

LAST SERVICE

An excerpt from the book

THE RADIANT BOY

Four Ghost Stories
from the Age of Sail

by Emma Collingwood

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ISBN 978-3-8423-3675-9

"The Radiant Boy" is the second book in the "Penny, Dreadful & Tarbottom" series.

First published in 2010.

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Production and publishing:
Books On Demands GmbH, Norderstedt/Germany

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May all their endeavours fail and friendships break until the day they make amends.

Leigh's Tale

"Now it's my turn, and as I see that it's already late, my story will be a short one," Leigh promised. He stretched his long legs, holding a glass of port and presenting a picture of comfort and satisfaction.

"Your John Freers took his duties very seriously, and rightly so. It's the men who go beyond the call of duty who keep our fleet and our country afloat, and my story is about just such a gentleman. Surprisingly enough, he was an admiral."



Last Service

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Lieutenant Torridge jumped when Hardy raised his voice behind the locked door. The young man jumped again at the sound of Nelson's fist banging on the desk. Over the last decades, Collingwood had become familiar with his old friend's occasional outbursts of fury, but to the young lieutenant they were foreign. From time to time, Torridge would glance in Collingwood's direction, quickly looking away when he felt the admiral's scrutinising gaze, probably embarrassed that his ludicrous behaviour was witnessed. Not once had Torridge dared to address him, but Collingwood didn't mind; he wasn't interested in conversation, anyway.

While he was sympathetic to Torridge's fears, he had never appreciated spoilt young gentlemen promoted because of their family's income and reputation rather than their actual abilities. If the gesture of an angry man behind a closed door made Torridge jump, what would the officer do in battle? Hide behind his sea chest and cry for his mother?

Collingwood had to hide a smile. In all fairness - once he had done just that himself, though not in battle. But he had been a young monkey of a boy on his first voyage, twelve years old, not four and twenty like the lieutenant! The young man had no zeal, no spirit, and Collingwood pitied Hardy, who had been morally obliged to take the drip under his wing as a favour to Torridge's father. Next to wood rot and paddocks, Collingwood considered nepotism one of the greatest threats to the Royal Navy.

Another 'thud', more vocal protests by Hardy, interrupted by Nelson's angry voice.

"I expect the conversation will come to an end very soon," Collingwood said. Bounce looked up at his master, knowing well that the words were directed at him rather than Torridge. At times Collingwood found his dog to have more common sense than his fellow men. Bounce gave a short, affirmative bark, then yawned. Used to the busy life aboard Admiral Collingwood's flagship, he hoped for something interesting to happen; just like his master, he was beginning to feel restless, waiting here for the outcome of the argument.

Just when the dog had decided to lie down and take another nap, the door of the great cabin was flung open. Face red with anger and fringe of grey hair dishevelled, Thomas Masterman Hardy rushed out, slamming the door shut behind him. Collingwood heard Nelson's railing; he couldn't make out the words, but he assumed that his friend's remarks were not overly complimentary. The matter at hand was more than just a passionate disagreement between friends; it was a clash of philosophies of life as well.

"I take it you couldn't convert him to your point of view?" Collingwood had predicted this outcome, and though he was a gentleman through and through, he couldn't help gloating a little.

"Indeed I could not," Hardy snapped. He wiped the sweat off his forehead and tried to regain his poise. Not an easy task, considering Hardy's discontent both with the outcome of the argument and the fact that Torridge was witness to his defeat. Torridge, back pressed firmly against the hull of the *Victory*, was as pale as a sheet, his face a mask of fear.

"What are we going to do now, Sir?" he spluttered.

"Behaving in a manner befitting an officer would be a good start," Hardy grumbled. "Good grief, Mr. Torridge, straighten up!" Then he gave Collingwood a questioning look and spread his arms.

"My offer holds," Collingwood assured, understanding the gesture. "And if it should still be your wish, I will talk to him."

Hardy knew that Collingwood was a man of his word; he had trusted him with his life many times over. The matter at hand was of a very delicate, if not to say disconcerting nature, though. His own reputation as a gentleman and capable officer was at stake. One wrong word, and his career would be ruined; he'd become the laughing stock of the Royal Navy and every coffeehouse in Britain. Nelson wouldn't budge in his opinion, that much was certain, so Collingwood's intervention seemed to be the answer to Hardy's prayers, even if it meant admitting defeat.

However, before he could accept Collingwood's offer, the door opened and Nelson appeared in the doorway. The admiral was still seething with anger, and seeing Hardy had not yet left, he was more than willing to give vent to his rage once more. "For God's sake, Hardy! Haven't I told you to go to - oh, you are here as well." He interrupted his tirade upon noticing Collingwood. "Every time they think I need to see reason, they send you as mediator, it seems."

"It can never harm to look at all options," Collingwood said, choosing his words carefully. "As I'm not directly involved, I might offer an unbiased view on the matter."

That was a blatant lie, and Collingwood inwardly cringed, for he was an honest man. Of course he was biased; how could he not be, here, aboard the *Victory*?

On an emotional level, he disagreed with Hardy just as much as Nelson did, maybe even more so, but rationally, Hardy's controversial decision had been a sensible one.

"Fine, fine, come in then, you and your bag of fleas." Nelson returned to the cabin without giving Hardy and the terrified Torridge a second glance. Collingwood followed him, so did Bounce, and the door closed behind them.

The great cabin of the *Victory* - a special place, for many reasons. Collingwood had no doubt that, many years from now, people would still speak of the ship and the men who had served in her with great respect and gratitude. And that was exactly the point Nelson and Hardy quarrelled over.

Britain's greatest naval hero - a title Nelson was particularly proud of, even if he attempted to be humble about it - had returned to his seat at the desk. Collingwood had seen him countless times like that; hunched over his writing slope, sometimes covering page after page with his spidery handwriting, sometimes just staring at the blank sheet in front of him. Nelson was a fascinating mixture of genius and obsession, and while Collingwood had never read one of the letters his friend had written to Emma Lady Hamilton, he hoped to God that the woman had at least had the good sense to burn them after reading.

"Not one letter, Coll! Not a single word! Nothing! I have written her, oh, a hundred times, but she never replies. How can that be? Has she forgotten about her Nelson?"

Collingwood, feeling uncomfortable with the question, cleared his throat and clasped his hands behind his back. "Well. Postal services, so I've been told, are very lacking

lately," he replied diplomatically. Collingwood had never approved of his friend's scandalous love affair, but he knew better than to speak aloud the thought that had first crossed his mind upon hearing the question. "I'm very certain she will reply in time. Some matters probably need time to be - sorted out."

Nelson tapped his fingers on the desk.

"Right, right. As usual. I need to learn to be more patient, don't I? Ah, don't tell me, I know. Impatience and my hunger for fame; that's what future generations will call my weaknesses. That, and my love for Emma."

"But at least future generations will still *be* talking about you, Nelson, long after my name has been forgotten. I suppose I can call myself lucky if they name a footpath after me or a fishpond. Doesn't such devotion make you proud?"

Nelson gave him a sheepish smile.

"Of course. My apologies, I shouldn't be so narcissistic. And you should stop being so terribly noble and humble. I think we both deserve monuments and streets named after us. Ah, but as long as Britain will look after my Emma, I shall not complain."

Collingwood had his own theories about the lifespan of gratitude, but now was not the moment to bring them up. He had experienced Britain's 'gratitude', and as far as he was concerned, King and Admiralty had not grasped the true meaning of the word quite yet. But that was neither here nor there.

"My dear friend, while *you* might not complain, complaints have been made about you, and rightly so. No, no, please let me explain." Collingwood held up his hands in a placating gesture, for Nelson was about to protest again. "I agree with Hardy's order. It's rational,

sensible and will save the navy money. Money that is needed to keep our ships afloat and Britain safe. Is this not what we have fought for? Why are you countermanding his orders?"

Again Nelson banged his fist on the desk, sending inkwell and pounce pot dancing.

"Rationality! Money! Saving! Damn your compulsive economy and Hardy's rationality! Yes, he might be the captain of the *Victory*, but *I* am the one in command! I am Horatio Nelson!"

Collingwood nodded. "Yes. Yes, you are. But, and please forgive me for being so forward, you are also dead."

Nelson stared at Collingwood, then leaned back in his chair. If he'd still had both arms, he would probably have crossed them defensively. As things were, he restricted the expression of his discontent to drumming his fingers on the desk.

"There was no need to mention that. Not very tactful, Coll. Not very tactful at all."

"That might be, and I apologise, but still the fact remains that you have passed on, the *Victory* is a wreck and the Admiralty of the opinion that she should be broken up. While I understand your sentiments in that matter, and quite naturally share them, I have to agree with that decision." Collingwood made a sweeping gesture encompassing the broken windows, splintered wood and mouldy canvas surrounding them. "And with all due respect, my dear Nelson: do you really wish to spend eternity *here*?"

Nelson frowned, then shrugged.

"It's true, I've seen her in better shape," he admitted grudgingly, "but certainly something could be done about

that. Replacing the floorboards, for example. Fixing the windows. A new coat of paint. That can't cost a fortune."

"No, but replacing hull, masts, sails, rigging, canons, brass and God knows what else would, not to mention occupying a dock that's desperately needed by other ships."

"But - this is the place of my greatest victory! It's also where I died! Hardy, of all men, should show some respect for that fact. The *Victory* is not just a ship, Coll - she's a monument!"

Collingwood began to pace up and down. As was his habit, Bounce followed his master, who consequently had to concentrate hard so as not to stumble over the large dog.

"How many monuments does a man need, Nelson? You have one at St. Paul's, and quite a splendid one it is, if I may say so. There have been miniature pyramids erected in your memory, streets have been renamed and they even sell commemorative plates with your portrait. From all the 'original splinters of the *Victory*' that are sold on the streets, the navy could easily build three new first rates. And now there are even discussions about naming a square in your honour, right in the centre of London. With a statue."

"A large one?" Nelson inquired, looking very interested. Collingwood couldn't help but sigh once more.

"Vanity does not befit a gentleman. And with all due respect: if you don't follow my repeated requests as a friend in this matter, I will have to remind you that the Admiralty *ordered* you to leave this ship."

Nelson looked disappointed and shifted in his seat. "Is that really your wish? I was under the impression that you appreciated my company."

"Through all these years, I have appreciated and cherished your company above that of any other person in the service. You are, and have always been, my closest friend and confidante." Collingwood halted his steps; so did Bounce, and the admiral patted the dog's head, as if to reassure the animal of his fondness. "But yes, it is my wish. And it's what the Admiralty orders. Dismissed, Vice-Admiral Horatio Nelson."

"Very well then. I'll leave, but not because somebody orders me to do so. I simply don't want to cause a friend and brother officer further grief. Still, I wish to have it duly noted that breaking up the *Victory* is a crime and a disgrace. She's not just a ship. She's a symbol." Nelson closed the writing slope in front of him and gave Collingwood an awkward smile. "Do you think Emma will reply to my letters once I've left?"

"I'm very certain of that," Collingwood said. "Godspeed, my friend."

Nelson nodded, stood up and slowly faded away. Only now did Collingwood note how very much his presence had filled the room; the great cabin was now empty in every meaning of the word.

"Another duty fulfilled," he murmured. "I hope that really was the last one, Bounce. I'm tired."

The dog seemed to share that sentiment and prepared to leave, the padding of his paws echoing in the room which contained little more than a desk, covered by cobwebs, and two broken chairs. Collingwood shook his head, then followed Bounce and opened the door. Hardy was still waiting outside, but Lieutenant Torridge was nowhere in sight.

"Now where has that young buck gone to?" Collingwood asked.

"I'm afraid the situation was more than he could handle," Hardy muttered. "I always thought he'd be better suited for uniform-making than uniform-wearing. How did he- I mean-" He didn't finish the sentence, only gestured with his head in the direction of the great cabin.

"He has left," Collingwood simply said. "And I'm hopeful that he will not return."

Hardy sighed with relief.

"Thank God! And my eternal gratitude to you as well, dear Sir. I assure you that I greatly appreciate your help in this matter and your willingness to undertake such a long journey. If only he had listened to the vicar, there wouldn't have been any need for your intervention. Though, I should have known that you would be the only one who could help me out of this predicament."

Collingwood remained silent for a moment, seemingly lost in thought. Then he exchanged a nod with Bounce. "I thought breaking up the *Victory* was a sensible decision," he finally said. "But I was wrong. We were both wrong. Get the *Victory* fighting fit again, Sir. Or find some other purpose for her, but for God's sake, do not break her up. It would be as much of a crime as demolishing St. Paul's Cathedral to clear space for the building of a garden shed."

"We can't-" Hardy began, but Collingwood cut him off.

"Take your time to think about it, Sir, and you will find that I'm right. Also, I would remind you that there's always the risk he might return. You know what he was like once he had set his mind on someone - or something he loved."

Hardy was a man who knew when he had lost. "I will rescind my order."

"Do I have your word as a gentleman and a brother officer?"

Hardy straightened up.

"Of course, Sir."

Collingwood nodded and walked past Hardy. Then a thought crossed his mind and he turned around.

"As for the reasons for your change of mind - your wife was not very happy with your order either, I understand?"

Hardy thought of the last seven nights he had spent on the sofa in the anteroom of his bedchamber, much to the amusement of the servants. In some matters, Louisa could be terribly stubborn.

"That's an understatement," he muttered.

"Well then, say it was for her sake. And should you be mocked for the revocation of an order just to please your wife, keep in mind that it's always better to earn a reputation as a doting husband than as a superstitious fool. And now please excuse me; I have to look after my cabbage plants. Good day, Sir, good day."

With that, the forms of Collingwood and Bounce slowly began dissolve; the last glimpse of the dress coat's sleeve was carried away by an icy gush of air.



THE END



Author's Notes for the Curious

"Last Service"

Rumour has it that Thomas Hardy recalled his order to break up the *Victory* because his wife Louisa was heartbroken over the decision. However, the only factual evidence is that he did rescind the order and that the page in the duty log with the revocation has been torn out.

The events described in "Last Service" are completely fictional, and a Lieutenant Torridge never served under Vice-Admiral Sir Thomas Masterman Hardy.

Postal services, however, are still *very* lacking.