

MANCO or THE FINANCIAL CRISIS EXPLAINED BY SEBASTIAN QUINN, PURSER **by Emma Collingwood**

"Manco" - malapropism of "manque": French for "missing, unaccounted for"

There were three things a purser needed to be successful in his profession: capital to start with, mathematical talent to handle the complicated finances aboard a ship and a good aim in case he should abuse said mathematical skill for his own profit.

Finding Sebastian Quinn in his cabin, hunched over his books with an expression of despair on his face, made Captain Denningham feel very uncomfortable. The thought that his new purser, unlike his predecessor, might know a thing or two about book-keeping crossed his mind. In that case, the despair was easy to explain, for the state of the *Selkie's* books was a disgrace. Denningham was well aware of that fact, and he also knew that putting all the blame on the sadly deceased Mr. Widdle wasn't fair - after all, he was the captain, and it was his responsibility to ensure that every man aboard the ship performed his duty.

At least theoretically. Practically, the men would have done as they pleased if it hadn't been for Mr. Barnett, who saw to it that discipline was upheld. Denningham wondered if maybe he ought to have allowed his first lieutenant to unleash his temper on Mr. Widdle from time to time, but the poor man would probably have died of fear. As it was, he had died of the fever only recently, leaving a wife and six children behind as well as book-keeping that was a gallimaufry of miscalculations and ink blotches.

"With all due respect, Sir, what is 'manco' supposed to mean?" Quinn asked. Denningham felt as if he was shrinking, like a schoolboy asked a question by his teacher that he couldn't answer because he hadn't been paying attention.

"That's - the rest," Denningham replied after a moment's consideration.

"The rest? Of what?"

"Well, of everything." Cursed be the man and his confidence; why couldn't Barnett discuss this with the purser? Denningham knew the answer, of course - Quinn and Barnett would have been at each other's throat within moments. He had never before observed such instant, intense mutual dislike as existed between the rough-and-ready first lieutenant and the elegant, narcissistic purser.

"Of everything, I see." The tip of Quinn's quill hovered over the paper, and Denningham felt as if the man was about to sign his death sentence. "You have, from your personal capital, given Mr. Widdle a loan of £ 300, is that correct?"

"Yes," Denningham confirmed. "It was necessary. Finding a purser for this ship was not easy," he added, though Quinn hadn't asked for an explanation. The expression on the man's face indicated a negative opinion about Denningham's judgment, though, and the captain couldn't blame him. Who but he would have given a man in debt a credit of £ 300 to become purser on a bum boat like the *Selkie*? Denningham had financed his own prison with his last money; no wonder Quinn questioned his sanity.

Quinn made a note. "£300. Good. The surety given by Mr. Widdle for the *Selkie* was £ 250. Assuming that your credit was for the explicit purpose of Mr. Widdle becoming purser aboard this ship, the question has to be asked what happened to the £ 50 that are missing."

Denningham made a vague gesture with his hand. "That's the manco."

"A kind expression for £ 50 lost. And here, the mess book! Aptly named, I have to say! I can't find any accounts of the men's rations. They are allowed credit for rations they haven't consumed. I only find bills and receipts for the totals, and if I count them up, we owe the

men about £ 20. Unfortunately, we don't know how much each man is entitled to. Did, by any chance, Mr. Widdle try to start a mutiny aboard this ship?"

The mockery and thinly veiled criticism did not escape Denningham.

"I'm sure Mr. Widdle would have been happy to know that his actions contributed to your entertainment, Mr. Quinn. But what would you suggest we do about the situation? The men haven't been paid in a year, and now this!"

Quinn shook his head and checked his calculations once again. They were correct.

"An unpleasant situation. From all I can tell, there is about £ 120 unaccounted for. I don't think the Admiralty will like that. At all. A pity Mr. Widdle is not with us any more. If he were, I'd have a good mind to make him walk the plank."

"You know perfectly well that we don't make men walk the plank in the navy, least of all an officer," Denningham protested, filled with indignation.

"Of course, of course, my apologies. Such brutish disciplinary actions are customary only among pirates. A flogging round the fleet is the civilised way to punish men. But while this might all be very interesting, the problem of the missing £ 120 is still not solved. Somebody will have to balance the books, Sir."

Denningham felt cold fear creep up to his heart. "I wouldn't know who could."

"Now that's where a fat little Spanish galleon, belly full of gold, would come in handy. Not very likely, though, and we'd have to give account on the prize, anyway. A rich widow, maybe? No, you already are married, and while I'll gladly give my life for King and Country, I refuse to get married to balance Mr. Widdle's mess book."

"A credit, then," Denningham suggested.

"Which would have to be repaid. With a new, larger credit, to cover interest. And that credit, with interest, would have to be repaid with an even larger credit. Sir, where would that end?"

"With a very large credit that couldn't be repaid?"

"Exactly. A very large credit with the names Widdle, Denningham and Quinn all over it, on the desk of some very displeased finance commissioner at the Admiralty. A very large credit which, eventually, would have to be carried by the Admiralty, which would demand more money from Parliament to cover it, and in the end that very large credit would have to be covered by the tax payers."

"It doesn't seem fair that the tax payers should have to pay for our mistakes," Denningham said carefully. "I fear I'm the one who will have to carry the can for it then."

Quinn smiled. "Very honourable, Sir. I doubt you'll ever take a seat in Parliament with that attitude. What do we have taxpayers for, after all? Couple of hundred pounds more or less, they won't notice."

"Mr. Quinn, I can only hope you're jesting, and if that's the case, I have to say that I find your jokes rather distasteful!"

Quinn bowed his head, feigning remorse. "My apologies, Sir. I'm afraid my frivolous nature has once again gotten the better of me. Now, we have a manco, and neither you nor the admiralty nor the government nor the tax payers should, could or will pay for it."

"What can we do then?"

The purser dipped the tip of his quill in the inkwell. "I'll do what every good accountant does, Sir: as the numbers refuse to be in accordance with the books, I'll bring the books in accordance with the numbers."

Denningham stared at Quinn. "How can that work? The money would still be missing!"

"Theoretically, yes. Practically, no. It's missing, but not missed. At least not yet. That, dear Sir, is the secret of our economy's success."

"But one day it will be missed, and what will happen then?"

"Devil may care, Sir, for I don't. With any luck, we'll all be dead by then. Your choice now, Captain Denningham: pillory or stocks?"

Denningham's head was spinning. "Do whatever you feel is the best thing to do," he finally murmured. "I think I need a breath of fresh air." And indeed he did; a waft of sulphur seemed to surround the purser, and Denningham even imagined him to have a set of horns.

"Yes, Sir," Quinn said cheerfully, and as Denningham fled the cabin, he heard the purser's quill scratching busily on the paper.

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