

“Plucky.”

He'll be fine, said Elsie.

He is late, I said again, as if she had not heard me.

Probably in the pub, said Elsie, as if that was any comfort. I needed the money he would earn from selling the fish he had caught.

He knows not to be late, said I, not today. I was not about to tell my sister-in-law that I needed to wipe the slate at Mr Wood's shop today else he might be a bit awkward next week. I was already a week late due to the storm last week and the boat not setting out. A whole week with no fish. I doubted that even the Navy set out into The Sound during the storm, so there was no way the fishing boats could go out. Not a penny came in, but Mr Woods saw us alright. I needed to do the same in return.

He'll be fine, he's with Samuel, she said with absolutely no understanding of what I thought of George's brother Samuel. A grand fisherman he was, but no shining example to be setting my husband. If Samuel had managed to drag him to the pub and get him drinking, then we all were in trouble. Samuel could drink the rum; George could not hold more than two glasses. That would not stop him standing a few rounds to keep face with the fishermen. He would never be considered mean or shirking, not in their eyes. So, he would drink and fall down, or stop drinking and keep buying. Either way I would not see the money.

Neither would Mr Wood.

I did not let Elsie see me glance at the clock for the fiftieth time. The sky had turned a deep shade of slate grey but that should not matter. They should have been back in harbour by now. They knew the weather and how it could turn. He was two hours late, and it was not the weather that was keeping him. My hands ached from the wringing of my pinny, as if somehow that was part of a magical spell to make him appear. Elsie got tired of re-assuring me and drifted to the front window. The small parlour gave the best view of the cobbled street on the hill leading down to the harbour.

Visitors she said. Coldly, no emotion, just telling.

Not George? I asked.

Looks like Navy to me, she said, not realising that a visit from the Navy was never good tidings.

Just ask any family who had someone press-ganged in the old days.

They're in fancy uniform, she said, but I had already guessed that.

No, the Navy never brought good news.

Not then. Not now.

* * * *

I look at the letter crumpled in my hand. A few short lines penned in an elegant and handsome hand which promised nothing for myself or the future for my children.

"November 30th, 1891

The Incident of HMS Plucky and George Hisbent (deceased).

Dear Mrs Hisbent,

It is my duty to inform you that as a result of the recent incident in the Plymouth Sound involving the Royal Navy HMS Gunboat "Plucky" and the fishing vessel 'Sunbeam' which resulted in the death of your husband, Mr George Hisbent, a Board of Inquiry will be held into all the pertaining circumstances. The results of this Board of Inquiry shall be notified to The Admiralty for any further consideration or action which is evidenced. You will receive an official notification of your requirement to attend these proceedings from this office and it is our advice that you should seek representation by a solicitor of your choice. Date and time of the Board will also be notified to you within the coming week.

Yours sincerely....."

Placing the letter on the tablecloth in front of me I smooth it out carefully. One day, one of the children may want to see this. For the moment it is enough for them to know their dad is never coming home again. It is barely sinking in, and it is no comfort to know I was right. He was late.

Elsie has long since gone back to her own house. I could not bear any more of the comfort she wanted to give. She is not my only sister-in-law, but she is the strangest by a nautical mile. I tried not to be unkind to her though I confess that is a trial. She wants to talk about George; I want to think about him. I want to remember those twinkling brown eyes. I want to remember those strong, lean arms around my waist. I want to remember the kind words which would escape his lip occasionally. I want to remember him playing with the children, teaching the eldest lad to make crab creels and nets for the fishing. I want to remember him setting aside his waders and Gansey for his Sunday suit, and I want to remember how smart he looked, just like the day we married in the little church in Saltash. I want to remember the excitement in his face at the birth of each of our children, boys and girls in equal measure.

Elsie does not understand quietness. It is not something she practices. She feels a need, god knows why, to fill every pause with more words. Sometimes they are good words, sometimes they are unnecessary words. On this occasion they were downright insulting words. I looked her in the eye and asked her to leave.

That may be the only time I have ever witnessed a silence of her making.

It stretched way beyond anything I ever thought her capable of. Then she made to speak again and on receipt of my sternest look thought better of it. Quietly she stood, pulled herself up to her greatest height and straightened her dress, and turned to leave.

I waited.

“Why?” Honestly, she could not help herself. I had to stifle a smile. Now that would have been unseemly. I stood to face my sister-in-law and friend and took her hands in mine. She flinched. She hated the feel of my calloused hands, ravaged by years of ice water and gutting fish. She was a lady who worked in a draper’s shop and when it came to rough work, she would wear gloves. She said that customers liked to be served by ladies with manicured hands. She might be right. I myself never noticed. I held firm until she heard me out.

“What you said, it was inappropriate.”

“What? I simply suggested you were young enough to marry again.”

“You are right about my age. Not the rest. I will wear the widow’s weeds as long as I feel is right. I have no thoughts to marry again. Why would I? It is but days since George was taken. Do you not see?”

“I was just saying...”

“And I am just saying, please do not. Please, go. I am expecting visitors.”

“Who?”

My only response was the stern look, again.

She left and I awaited my visitors.

* * * *

For one dread filled moment I imagined he was alone.

He could not be. I had made it clear. He had to bring a chaperone with him. I could not permit him into the house with me alone at this time. The children were reading in the kitchen, enjoying the heat from the range. They were well-behaved children with good manners, but they had too much energy to sit still forever. For a time, they would not disturb me.

I watched the street, disappointed. I did so much want this conversation which I said could not happen until after the Service. Even though I did not have George’s body to bury properly the order of things was important and now I was ready to hear the story of how he died. His brother Samuel could tell me, but if he were alone as I feared he would not be crossing the threshold.

So, I watched, hoping. Though there was no rule barring a widow from a conversation with her brother-in-law there were many eyes behind windowpanes twitching and who would see me admit a man into my home so soon after George was lost. I would not permit them as I had not permitted Elsie to stray beyond the bounds of what is fitting.

Suddenly Mary was there, four yards behind her husband. She was distracted by something at her knees and she seemed to be stumbling rather than walking. Samuel did not wait but approached the house, dressed for church. Like my husband, his older brother, he was either dressed for the boat in a Gansey, waders and oilskins or he was dressed in sombre garb for Church. Today his visit to me merited the latter, and as would only be fitting, I would receive them in the parlour. I called to our eldest, Angela, and asked her to open the door to her uncle and aunt. I would not display myself at the front door.

A minute later, perhaps two, I heard them greet Angela and she in turn greet them and inform them I was waiting in the front room. A tray for tea was ready prepared in our small kitchen and Angela knew that fifteen minutes after they had joined me, she should brew the tea, lay out a few slices of home-made cake and call me. There is only so much an eleven-year-old should have to do.

Samuel did not step aside to let Mary enter the front door ahead of him. He might remember to do that at Church; it would not seem so necessary here, today. He could be the most agile man you ever saw on the football field or on the boat, setting nets, drawing creels or making the deck ship-shape. Yes, he really used that word. But in this place today, anticipating the news he would have to give me, he was awkward and hesitant. I knew Samuel well; he would not shirk that duty. I was ready to know all that he knew. I needed to know all that he knew, and I would not allow them to leave with any part of the story untold. The address at the Service had not given such detail – it spoke only of George as a family man, a husband and father and a good man in the community. I wanted more. I wanted to know how the Navy could kill my husband and I was not prepared to wait until any Board of Inquiry to find that out.

Samuel clutched at his cap, wringing it as I did the hem of my pinny in times of stress. We touched hands, not shaking hands and most definitely not kissing, even in the cheek and I bid him sit in a good chair but not a chair George would normally use. Mary and I embraced as sisters-in-law would do but it was not hard to see she was quite distracted. She could not keep a secret and I knew if I could be just a wee bit patient she would tell all. I offered Mary a seat close to Samuel and offered to take her coat, but she dodged and sat down with her coat on.

Samuel drew her a stern look not so unlike my own. He sensed that I was likely to take this as an insult, as if I could not keep my house warm when a good but not extravagant coal fire burned in the

grate. It was not quite the last of my ordinary coal and I would resist using the fiery sea coal which was free for the gathering but would eventually melt the basket in the grate. Mary caught the glance and with some reddening of the cheeks then stood and removed her coat.

“It’s my hem, it has unravelled.” This was true. The stitching on the hem of her good dress had indeed come undone and a good inch or two for six inches or more hung down at the side of her dress. It was not a good look for a lady walking out dressed with her husband and I could understand the source of her stumbling now. She had been trying to hitch it back up under her coat in case anyone passing by saw her state of disrepair. I sympathised with her. I would have felt the same.

“We can fix that Mary before you go home,” I offered. My dressmaking and repairing skills were superior to her own and it earned me a few extra shillings when the fishing was light. She smiled with gratitude and nodded. I decided to press home my advantage.

“Before you ask, I am well and living with my loss. For the sake of the children, I am not hiding my grief, but I am controlling both it and my speech. I asked you to come because I now need to know what happened.” On a whim I held out my letter to Samuel.

“I know,” he replied, letting it lie between my fingers. “I have had one as has Mr Harris of the Alfonzo and the two Mr Harkcoms of the Sunbeam. I would expect Lieut. Freemantle, the captain of the gunboat Plucky to be giving evidence as well.”

“As we might expect Samuel. In fifteen minutes, we shall take tea and I hope you can enlighten me somewhat before then. We can continue over tea if needs be. Are you content with that?”

Samuel nodded, but not with a great enthusiasm. I understood. Having to talk about the death of his brother was not easy but I could not ask the Harkcoms. The little boats – called smacks or hookers - had a crew of two each. It was a perilous enough venture for them to venture out towards the Eddystone fishing. George and I had always accepted that, quietly. We did not need the Royal Navy to exacerbate the risk but nevertheless that is what had happened.

“Do you need some water Samuel before you begin?” He nodded. From the jug on the sideboard, I poured him a glass. Mary looked longingly at it and I poured her one also. Then he began, in his broad Devonian drawl, the story of his brother’s last moments.

“It was as you know the morning of Friday the 30th of October. The weather was good but as likely to turn as not, we knew that. It is the nature of this coast to be fickle. When we set off visibility was good enough for a day of fishing. Both of our boats were similar, Plymouth Hookers, and we headed for the whiting we expected to be shoaling about five miles south of the breakwater. We had no plans to go as far as Eddystone which is nine miles out. We were not alone. In all the fleet was 200 boats, but the fishing down there is good, plenty for everyone.”

I interrupted.

“The Navy?”

He smiled, ruefully.

“The Navy is the Navy. It has ruled these waters and these three towns since long before me. From the brass down to the lowliest rating they drink and lord it up and they send their ships out and in. There is no war, so they keep busy in other ways, polishing their ships and practising their gun skills on targets which do not fire back. Still, the Navy has brought a lot of money to the towns – ask anyone who owns an inn in these parts. They are just always there. We pay them no mind unless they draw across our bow. We are careful and know where we should be fishing.”

“But are *they* careful Samuel? That’s the question.”

“There are few incidents June, which is amazing when you consider the amount of shipbuilding and ship activity in this area. We know that the whole area is used as a firing ground for the Navy, especially around the Eddystone area. We had no need to fear when we went out. I was in my boat; George was in the Alfonso with Frank Harris. Have you met him?”

“That was George’s work. I have spoken briefly with Mrs Harris in the shops.”

“Well, we were in our boats and the Harkcom brothers were in theirs, the Sunbeam. We had been fishing and catching well when we heard the first shells come over. That was not new, we have laid complaints before of a stray shell or two but as in the past we assumed we could disregard that and concentrate on fishing. We assumed that the Navy would realise their mistake and correct their aim. The hookers are good boats and will play you fair as long as you concentrate. From the sound we judged the firing to be nearer to Eddystone than ourselves and therefore no danger to us.”

“What do they fire at Samuel?”

“Target buoys and I think occasionally dummy ships. It’s not all completely clear. One thing is certain – they ought not to have been firing at a flotilla of 200 fishing boats. Anyways, George’s boat was about two miles west-north-east of me and the Plucky which we had spotted earlier roughly four miles inside him. By the time we heard the first shots I would say the Plucky was two miles north-west of Harris and George. Then the first few shots landed in between the boats. People sat up and paid attention to the waterspouts but as we had no agreed way to communicate with the Navy we carried on fishing. Then, something happened, maybe the gunboat changed its position, maybe a gunner got confused with the target but another couple of shells came in. One shell struck the side of the Sunbeam blowing the timbers to hell. sorry. Blowing out her timbers. I was near enough to see the two Harkcom brothers – that’s John and Henry – react. Henry was the quickest, pulling off his sea boots and diving over what was left of their side. By this time to be true the weather had closed in a bit, but not dangerously, and there was a real swell on the sea. Enough to prevent the pleasure boats from setting out from the Pier but not enough to trouble a seasoned fisherman. John Harkcom followed quick time after. They were in the sea for about twenty minutes, there was a lot of confusion.”

“Panic?”

“I would say it like that. We don’t panic easily, even under fire. Many of these fishermen have served in the Navy but when wars end many seamen get paid off until the next war. I don’t think they would panic so much. After the Sunbeam was hit, I saw that the sails had been hoisted on George’s boat and whilst it was not a direct signal it should have made them visible to the gunboat. Still to our shock the firing continued, and the next shot struck the Alfonso astern. The hooker wasn’t destroyed but with no stern it began to sink immediately. I saw Frank Harris trying to tread water, but it isn’t easy in our fishermen clothes. They are designed to keep wind, sleet and rain at bay, not for swimming. When they begin to saturate they are not so easy to strip off in the water neither. Frank is no weakling, but I could see him struggling alright.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat and whispered,

“George?”

“I did not pick up the Harkcoms or Harris. I came in from our position to look for George thinking like Harris he was in the sea. I expected him to go down first then come up. That would be the time to grab him. I could not find him.”

“The shells? Did you not think...?” I had intended no insult, but it was clear from the dark storm brewing on Samuel’s face that I had in fact offended him.” “I am sorry,” I blurted, suddenly realising how Elsie must have felt.

“I understand lass. Look, when a man goes in the sea, be it a slip or a freak wave broadside or even carelessness we go after them. That’s all. Even if it were Moby Dick coming to swallow him up, we would go for him. George was my brother. I didn’t think I needed to explain. There was no thought of shells or boys in matelot uniform taking pot-shots – there was just my brother in the sea. Okay?”

“Yes, I really am sorry for my clumsiness.”

“While I was looking for George the gunboat Plucky came into view. Perhaps they had realised the explosions were too big for a target buoy or maybe they had found out how to use a telescope the right way round, but they had closed on our position. The hooker that had rescued Henry Harkcom went alongside The Plucky as we could then see her to be and called out ‘*Do you know what you have done?*’ A young officer called back ‘*No What’s up?*’ and I heard the owner Murray explain that the gunboat had sunk two hookers and we feared a fisherman lost. The officer inquired if they could pick the boats up. I doff my hat to Murray who was uncowed by the shiny buttons and uniforms and replied with less sharpness than I could have managed ‘*how do you think to accomplish that in eight fathoms of heavy sea.*’ I don’t know if their Commander, one Lt. Freeman realised what had happened as the firing continued further out to sea. The Plucky joined them and continued its target practice. We were left to collect our injured and return to Devonport. I am sorry, I really tried but I could not locate George. And before *you* ask, I do not know if he was killed by the shell or drowned. Harris does not know either. Whichever it may be, I hope, for George, it was swift. There is not a fisherman I know who does not fear the drowning, myself included.”

“Have you knowledge of what came after?”

“Not much. There is talk that upon the return of The Plucky to port the gunboat commander, Lt. Freeman, reported the incident to the Duke of Edinburgh. Some of the fishermen were also called to the Navy yard to report their recollections. I did not then; I went the next day. I have no notion if Freemantle admitted to his actions or claimed innocence or ignorance of the presence of fishing boats. At the very least he ought to have known the range of his guns and the location of the fishing boats who regularly fished in that area. It was true that the visibility was not as good as earlier in the day, in which case not firing might have been the action of a prudent man, even a popinjay Navy commander. These now are just my thoughts June.”

“I appreciate your candour and honesty Samuel. I think we all need some tea now.”

* * * *

It is almost a new century.

Three years on it is a new life for the children and me.

A life that continues without their father, a life without my husband.

It is a cold day in January, but the children play upon Plymouth Hoe as if it were summer games.

They are resilient.

They cry at night when there is nothing in the darkness to distract them.

I cry in the darkness when they cannot see.

In a short while I will call to them and we will go down the hill to the Pier. Perhaps an ice cream.

It is a rare extravagance which I can just afford. Times are hard without their father's support, but Samuel was true to his word that day he came to explain. The family stands by us.

I thought that knowing would help but it does not ease the pain, and now I do know all that there is to know except what went through the mind of the Commander of the gunboat that terrible day. The Board of Inquiry was difficult to endure, so formal and cold. I felt then, and now, that they did not really

care about my George or us. Lieut. Freeman had been taken for court martial aboard the Swiftsure and charged with negligently performing his duty during the gun practice. That gave me the faintest glimmer of hope of justice for George. I was surprised to hear that a gunnery instructor who was aboard what they call a mark-boat close to the target testified under oath that he saw every single one of the first 32 shots directly strike the water. This was said in contradiction to his own admission that he was approached by fishing boats after the 3rd shot who claimed vessels had been sunk. Such a strange thing, to be able to see 32 single shots land but not see 200 fishing boats gathered across Plymouth Sound. Stranger still, he attributed the sinking of my husband's boat to a ricochet rather than a direct hit. A ricochet from what he was never called to explain. Mr Harris and Samuel gave their testimony honestly and firmly and I could believe every word they uttered. Not so the Navy but as Samuel had rightly said, the Navy was all. Lieut. Freemantle was eventually acquitted of the charge, with the court attributing the disaster of George's death to "an error of judgement due to the peculiar conditions of the atmosphere prevailing at the time." None of the witnesses from the fishing boats referred to such inclement conditions which would have obscured the target and highlighted the Sunbeam. Navy witnesses claimed during the proceedings that there was a 'haze' that made distances difficult to judge. I am just a woman and a widow, but it strikes me that if distances between a fully armed gunboat and 200 fishing boats were difficult to judge then a decision not to fire was merited. It was not war after all.

After the official proceedings concluded, Mr. Harkcom received £150 for the loss of his boat and £75 for the loss of fishing time. Mr Harris who survived the loss of the boat on which he served with George received £125 for his boat and £50 for his loss of fishing time. I was not forgotten. Those unseen faces at the Admiralty awarded me £500 to be invested for my future assistance at the rate of 7s per week for myself and 2s and 6d for each child unto the age of 14. I was described as destitute during the Board of Inquiry, a view which I did not contest despite the shame of such a description, and perhaps we deserved the pity money. I was not so well off as to cock a snook at such a sum. With £500 I could buy 21 horses or 61 cows but sadly I had no grazing rights on Plymouth Hoe. Farm animals do not prosper on the cobbles of Saltash where we now reside.

The final word was claimed by the polite Navy gentleman of some seniority who approached us after the Board of Inquiry to say that George had been a 'plucky fisherman'. There was no trace of irony either in his formal Navy voice or his lack of comprehension of my loss. I pray that none of our sons enter the Service to be so blinded by loyalty to King and Country.

We are moving on. I am a widow, dressed in black, avoiding pitying gazes in the street and resigned to her fate. I have become a seamstress of some local reputation, keeping as busy as is humanly possible. The children work hard at their schooling and of course they miss their father. They do not hesitate to recall his face or talk of his love and kindness. The eldest spends much time with Samuel in and around the boats and I am sure he will become a fisherman in his father's mould. I shall not stop him. He must forge his own way. Elsie and I are speaking once more, and perhaps I am more tolerant of her incessant chatter. A little bit anyway.

Sitting here upon a George's folded greatcoat as protection against the cold grass I can gaze out over the grey water of Plymouth Sound, beyond Drake's Island and the breakwater to the open sea.

Somewhere there George rests.

I believe he is at peace in his beloved sea.

I want to believe that he knows we are here, remembering him.

Always.

Plucky indeed.

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