

This is the sixth excerpt from *The Price of Freedom* that I'll be posting. I hope you'll enjoy it. Included in this scene is Jack's first – and possibly *only* – BATH.

Only a few days now before *The Price of Freedom* is released. Amazon.com and Barnes and Noble.com both have it listed for a mere \$13.08. (See the "buy" link on this website.) It should also be available in your local bookstore.

If you'd like a signed copy of the book without the hassle of mailing that big volume, hey, good news! I have some great collector edition *Price of Freedom* bookplates (see my blog for picture) that I am **GIVING AWAY!!** Just send a SASE (stamped, self-addressed envelope) to PO Box 827, Bryantown, MD 20517-0827 and I will send you back a signed bookplate you can stick on the title page of your copy! If you want it personalized in some fashion, just include a little note saying how, and I'll be happy to do it.

The *Wench* sailed north, along the coast of the American colonies, gliding on the Gulf Stream. As before, Jack brought her across the Atlantic, navigating with admirable precision. She unloaded her cargo in Liverpool, then picked up another cargo, and departed, bound for Calabar. Jack was glad that the EITC dockworkers had wasted no time loading his new cargo. He'd checked the days their voyage had taken, and realized he was actually running close to the record for sailing the Triangle. His *Wench* was indeed fast!

Then they were on the move again, sailing south, past France, past Spain, past Portugal. They took on fresh water in Gibraltar, and then they were hastening south, down the coast of Africa, curving around the bulge, then turning almost due east.

They reached Calabar on a Thursday, not long before the rainy season was due to begin, and tied up at the EITC dock. Jack checked the date, and sighed. *Missed equaling the record by two bloody days! If we hadn't diverted to St. Jago, we'd likely have beaten it. Still, not too shabby for a first voyage as a new captain. Not too shabby at all...*

Jack had scarcely checked the moorings on the *Wench*, before crowds were gathering on

the dock. Voices were calling out to the ship, shouting that he'd almost beaten the Triangle record. Hearing them, Jack went to the railing, and waved modestly. The dockworkers cheered.

After they dropped the gangplank, a short, ginger-haired man came scurrying up, to introduce himself as Eugene Parker, the new EITC portmaster. Portmaster Parker told Jack that his predecessor, Benjamin Blount, had fled Calabar in the middle of the night after a captain had discovered that the provisions he'd sent had been infested, and the meat rotten. Hearing this, Jack shook his head in wonder and made appropriately shocked comments.

He was still standing on the weather deck, talking to the portmaster, when a slightly built, dark-haired man called out from the bottom of the gangplank, "Permission to come aboard, Captain Sparrow?"

Jack looked down at the man, and nodded. "Who's the Scotsman?" he asked the portmaster.

Mr. Parker's broad, good-humored countenance tightened, but he said, evenly, "That's Mr. Beckett's assistant, Ian Mercer."

By that time, the new arrival had joined them. Jack nodded cordially to him. "Good afternoon, Mr. Mercer."

Mercer gave him a curt nod back. "Good afternoon, Captain Sparrow."

Jack noticed Mercer didn't extend his hand. Looking into the man's eyes, Jack was just as glad. Mercer's eyes were flat and cold . . . the eyes of a man who could kill without a thought, without even a reason, and never think twice about it. Jack had met a few pirates who were killers; most were madmen, dangerous to their crews, and to everyone they encountered. But even worse than the madmen, Jack had found, were the killers who had eyes like Mercer.

And this man works for Mr. Beckett? he thought, dismayed, but careful not to let it show.

Why would he need a man like this working for him? What's Beckett up to, that he has a killer as his assistant?

Jack cleared his throat. "So how is Mr. Beckett keeping, Mr. Mercer? Well, I hope?"

"He's fine, Captain Sparrow," Mercer said, shortly, obviously not interested in exchanging pleasantries. "Mr. Beckett sent me down here to ask you to come to his office right away. There's someone he wants you to meet."

Jack blinked at Cutler Beckett's new "assistant," then glanced around at the *Wicked Wench*, visually checking her status. The ship was safely secured, but there were things he needed to do, such as arrange for his cargo to be unloaded, and inform the crew about shore leave. But this sounded urgent . . .

"I'll come directly," he said. "Just let me speak to my first mate to let him know about this."

Mercer's face never changed. He nodded, grudgingly.

Jack was back in moments, and the two men set off on foot, down the gangplank, along the docks, then they left the docks for the rutted mud of the streets, heading up the hill toward the better section of town. Brushing uselessly at a spot on his coat, Jack cleared his throat. "I hope Mr. Beckett will understand that I haven't had a chance to . . . freshen up."

"That's been taken care of," Mercer said, flatly. The only distinctive thing about his voice was his Scottish accent. Otherwise, his voice was toneless, lacking any emotion.

Jack glanced at Mercer out of the corner of his eye. He was fairly sure the man was carrying a brace of pistols beneath his coat. The garment itself was cut so as to conceal them, but Jack knew where to look. He'd carried pistols slung beneath his arms himself, a few times.

Who is this man that doesn't even take a mile walk in broad daylight on a public street

without going out armed? What kind of trouble can he be expecting? And WHY does Mr. Beckett need a man like this to handle things for him?

Mercer strode along quickly, forcing Jack to lengthen his stride. Even though Mercer was shorter than Jack, Jack's gait was perforce unsteady, since it had been many weeks since he'd been on dry land. By the time they'd climbed the hill to Beckett's home (Jack was surprised by their destination; he'd been expecting to be taken to the EITC office) his "land legs" were working again.

Mercer led him inside the beautifully appointed townhouse, stopping in the foyer. "Mistress Goodwright?" he called out.

A plumpish middle-aged white woman appeared, wearing a blue dress with a white fichu crossed over the bosom, and the white cap worn by married ladies in England. "Yes, Mr. Mercer?" She glanced at Jack. "Is this the young man we're expecting to lunch with Mr. Beckett and his Lordship?"

"Yes, Mistress Goodwright," Mercer replied. "Please attend to him."

The housekeeper gave Jack an appraising glance, from his sun-faded old tricorn, to his battered buckled shoes. She then made a little "tch" with her tongue against her teeth, but didn't . . . quite . . . shake her head. "Very well, please come with me, Mister . . . er, Sparrow, is it?"

Jack swept off his battered tricorn, bowed slightly, and smiled. "*Captain* Jack Sparrow, madam."

As she took in his smile, Mistress Goodwright's plump cheeks turned even redder; smiling back, she actually dropped a little curtsy. "La, and aren't you the one," she said, to no one in particular. "Come with me, please, Captain Sparrow."

Jack followed her down the hallway, through the family living quarters, to the back of the

house that seemed to be part of the laundry area. A portion of it had been cleared of sheets and clothes, and there stood a cast-iron tub full of water, a big ewer that was likewise filled, a cake of soap, a razor, and several large towels. A comb and brush waited on the washstand. Hanging from a clothes tree was a bright blue coat, a canary colored waistcoat, an ivory lawn shirt, and a pair of fawn-colored britches. Creamy white stockings were draped alongside the britches. All of the clothes appeared to be new. “We didn’t do the shoes,” Mistress Goodwright said, regretfully, eyeing Jack’s battered shoes. “But you can brush ‘em off, a bit, maybe.”

Jack stopped in the doorway. “What’s all this?” he asked, surprised. “New clothes? For me?”

“You’re to meet his Lordship, Viscount Penwallow,” Mistress Goodwright said, bustling around. “Methinks we’ve got a hat that will fit . . . one of footman’s old ones, perhaps. I’ll see about it, while you’re having your bath. Hurry up, it’s almost time to serve luncheon.”

Jack was mesmerized by the water in the iron tub. Reaching out, he touched it, finding it tepid. “What’s this for?” he asked.

“La, lad!” Mistress Goodwright giggled, “’Tis for you! Very particular, Mr. Beckett is, ‘bout his hygiene. That is his own tub! He ordered us to haul it down here and fill it for you, Captain.”

Jack frowned, confused. “What does Mr. Beckett want me to do with it?”

She giggled harder. “I know, I know . . . outlandish idea, isn’t it? But ‘tis becoming the fashion among some of the gentry, they say. At least once a month, they takes off all their clothes, and they SITS in those ‘bathtubs’ and they washes themselves. All over. Mr. Beckett says the Romans did it all the time.”

“No wonder their Empire fell,” Jack muttered. Turning back to Mistress Goodwright, he

drew himself up and fixed her with a reproving glare. “Madam, I am clean.” Catching sight of his hands, he tucked them behind him and amended, “well, mostly.”

Silently, the goodwife shook her head, pursing her lips.

“I’ll have you know I went for a nice long swim on a lovely beach, not much more than three months ago,” Jack said, indignantly.

Mistress Goodwright stepped forward, biting her lip. She swallowed. “Mr. Beckett told me that if you said no, I was to tell him and he’d instruct Mr. Mercer to see that you did it,” she whispered.

Jack moved forward and stared down at the nervous little housekeeper. His voice, when finally spoke, was very soft and cold. “*Did* he now? That’s . . . interesting.”

The thought of having Mercer and some footman ripping his clothes off and throwing him into that tub was not only unappealing, it was terrifying. For a moment, Jack was tempted to say to hell with the whole bloody thing and go back to his ship. Still . . . he worked for Beckett . . . and Beckett had made him a captain . . . and there was the *Wicked Wench* . . .

He hesitated.

Mistress Goodwright nodded fearfully. “Oh, *please*, Captain Sparrow. Mr. Beckett ordered me to see that you bathed. He’ll be powerful angry with me if you don’t. He’s always so particular about things when Lord Penwallow comes to visit.”

The goodwife’s eyes were suspiciously bright, and her plea was obviously heartfelt. Looking down at the clear water, Jack shrugged. *How bad can it be?* “Oh, very well,” he grumped. “But I’m sure it’s unhealthy. I’ll probably catch me death.”

“*Thank* you, Captain Sparrow!” Mistress Goodwright hesitated in the doorway as Jack placed his tricorne on a row of hooks, then stepped out of his shoes. He took off his coat, then

looked back up at her, wondering why she was still there. “Um . . .” she cast her eyes down modestly as she blushed, “Captain Sparrow, would you like me to . . . scrub your back?”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Madam . . .” he said, patiently, “I thought time was of the essence?”

“Yes, yes, you’re right, of course . . .” she moved backward.

“And close that door, if you please,” Jack ordered, shrugging out of his waistcoat.

The door swung closed . . . but he didn’t hear it click. Jack began unbuttoning his shirt. “All the way, Mistress Goodwright,” he said.

The door clicked shut.

The bath wasn’t nearly as bad as he’d thought it might be. He’d never washed with anything other than a chip of laundry soap, but this soap smelled like herbs and flowers. Jack even washed his hair, dunking his head to rinse. When he climbed out, he was surprised to see how dark the water had turned.

Maybe I should try to swim more often, he thought, toweling off.

After he’d shaved, and tied his hair back, he turned his attention to the new clothes. They fit perfectly.. Jack wiped the dust off his shoes with one of the towels, buffed the buckles for a moment, then pulled them on. He opened the door to the other room to find Mercer and Mistress Goodwright waiting. She handed him a plain black tricorne. “Here, Captain Sparrow. You look very . . . distinguished.”

“Thank you,” Jack said. The new clothes were stiff against his skin, but he had to admit they felt good. He wished he had a mirror. “About my old clothes –“

“We’ll take care of burning them for you,” Mercer said. “Come along now.”

Jack halted. “I don’t think so, mate. I’m rather partial to my clothes. I spent good coin on

them, money I earned by the sweat of my brow. I want them returned to my ship, or put in a parcel so I can carry them back myself.”

Mercer’s look clearly expressed his irritation, but Jack stood firm.

“Very well,” Mercer said, and even through the man’s flat tones, Jack could tell this small concession cost him. This was a man people did not say “no” to with impunity. “Mistress Goodwright will see that your clothes are waiting for you.”

Jack glanced at the housekeeper and she nodded reassuringly at him.

He headed for Mercer. “Let’s go, then.”

Luncheon, it turned out, was to be served upstairs, in Beckett’s library. Jack stood with Mercer outside the door while the assistant knocked on it. “Mr. Beckett, Captain Sparrow is here.”

“Please send him in,” responded a familiar voice.

Jack entered the library, and thought that he had never seen so many books in one place before. He would have loved to look around, but instead went straight over to the long table in the center of the room, where Cutler Beckett was seated with a heavy-bellied man who smelled strongly of expensive perfume. No doubt this was the Lord Penwallow that had been mentioned. The older man wore an elaborate powdered wig and elegant brocaded coat in marked contrast to Cutler Beckett’s subdued business attire. His lordship’s clothing, Jack realized, probably cost more than an EITC captain made in half a year.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Beckett,” Jack said, wondering whether he should bow or offer to shake hands. Deciding to play it safe, he gave a respectful bow.

“Ah, Captain Sparrow!” Cutler Beckett said, in his upper class accent. “How nice that you could join us for luncheon. Allow me to introduce my houseguest. This is Viscount, Lord

Reginald Marmaduke Bracegirdle-Penwallow, the EITC's Director of African Affairs.”

Jack wished that someone had warned him beforehand about that name. He kept his features pleasant, but it was a close thing for a moment. Promising himself a good laugh the moment he was alone, he bowed, rather more deeply than he had to Beckett, to Penwallow. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Lord Penwallow.”

Lord Penwallow smiled affably. “Thank you, Captain Sparrow, and I must say the pleasure is all mine. It's an honor to meet the captain who so nearly broke the record for sailing the Triangle—and on the vessel's maiden voyage as an EITC ship, too! Well done, well done, Captain Sparrow!”

Jack found himself rather liking Lord Penwallow.

After Jack was seated, and while they were exchanging small talk about the *Wicked Wench*, chatting about her cargo capacity and her top logged speed, Mistress Goodwright tapped on the door, then entered, followed by a string of maids and footmen, all of them carrying platters, bowls and bottles. Jack, who hadn't eaten since dawn, heard his stomach growl, and devoutly hoped no one else had heard it. He stared at the excess of delicate wineglasses, bone china and polished sterling with dismay, then, glancing sideways at Cutler Beckett, resolved to follow his host's lead in navigating these unknown intricacies of table etiquette. It wouldn't do to commit some manner of egregious *faux pas* and embarrass Mr. Beckett.

The meal began with a delicious consommé, and a glass of Port. Jack copied Beckett's use of his soup spoon, enjoying the flavor, all the while wondering why such a flavorful broth had been allowed to get cold, and was lacking any actual meat, vegetables, beans or rice in it. Jack noticed that Mr. Beckett didn't clink his spoon against the china, and made not even a trace of a slurp, so he carefully followed his lead. *The gentry don't have much fun when they eat, do they?*

Maybe that's why Mr. Beckett hardly ever smiles . . .

The next course was a delicious white fish with a creamy sauce, accompanied by a delicate Chablis. Jack had eaten fish all his life, but never any so elegantly prepared and served. Now that he had to actually chew, he was careful to mimic Cutler Beckett and keep his lips together.

Jack sipped each wine carefully, politely refusing refills. He wanted to keep a clear head so he wouldn't make some kind of mistake. He was relieved to discover that the main course was filet of beef, with potatoes. The captain relaxed a bit; he'd certainly had meat and potatoes before. But he'd never had beef this tender. He chewed appreciatively—but carefully. Again there was a different wine, this time a rich Beaujolais.

When the servants cleared away his plate this time, Jack figured they were finished. He was just about to push back from the table, when suddenly there was a plate of raw greens, onions, and slivers of carrot resting before him. After a glance at Cutler Beckett's place setting for a cutlery check, he picked up the appropriate fork (he was down now to only two) and was soon crunching away manfully. How odd to eat vegetables that hadn't been cooked! But he had to admit, they tasted better than he would have imagined, due mostly to the dollop of dressing the footman had added to them after placing Jack's place before him.

The last dish served was some kind of pudding, mixed up with cake, all of it topped with thick cream and a sweet liqueur. Jack had never eaten anything so sweet and rich in his life. He finished, then laid his fork down, wishing he dared lick the plate . . . but even pirates seldom did *that*—at least in public. The sweet sherry that had accompanied it wasn't to his taste, so he didn't finish his glass—another first. Using the damask serviette for the last time, Jack wiped his mouth, just as Beckett and Penwallow did. He found himself thinking that perhaps he'd invest in

a few of these. They worked better than one's sleeve, and were far easier to keep clean.

Conversation during the meal had mostly been carried on between Beckett and Penwallow, with Jack only having to briefly answer a question or two about his recent voyage. As the last of the servants left with the dirty dishes, Beckett turned to him, saying warmly, "Jack, it was truly a fortunate coincidence that you arrived today, and could join us. I trust you enjoyed our modest repast?"

Jack nodded. "Oh, yes, Mr. Beckett. Thank you for the invitation."

"Good! Jack, Lord Penwallow has an important delivery to be made to the plantation he recently purchased in New Avalon. I told him you were the very chap to transport it there for him."

Jack nodded. "Certainly, Mr. Beckett. I'll do my best to get it there in good time." A sudden thought struck him. *He's not talking about slaves, is he? I don't transport slaves.*

Penwallow, too, was smiling and nodding. "I'm building a new plantation house, Captain Sparrow. I had everything shipped to me here in Calabar, so I could inspect it all personally before I had it sent on its destination. I was worried that the imported window glass might have broken, but it was packed exceedingly well—just as I instructed."

Jack relaxed and smiled. "Building materials? I'll be happy to head right back out as soon as they're loaded, and we've re-stocked. It's almost time for the rainy season here in Africa, and I'll be glad to get away before that begins."

Penwallow nodded again. "Capital, Captain Sparrow!" He rubbed his be-ringed hands together, obviously in an excellent mood. "This load will need your personal supervision, Captain. Some of the objects I've acquired are one-of-a-kind pieces of art, and all of them would be difficult to replace. For example, there will be two types of brick, the regular brick for the

sides and rear of the house, and the ornamental brick for the front. Wait until you see the rose color of it. It's splendid! And of course the rare woods for the floors."

"Don't forget the more prosaic stuff, my lord," Cutler Beckett said, still smiling. "Nails, and hinges, and fittings for the doors. Lath and plaster and mortar. And boards, of course, both finished and rough-planed. Not to mention the tools for the workers."

"Cutler, my boy, you're forgetting my Italian marble tiles for the pavement, plus the fountain I purchased in Venice!" the EITC Director said, beaming. "It's going to be a showplace, I declare!"

"You'll be moving there, Lord Penwallow?" Jack asked. "To New Avalon? You and your family?"

"We'll certainly be visiting there," the portly man said. "Whether m'wife Hortense will agree to make it her year-round home remains to be seen. As for m'self, I spend most of my time traveling for the EITC."

"New Avalon is lovely, much of the year," Jack said. "Summers are much hotter than England, of course."

"I've been there, but Lady Hortense hasn't," Penwallow said. "Still, the climate will be good for her joints, methinks. She suffers terrible with rheumatics every winter."

Jack nodded. "If the cold bothers her, then living in New Avalon should definitely help. Do you have children, Lord Penwallow? It sounds as though you're building a large plantation house."

"Yes, two," Penwallow said. "But our daughter Anna is married, and no doubt she'll stay in England, though I hope she might visit and bring the children. Our son, Frederick will probably prefer to remain in Surrey. He wouldn't want to miss the season at court."

“Ah,” Jack said, nodding, sagely, as though he met people who had relatives at court every day.

“I have their miniatures, would you care to see?”

“I’d like that very much, my lord.”

“Here we go . . . I always carry them . . .” Lord Penwallow brought out the painted ivory miniatures in their little gold frames and handed them over.

Jack studied them, listening as the old man rambled on about his family, particularly his son. Frederick Penwallow, it seemed, was the best rider to hounds in all of Surrey, could dance every dance at every fancy ball, hold his liquor with the best of them, and had never lost a game of chance. It was clear that the young man was the apple of his father’s eye, and something of a rake, Jack concluded, studying the pictured face. The miniature showed a young man of about Jack’s age, with dark, curled hair, dark eyes, and a hint of mischief in his eye, presuming that the artist had rendered a good likeness.

“A handsome young gentleman,” Jack said, hanging back the picture. “Though for a young man of such high birth, I’m surprised he doesn’t favor powdered wigs.”

Lord Penwallow laughed, delighted. “That’s Frederick’s own hair!” he said. “Thick and curly as any fine wig, it is. Just between you and I, Captain Sparrow, he’s a bit vain about it.”

Jack widened his eyes appropriately. “A fine head of hair indeed,” he said. “I’ll take odds Frederick is considered quite a catch, eh? All the young ladies setting their caps for him, ”

Penwallow gave Jack and Cutler Beckett a triumphant glance, then lowered his voice. “I was told by a reliable source in the Privy Council that Frederick has been referred to as England’s most eligible bachelor!”

“I knew it,” Jack exclaimed. “Didn’t I say it? *All* the young ladies!”

By the time the three men parted company, later that afternoon, Jack knew a great deal about his lordship's family, and Lord Penwallow was convinced that Captain Jack Sparrow was not only a notable ship captain, but a young man of great taste and discernment.

He positively beamed at Jack as they bade each other farewell.

Jack headed back down the street, carrying his old clothes in the sack Mistress Goodwright had handed to him at the door, wondering what it would be like to live in Mr. Beckett's world—or even Lord Penwallow's world. *I suppose you get used to wearing fancy clothes all the time, and eating fancy food, food that sure beats burgoo*, he admitted, recalling that memorable luncheon.

But . . . everything's so bloody complicated for the gentry, it seems! You'd have to be planning and figuring and doing every moment of every day. When would you have time to enjoy yourself? No, I'll take a good ship and a following wind any day, he concluded.

But . . . wouldn't it be great if the good ship were his *own* ship?

Jack's strides slowed, and his expression grew thoughtful. *How could I ever buy a ship of my own?* he wondered. He'd never been one to save money. But perhaps it was time to change that. If he had a ship of his own . . . perhaps even the *Wicked Wench*, say, *he* would be the one in charge. He'd give the orders on land, as well as at sea. And he wouldn't have to worry about pleasing a supervisor, or a company. He'd only have to please himself.

He'd wanted for so long to be captain of his own vessel. What if the ship he commanded actually *belonged* to him?

Jack walked on down towards the docks, deep in thought.
