

Bourne toWrite...

creative writing
workshops

Pressganged

by Richard Lewis

Stephen and the rest of his class double marched to the school block; black tarmac of the parade ground below and grey skies of Gosport above. Today it was history, delivered by 'Dusty,' Petty Officer Rhodes, a short barrel of a man with craggy features and a voice that matched. He always looking worried, as if carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. Everyone was expecting another boring lesson but today would be different.

Dusty surpassed himself, transporting everyone back to days when the British navy did rule the waves. To the tumultuous days of 1805 and the battle of Trafalgar, when Lord Nelson's HMS Victory led by the front column. It felt that they were actually there on that famous ship, as if there'd been a mistake in time. The present world stilled, minds awash with the unfolding drama of the battle.

Nelson, parading himself on the deck of the Victory, had insisted against advice from his subordinates, on wearing full ceremonial dress uniform; thus making him an easy target for French sharpshooters. A musket ball hit him in the left shoulder, piercing his lung and breaking his spine. He died shortly before the battle ended, though his plan of attack was faithfully adhered to by his commanders.

Although costing his life, Nelson had done a mighty job of dispatching the French and Spanish fleet when heavily outnumbered, thus cementing his place in history and Britain's dominance of the sea for the next one hundred years.

Stephen, moved by Lord Nelson's daring and heroic action, carried the epic tale inside his head for many days after. Yet the next part of the lesson would have an even bigger impact on him. The subject of press-ganging. A practice enforced by law in the eighteen and nineteen hundreds to make up for a shortage of crew. Usually though not always, they were merchant seaman who could be snatched off the streets or from the imagined security of their homes, required to serve for the duration of a ship's voyage or longer. At the time of Trafalgar almost fifty percent of the crew would have been supplied in this way.

That night as Stephen lay on his bunk, the plight of those poor men being prised from their families played on his mind and he dreamt:

He was sat at the rear of the bar of The Dolphin, wondering how on earth he'd got there. A plaque on the wall stated it was the oldest pub in Portsmouth, founded in 1716, well before Lord Nelson and his epic Battle of Trafalgar. One of the windows had been signed by Nelson himself. The sound of sailors laughter echoed across the room as they exchanged salty tales and washed down beer that barely touched the sides. Stephen's ears rang as the shrill voices bounced off the walls and he choked on the air filled with a pungent aroma of pipe smoke that hung like a sea fog. He became aware that everyone's eyes had settled on him as if he were some kind of freak. Looking down he realised he was wearing nothing but his underclothes. Mortified Stephen was about to leave when there was a banging at the door and in barged an army officer looking strangely out of place in immaculate dress surrounded by the motley crew of naval ratings. The bright buttons on his shoulder and gold braid of his cap flashed above the crisp khaki tunic. His facial features were distorted as if disguising his true identity or perhaps he'd been the victim of some terrible accident. Stephen sat mesmerised as the officer's hand inched toward his leather holster and produced a Webley revolver, pointing it menacingly at him. Behind him appeared a gang of ruffians brandishing clubs and a voice boomed, "seize that man." Stephen turned, pleading for help from fellow patrons but they were unconcerned, clasping their precious tankards, swilling the golden nectar. Stephen tried to bolt towards the back door but his legs, betraying him, were pillars of lead, barely able to move. In an instant the gang was upon him, dragging him roughly out into the night. Above, the clouds rumbled as if a heard of buffalo were stampeding behind them. Rain fell from the darkening sky that itself seemed to be falling; the heavy droplets bouncing off cobbles that glinted in the faint light. Ahead, HMS Victory towered above him; the ship normally found in dry dock was strangely moored at the pier, her sails half filled by the stiffening breeze. Ghostly pirate like figures rolled barrels across the gangway, loading the vessel with provisions. Stephen tried to call out in protest but like his legs, his dream tongue refused to cooperate, frozen in its cage. As the struggling group clambered aboard the ancient ship he noticed that bizarrely it was built of brick and concrete, its rigging made of steel cable. 'Surely this'll never float, we're all heading for a watery grave,' he thought.' As they reached a ladder leading to the lower deck, Stephen looked back at the army officer standing on the dock. His features now visible, wore a distant look. A look Stephen recognised. It was the face of the familiar stranger, his father.

The realisation shook him back to consciousness and he sat bolt upright, his sweat ridden bed sheets wound tight as a straightjacket, his heart pulsating like a frightened bird.