smoothly parting the waters of the Atlantic - on its peaceful return home, perhaps.

Commander Wentworth's voice, directed particularly at her, broke her reverie. "You are quiet, Miss Elliot."

(Elizabeth had about as much regard for curates as she had for rainy evenings, and had remained at home.)

Anne turned her face from the fire to meet the gaze of the storyteller. "It's very interesting," she said hastily, not wanting him to think that she hadn't been attending. "I was only thinking of the time I visited the seaside, as a child."

"I've never been to the sea," sighed a Miss Hastings, from the neighbourhood of Kellynch.

"I spent so much time gazing at the waves that my mother threatened to leave me there," Anne said. "Or perhaps I should say, 'offered.'"

"Ah." Commander Wentworth smiled. "The sea is a sight that gets inside one's mind, to be sure, and then we are never without it again."

"Though we may miss it nonetheless," Anne said, "when we are obliged to go away from it."

"And how long have you been away, Miss Elliot?" he asked.

"It must be above eight years."

"Well," he said, with warmth. "That must be remedied. You must find occasion for seeing the waves again."

"And hearing them," Anne said softly, unaware that half the rest of the party had fallen silent to observe, and the other half had flounced away, giving up on the Commander in favor of a card game. "And the gulls overhead, and the salt in the air. I should like to see ships again, too. Perhaps not in battle," she broke off to smile back at him. "But just . . . sailing about. I liked to see them coming in, with their decks all busyness and the sails coming down - and people on shore rushing to see what ship it was and who was returning."

That was a bit of a speech for Anne, who generally lived with people who were not terribly interested in the things that interested her. She felt herself blushing a little, but also because Commander Wentworth was looking at her with increased attention.

It was not long before he was telling her about how he had learned his way around a ship, how he had moved through both the ranks of the navy and actual jobs on the ship, which she found all very confusing but very interesting; and then he was laughing at her for thinking that life on ship was like sleeping in the hedgerows, only on water. How odd, to think that someone would have made room for a kitchen on a ship! though of course it was called something else, as he explained patiently. And that someone would be brought on long sea-voyages who had no idea how to sail a ship, but was there only to prepare meals, or to doctor wounds. It all sounded much less spartan than she had ever imagined.

It was also not long before the visit was returned, and both Commander Wentworth and his brother called at Kellynch Hall, and were somewhat politely ignored by Elizabeth, not that either man cared. Lady Russell had called at the same time and was ready to pay the respect due to a man of the cloth,
and Frederick and Anne simply sat before the fire and were lost in discussion of the places he had seen, and what the people and the birds and the seashores were like there. An enraptured Anne thoroughly forgot to drink any tea as she heard about the wonders - and dangers - of coral reefs, and the oddity of seeing parrots flying about as common as sparrows.

In another week Anne had learned, using the drawing room bell-rope at Monkford, how to make what Frederick called a "very creditable" sailor's knot (she only accidentally summoned the servant twice in the process), and she was laughing to tease him with the promise that someday she would climb to a crow's nest, she was resolved to it.

In another week they were in love, to nobody's great surprise.

Against all probability, Anne Elliot became Anne Wentworth in sight of the sea, with gulls overhead.

That it happened where it did was as unexpected to the participants as the fact that it happened nearly nine years after they fell in love over knots and reefs and galleys. And the initial facts which led to this event were not romantic: primarily, that Kellynch Hall was still to let. Although the Crofts were eager to welcome Anne as their sister and would happily have had the whole party to stay, Anne couldn't quite stomach visiting their own home as a guest (and her father and Elizabeth would never have heard of it). Of course her bridegroom could have stayed with his sister and brother and the Elliots with Lady Russell, but where would they spend their wedding-night? Captain Wentworth still could not quite forgive Lady Russell for being the cause of the nine-year delay, certainly not enough to stay as a guest in her home. Uppercross was of course offered, but Uppercross still hosted the little Harvilles and expected to host their parents - who would be compelled to stay by their desire to see their friends married - and only so many could invade those already strained walls.

So Lady Russell's dreams of seeing someone at least be given Anne's hand in Kellynch church were to be dashed as finally as the dream of it being Mr Elliot.

Bath was the obvious next choice, since the interested parties were all there, but - despite it being the location of her greatest renewal of happiness - Anne could not love Bath. She could resign herself - indeed would have, in time - but Frederick made a wonderful suggestion instead.

They needed a home. No one would suggest that Anne live with the Crofts while the Crofts were at Kellynch, and in any case it was unknown how long Frederick might be on land. It could be quite a while. They needed some establishment. And why not, why should Frederick not choose them some place in Lyme, near the Harvilles and the Benwicks, where Anne could be near friends - and still only a short journey from both their families - if he were called back to sea? And since Mr Jones the vicar was so accommodating - and Lyme the happy scene of Anne's third-ever sight of the sea, until Louisa's accident - why should they not fix the date there near their new home?

So to Lyme Frederick went, and in Lyme a house was chosen for rent, and in Lyme parish church they eventually stood up together, on the cliffs over the sea. Neither the church nor the inn were as grand or elegant as Elizabeth or Sir Walter would have chosen, but their friends were all around and the cries of the gulls were better accompaniment than any organ; and Anne was perfectly happy as they left the church and took the narrow path down toward the Cobb under a shower of petals.

For a wedding present Frederick gave her a lovely painting of a ship in calm seas at full sail. She hung it on the wall of the parlor, beside the window that faced the sea.
End Notes

While not especially relevant, "Come Home to the Sea" happens to be the first track on Mannheim Steamroller's album *Fresh Air VI*. It's a nice little piece with a lot of ocean sounds.

Dear ingreatwaters, thank you for a challenge! Although a longtime Jane Austen fan, the naval/seafaring aspect of this novel is not one I've considered much before. I enjoyed learning about coastal towns and naval ranks and battles of the 18th and 19th centuries! and I hope you enjoyed reading it.

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