

Here's the fifth excerpt, which is actually the beginning of Chapter 6, titled "The Wicked Wench." In the Han Solo Trilogy I was privileged to write the scene where Han first beheld -- and fell for -- the Millennium Falcon. What a thrill! And it was every bit as much of a thrill to write the following scene, I assure you! In April I'll post the sixth and final excerpt from the novel...the one where Jack takes his first (and possibly *only!*) BATH. Only about eight weeks to go before the release date!

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Jack Sparrow had never thought it would happen to him. All his life, he'd heard people speak of love—mostly men, of course, since he'd spent the majority of his life at sea, and there were few women who chose that life. Life on the sea was a male-dominated occupation, whether the sailors were pirates or seamen aboard a merchant ship or the crew of a naval vessel. There were the rare—and refreshing—exceptions, of course, such as Esmeralda, lovely Esmeralda . . .

Men were self-conscious about referring to love. They were often given to enthused bragging regarding their carnal adventures and conquests, but when they referred to love, it was usually in a hushed whisper, or a mumble. Sometimes an awed murmur, if the poor chap was embarrassingly besotted.

Jack wanted to shout his adoration aloud—and he would have, too, if he hadn't had a certain dignity to maintain. But ever since that day when he'd seen her, he'd thought of her with . . . love. No other word fit.

She was lovely, yes, of course. But there was more to it than that. She moved with authority, as well as beauty. There was a wildness, a sense of freedom and strength about her that captivated his heart, his soul. He wanted her for his own. When he'd finally gotten close to her, could touch her, she'd responded to his touch, he fancied, the way she had never responded to another man's.

Love, yes; there was no other word for the way he felt about her. At night he even

dreamed about her, about how it felt to guide her as she moved, feeling her respond to his orders. Her intoxicating scent—tar and salt and honest sweat. The sounds she made—the wind filling her ivory sails, the creak of her sheets, the slap of the waves against her red-gold bow as she clove the sea. She was beautiful, a work of art with graceful, gilded lilies and scrollwork emblazoned on her bow and stern, and gilded railings on her gunwales. A golden dream of a vessel...and she was all his to command. The *Wicked Wench* was her name, and Jack Sparrow, at long last, knew what it was to be in love.

The first time he'd seen her, she'd been tied up at the EITC dock in Calabar, looking somewhat forlorn. It was plain she hadn't been taken out for the last few months, since Cutler Beckett had acquired her. She was a ship that needed maintenance. First and foremost, she was crying out for a good careening. And once her bottom was clean, her decks needed scrubbing; her railings and trim needed painting. Her sails needed patching, and many of her lines needed replacement or splicing.

But Jack had seen beyond her down-at-heels appearance, seen the glory and grandeur of a full-rigged ship that could prove both fast and maneuverable. This "wench" had felt a lot of ocean slide beneath her keel, but she was sound; he could feel it in his bones. She most resembled a Dutch East Indiaman. Typical of merchant vessels, she was woefully under-gunned: only twelve big guns, six on the port side, six on the starboard side of main deck, then two smaller guns, nine-pounders, on her weather deck, and, finally, three small swivel guns topside, one fore, and two on her quarterdeck.

The *Wench's* main deck guns were heavy ones, twelve-pounders. Jack thought about what it would be like to hear the roar of those big twelve-pounders loosed in a broadside against an opponent, and shivered with excited anticipation—before he sternly reminded himself that

merchant captains counted themselves blessed if they never had to fire their guns.

Jack longed for more armament for his new love, even though knew he'd have trouble finding and training enough crew to man even as many guns as she now boasted on her main deck. Arming merchant ships was a tradeoff—guns, powder and supplies took up valuable space below decks that could be used for valuable—and profitable—cargo. Still, remembering his former associates at Shipwreck Cove, Jack immediately resolved to speak to Cutler Beckett about allowing him to install two additional twelve-pounders. That still wouldn't be enough weaponry to make any determined pirate think twice, but it was enough to dissuade smaller, more lightly armed and crewed vessels.

The day he first saw her, Jack stood there, spellbound, studying her every curve, every line, grinning like a besotted suitor. He couldn't help the first thought that sprang to his mind: *If I could just find enough men to crew her properly, what a pirate ship she'd make! If she were properly armed, and crewed, this ship could square off with Esmeralda's Blackwall frigate. Morgan himself never had such a ship.*

Sternly, Jack Sparrow repressed that thought. He was an honest merchant captain, and he'd best never forget it.

As Jack had stood there, gazing at HIS ship, he'd heard a step beside him and turned to find Robby Greene at his elbow. "Jack!" the younger man exclaimed. "I've been looking all over for you. Finally had to ask that nasty codfish of a portmaster, Blount, whether he'd seen you. He told me you were down here, staring at this ship, and had been for at least an hour. What's going on?"

Had it been that long? Jack blinked. He'd been so ensorcelled by the sight of his new vessel, making plans for getting her shipshape, that time had simply evaporated. He smiled at his

friend and gestured at the ship. “What do you think of her?”

Robby stared at the *Wicked Wench* for a moment, then shrugged. “She’d be perfect if we were still on the account and we had enough guns, powder and crew to sail her properly. Why?”

Jack chuckled at hearing his own initial assessment echoed so precisely. “She’s *mine*, Robby. Mr. Beckett made me her captain. We’ll be taking her out in a couple weeks, with a load of cargo.” He glanced back at the ship, straining against her tethering ropes like a spirited horse that wanted to run free. “How does it feel to be first mate of the *Wicked Wench*?”

A smile crept across Robby Greene’s tanned features. “First mate? Me?”

“Who better?” Jack said.

Robby laughed, then quickly sobered. “We’ll have to put together a crew.”

“She has some crew still in port,” Jack said. “Many of them found other berths and shipped out, but the office records indicate that there are perhaps twenty of them still here in Calabar. I’ll give you the list, and you can start rounding them up. Plus any hands you can scrounge up.” He glanced up the hill at the town of Calabar. “Not the best spot to find able-bodied seamen, I fear,” he added, wryly.

“Able-bodied?” Robby echoed. “Jack we’ll be lucky if we can find ordinary seamen!”

“Her bottom’s a mess,” Jack rubbed his chin, meditatively. “She’s nothing but barnacles and muck below her waterline. Mr. Beckett gave me a free hand and some funds I’m to use to get her shipshape. I’m figuring two weeks till she’s ready to sail.”

Robby nodded. “Two weeks, aye. I’ll do my best to round up the crew we’ll need . . . Cap’n.”

Jack grinned. “Doesn’t that sound beautiful? Captain Jack Sparrow. Nice ring to it, eh?”

“Very nice indeed, Jack. Or are you so eager to hear it that I have to call you ‘captain’

even when we're alone?"

Jack laughed out loud. "Indulge me for a few days, Robby, me lad. It's been a long time coming."

"Aye, it has. And you deserve it, Cap'n."

Jack sighed happily. "I suppose I'll get used to it with time, Robby, but at the moment, hearing it is better than a swig of rum, I swear." He fell silent, regarding the ship, then his gaze shifted upward. "I'm thinking we should rake her masts back a bit to get more speed out of her."

Robby nodded. "Three degrees?"

"Five." Jack's eyes lit up. "She'll cut quite a figure, eh, mate?"

Robby nodded. "The masts look to be in good shape. We'll need to go over all her canvas."

"First, though, we've got to get her hull shipshape. We'll take her up one of the Calabar's tributaries half a mile, and careen her on one of those nice sandy banks."

Robby swallowed. "The ones with all the crocodiles?"

"Aye," said Jack. He waved a hand airily. "The crocs won't be any problem. One blast from a swivel gun will send those scaly blighters slithering back into the river." He rubbed his hands with anticipation at the thought of firing one of the guns. He was quite sober, but he felt as if he'd had a few quick jolts of rum. He couldn't stop smiling.

Robby laughed and threw up his hands. "All right. You win. We'll scrub her hull as clean as a girl baby's bum on her Christening day."

"First we clean her, then we replace any worn planking," Jack said, totting off items on his black-rimmed fingers. "Then we'll need to 'pay' the bottom to protect against weed and worm. For that we'll need fat and soap. And then we tallow her. And, if Mr. Beckett will spring

for it, perhaps we'll sheath her, too."

"What about coating her with black stuff?"

"That's the last step. We're not in Bristol or Liverpool. We're more likely to be able to get white stuff," Jack said. "We'll need at least a barrel per side. I know how to mix it."

"No wonder the worms won't eat it," Robby made a face. "All of that protectant stinks to high heaven."

"Train oil, pine rosin and *brimstone*, mate," Jack said, with satisfaction. "It should!"

The two stood there, gazing happily at their new acquisition, discussing the *Wicked Wench's* proposed toilette.

The next two weeks were busy ones. Jack, who could work like a demon when he was motivated, was up every day before dawn, overseeing the cleaning and refitting of his new vessel.

Robby, when he wasn't helping with the work on the ship, was rounding up hands and sending them to help with the work. One day he rowed up to the ship with a windfall: three able-bodied seamen and two ordinary seamen. Jack, stripped to the waist in the heat, with a bandanna tied around his head to soak up the sweat, was standing on the canted starboard hull, overseeing the crew that was crawling around with brushes and scrapers, spreading the "white stuff" preservative on the newly cleaned planking. When he saw the new arrivals, he leaped down to the ground and strode over to meet them as they pulled the boat up onto the sandbank.

After Robby made introductions, Jack interviewed the three able-bodied seamen briefly, nodded in satisfaction at their qualifications, then ordered them to join the crewmembers that were working on the hull.

As Robby escorted the new crew away, Jack turned his attention to the two remaining

candidates. The ordinary seamen were a tall, gangly Frenchman, Etienne de Ver, and a short, burly Englishman, Lucius Featherstone, both of them in their mid-twenties. The Frenchman was black-haired and sallow, the Englishman fair-haired and ruddy.

“I’m Captain Jack Sparrow, lads,” Jack said, though, in truth, both sailors were probably near his own age. Something about the way both of them were standing, carefully not looking at each other, alerted him. He gestured from one to the other. “You two know each other?”

“*Oui*, Captain,” the Frenchman said, giving a military salute. Jack’s eyes widened with surprise.

Featherstone, not to be outdone, snapped to attention and saluted with even greater vigor. “Aye, sir, we do!”

“You were in the navy?” Jack was taken aback, thinking this didn’t bode well. If they’d been navy men, they both must have been cashiered. The navies of most countries were so short-staffed that they often had to resort to shanghaiing hands to serve. And, obviously, these two couldn’t have served in the *same* navy.

“No, *mon Capitan*,” de Ver said. “I was a soldier. Infantry.”

“And you?” Jack turned to Featherstone.

“Infantryman, Cap’n Sparrow. But the war, it ended almost three years ago, sir.”

Ah . . . the situation was now explained. They’d been paid off and mustered out honorably, one hoped.

“I see. How long have you been going to sea?” Jack asked Featherstone.

“I tried working as a farmhand for a year, Cap’n, but the crops failed in the drought,” the man said. “So then I signed aboard a merchant vessel, the *Molly Dover*. We went all the way to China, Cap’n. But while we were on our way back to Liverpool, the poor *Molly*, she hit a rock

off the coast here, and we had to abandon ship in a storm. I need a new berth.”

“And you?” Jack regarded de Ver.

“I, too, was on the *Molly Dover*, Captain Sparrow,” the man answered.

A voyage from England to China . . . yes, that could easily take a year or more, depending on the number of ports of call.

“I see. So you were both soldiers. Who did you fight?” Jack asked, trying to remember what he’d heard about the most recent conflicts England and France had been engaged in. There were always wars going on somewhere in Europe, and land battles had little relevance to men who lived on the sea.

“The British, *mon capitain*,” de Ver replied.

“We fought the French, Cap’n Sparrow,” Featherstone said, almost at the same moment.

“Kicked their frog-gulping arses, we did,” he added, with relish.

The former opponents exchanged sideways glances that were anything but amiable.

“I see,” Jack murmured, stroking his chin thoughtfully. “Well, if I permit you to join the ship’s company, are you prepared to be faithful hands before the mast?”

“Aye, *mon capitain*!”

“Aye, Cap’n Sparrow!”

“Aboard the *Wicked Wench*, you’ll be comrades. Can you remember that?” Jack barked, letting an edge enter his voice.

“Oh, aye sir!” Featherstone said.

“*Oui, mon Capitain*,” de Ver said, then added, “Aye, sir,” in his strongly accented English for good measure.

“Very well,” Jack said, gruffly, eyeing the pair. Featherstone and de Ver seemed earnest,

if not overly bright. “What ports of call on your voyage to China, Mister de Ver?”

Etienne de Ver scratched his head thoughtfully beneath his battered cap. “Marseilles, *mon capitain*,” he said. “Where the best ships, the ships built by Frenchmen, they are docking! Also, Lisbon, Gibraltar, Algol here in Afrique, then around the Cape of Good Hope to Shanghai. With stops for provisioning, *naturellement*.”

Featherstone made a derisive noise. “Don’t be payin’ any attention to that frog-eater, Cap’n Sparrow, sir,” he said. “He knows the best ships are made by Blackwall, and set sail from English ports. He’s just been out in the sun too long.” The short man tapped his forehead, where his sandy hair was thinning even at his age. “The sun and eating all them unnatural vermin, them snails and frogs—turns a man’s brain to porridge, it does.”

The black-haired Frenchmen drew himself up indignantly. “*Zut!*” he snapped. “Captain Sparrow is obviously a man of the sea, a man who has sailed the world. *He* knows who builds the best ships!”

Jack cleared his throat significantly, and both sailors fell silent. “I see,” he said, after a long pause. For a moment, he considered ordering both of them back into the canoe. But the *Wench* was still very short of hands, and he couldn’t afford to be too choosy. Both Featherstone and de Ver were well muscled and appeared healthy. He’d keep an eye on them, and he’d tell Robby to do the same.

“Captain . . .” began Featherstone hesitantly.

“Yes, Featherstone?”

“Sir, beggin’ your pardon, but . . .” Featherstone gulped and then plunged ahead, “I discovered I like life on the sea. The food ain’t great, true enough, and it’s hard work, but hard work never killed anyone, eh?”

Jack gestured for him to continue, and get to the point. “Yes?”

“Sir!” Featherstone straightened his shoulders. “Cap’n, I’d like the chance to qualify as an able-bodied seaman! I’ve already got a year in. Just wanted to say, sir.”

“Able-bodied seamen” had to be able to “hand, reef and steer,” which translated to climbing rigging properly (which meant putting their hands and feet in the proper places), handle sails, raising or reefing them, as well as steering the ship in all types of weather, correctly following a course heading. They also had to be able to splice lines, repair equipment, and tie all of the knots used by sailors correctly. It was no surprise to discover that Featherstone wanted to raise his status to that of able-bodied seaman, because, traditionally, they made about twenty-five percent more in pay.

“I see,” Jack said. “Well then, look sharp during the next six months or so, because you never know when I’ll decide to test you, Featherstone.”

Featherstone was clearly pleased. He glanced quickly sideways at de Ver, smiling triumphantly. The lanky Frenchman stirred. “Captain Sparrow,” he said, clearly trying to make his English as proper as he could, “I, too, wish to be made able-bodied seaman.”

“Very well,” said Jack. “The same goes for you, then. Now, both you lads report to First Mate. Greene. He’ll assign you to tasks.”

“Aye, Captain!” Featherstone saluted again.

“*Oui, mon capitain!*” de Ver said, doing likewise.

Jack cleared his throat again, significantly. “Ahem. Mates, this isn’t a naval vessel. No need for all that saluting.” He waved a finger at the duo. “But the discipline I expect is no less,” he added, sternly. “Now off with you.”

As they moved away, he heard their voices drift back. “Just watch me make able seaman

ahead of you,” Featherstone proclaimed.

“*Non*,” came de Ver’s retort. “It is I who will attain it before you!”

“Not a chance, frog! See, it takes *brains* to make able seaman. And courage!”

“Ze Englishman never lived who had either! Your countrymen ran like chickens before *Guillaume le Conquérant!*”

“Oho, but our Henry the Fifth, he crossed the channel and kicked your butts on your own soil! English longbowmen made pincushions out of them Frenchy knights!”

Jack rolled his eyes, sighing heavily as the pair moved out of earshot, still bickering.

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