

“The Wife”

By

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Introduction

The Wife is a historically fictitious one act play. It is not expository history or unadulterated fiction, but a combination of fact and literature in an attempt to illuminate one imaginary woman's specific experience in Salem, Massachusetts—the worries of the wife of a privateer.

The play is set in 1780 in Salem during the Revolutionary War. The colonists had declared their independence, and were fighting a struggle that at times could be juxtaposed with David battling Goliath.

It was in many of these battles that privateers, who had sailed out of Salem and other New England harbors, captured British trading vessels and other enemy allied ships. In doing so, they not only protected their harbors, but brought back provisions and munitions that kept the Continental Army supplied, and supplied the colonists with provisions that were not easily obtained once the war began.

Specifically, privateers were privately owned vessels armed with guns. They seized rival nations' merchant vessels during wartime. Every privateer was given a letter of marque which was a commission to seize any enemy ship and its cargo as a prize. In addition to the owners, captain and officers, the crew also received part of this commission. Each member served on board the ship for his share of the money reaped from the sale of prizes seized during the voyage.

However, before any capturing was to be done, the owner of the vessel was “required to give bond as principal, with two good names for sureties.” (Eastman, p4) This was insurance that the captain and all members of the crew would follow privateering regulations and on no account endeavor to capture a ship of neutral or allied

countries. If the privateer did make an illegal capture, the posted bond would indemnify the wronged parties.

Next, “merchants and private citizens would then purchase shares from the prospective privateer, putting up capital that provided the ship with cannon, supplies, and munitions.” (Goss, pg 22) Thus being prepared, the privateer was ready to seek prizes and make its commission.

Then again, seeing as the British government did not acknowledge the legitimacy of American privateering commissions, captured American seamen were aware that they could find themselves hanged as pirates. Often, the difference between being and pirate and a privateer was how much weight and power the signature on the letter of marque held.

Besides being hung for piracy, captured sailors could also be pressed into British service, with the British claiming that the prisoner was a runaway British sailor. This did not happen to every privateer though, for capture often meant imprisonment.

Capture for Salem privateers meant condemnation to prisons such as Melville Island in Halifax, or Chatham or Dartmoor Prison in England. If they were not sent to an actual building, prisoners were often kept in the brig on board damp wrecks secured in a remote part of some harbor. Many common sailors dreaded the prisons, such as Dartmoor, evoking some to say that “Dartmoor was a place less desirable to mortals, and more under the influence of evil spirits, than any other spot in England.” (Eastman, p 31) But for those of higher rank, if they had some money in their pockets, they could possibly last for awhile.

Lasting for a while could be difficult for many privateers. They not only faced capture, execution and imprisonment, there was also sickness and storms. Privateering was obviously not an easy way of life. Many men went to sea and left their wives, children and families behind. It is with these “left behinds” in mind and with these perils that I have described that I now present to you a wife’s side of the story.

Act One

First Lieutenant William Harker and his family are fictional characters. I have written him to have been an officer on the privateer ship the *General Pickering*, which was commanded by Captain Jonathan Haraden of Salem, Massachusetts. Haraden was “sometimes called the ‘Salamander’ because of his ability to with stand fire.” (Chidsey p62)

In spring of 1780, the *General Pickering* was sailing for Bilbao, Spain with a cargo of sugar. After a long voyage, she made her way into the Bay of Biscay, where the *General Pickering* spotted a British privateer, the *Golden Eagle*. The *Golden Eagle* was larger than the *General Pickering*, and outnumbered her by both men and guns. Taking advantage of the cover of night, Haraden came upon her. With the use of some creative bluffing, he convinced the British captain that the *General Pickering* was an American frigate, and if he did not surrender, she would sink them with a broadside. Because it was night, the captain of the *Golden Eagle* was not able to discern the size of his enemy. He soon surrendered. Haraden took the British vessel without any shots being fired. He then put a prize crew aboard the *Golden Eagle*, and continued sailing into Bilbao.

When getting close to port, Haraden spotted another vessel. This one was the *Achilles*, a British privateer out of London. Like the *Golden Eagle*, it was larger than the *General Pickering* and outnumbered it by men and guns. However, as before, this did not stop Haraden.

The winds were weak at this time, so both ships were becalmed. For several days Haraden and his crew waited. He left word with those on each watch that if that *Achilles*

approached, he was to be notified. It was on June 4, 1780, when Haraden was awoken and told that the *Achilles* was heading for them.

In a three hour battle, the *General Pickering* took on the British privateer. With her hull still full, she sat lower in the water than the *Achilles* and was able to adeptly and repeatedly broadside her. Sweep after sweep, Haraden raked the British privateer's sides. Soon, the larger ship was wrecked and savaged, and quickly lost maneuverability. Realizing this, the captain of the *Achilles* turned and ran while the ship was still able. Haraden went after the *Achilles* and tried to catch her, but the *General Pickering* could not match the British ship's speed.

The plot of the play has Sarah Harker concerned because she has recently received news from another ship that the *General Pickering* was possibly captured, and she has not heard from her husband for several months.

A study in the home of First Lieutenant William Harker, Salem, Massachusetts, in the fall of 1780.

There are several large windows in the room which allow plenty of sunlight. A large oak desk and a matching arm chair behind it, several books, a couch, two oil lamps, and two tables are the other furnishings in the room. At the back right corner of the study is a painting of William Harker.

As the curtain rises, Mrs. Sarah Harker is pacing about the room. She has a letter in her hand and she is noticeably worried. Her servant Mary is in an opposite corner of the room, trying to clean, but seems concerned for her mistress.

SARAH: Reading a letter to herself, and not paying any attention to her servant Mary, who is at the other end of the room cleaning. We hear Sarah's husband William's voice as she reads the letter. My dear Sarah, our trip has been long, but I will be coming home to you, soon. I miss your beautiful face, and our children's smiles. The voyage has been long, but thoughts of you bring me peace. I cannot wait to tell you, Habakkuk and Emily about Spain and some of the adventures I have had. I love you and I will see you soon. Sarah stops reading and wipes a tear from her eye. She speaks to herself. You made me promises you could not keep William.

MARY: Leary about interrupting her mistress. Mrs. Harker? I'm sorry to bother you, but would you care for some tea, or is there anything else I may get for you?

SARAH: She answers, somewhat distracted. Hmm, oh no, Mary, thank you. I do not need anything. I just want to sit down for a little while. Sarah goes over and sits behind the desk, and continues reading the letter.

MARY: Begins to speak but is interrupted by a knock at the front door. Mary hurries out of the study to answer. We hear her voice from the front hallway. Good Morning Mrs.

Jabobs. Yes, she is. Please come this way. *Mary shows Sarah's sister, Elizabeth Jacobs, into the study. She leans over to Elizabeth and whispers.* I'm very worried about her.

ELIZABETH: *As soon as she sees her, opens her arms and walks over to hug Sarah.* Oh my poor dear, come here. *She holds Sarah for a few moments.* How are you holding up? Have you received any news yet?

SARAH: No. It's has been two weeks since that messenger arrived with news that the *General Pickering* was possibly captured, and cruelly there has been nothing else. *Sarah becomes emotional.* Why must I be tortured like this? How can there be nothing at all. There has been no correspondence from William, no messengers telling me if he is well, if he is dead or even if he is locked up at Melville Island or Dartmoor.

ELIZABETH: Shhh. Here let us sit. *She leads her sister over to the couch.* Now, I know your mind is plagued by these horrible thoughts, but do you really think he was brought to either of those places? *Elizabeth pauses a moment. She contemplates what William's imprisonment could mean.* Dear heavens, do you think he could make it if he was?

SARAH: I don't know. I hope he's not there, but the last correspondence I received from him was four weeks ago, and it has been little over a week since I received news about William's ship. What am I to think? *Sarah waves her hands in frustration, the letter is still in her hand.* I hope this is all dream. But no...no, if he's been captured, I think he can make it. *She sounds like she is trying to convince herself.* William told me about

Dartmoor and Melville, these pits where the British throw their prisoners. He said, “A man with some money in his pocket might live pretty well through the day in Dartmoor Prison, there being shops and stalls where every little article could be obtained.”

(Eastman p31) Melville might be the same way. William is smart, and if anyone can survive... *Sarah's words drop off. She starts to cry.*

ELIZABETH: *Trying to calm her sister.* You are right dear. William is a cunning man, and if anyone can survive, he can. Please do not be upset. We do not even know if he is captured or not. He might be alive and well, and on his way coming home to you at this moment. Also, is he not sailing with Captain Haraden? Do you really think that the Salamander's ship would be so easily caught?

SARAH: I know, but I still...

ELIZABETH: *Interrupting.* Still nothing! Downtown is full of spirited stories of Haraden's latest escapade. Haven't you heard how he captured the *Golden Eagle*? The man is a genius.

SARAH: *She shrugs her shoulders.* I heard stories that he captured it, but what was so amazing?

ELIZABETH: *Surprised that Sarah does not know.* Oh my dear, I am shocked that you have not heard. The man is cunning. *Leans in like she is telling a secret.* He captured the

Golden Eagle by lying. *She sits back and nods her head.* What I have heard is that he came upon the *Golden Eagle* and cornered it in the Bay of Biscay. He then approached her at night, which worked to his benefit, for the British captain could not see with whom he was dealing. Haraden told him that *General Pickering* was an American frigate, and that he would broadside him if he did not surrender!

SARAH: *Sarah seems slightly interested in the story.* So what did the British captain do? Did he fight back?

ELIZABETH: No my dear, he surrendered. *Elizabeth laughs.* Haraden had won his prize by the morning. Also, and I do not know if it is true, people say he did this without any shots being fired. And mind you that is not the end of the story. Only days later, he came across another British ship. I think it was the *Archimedes* or *Achilles*. *Elizabeth gets a little flustered.* I just remember that it was a very impressive British privateer. Haraden ran circles around it and came close to sinking it, but unfortunately that one managed to escape.

SARAH: *With a deadpan expression.* That is impressive, to win a battle with no gun fire. I wish all battles could be so. *Stands up and walks to the window, looks outside. She talks to Elizabeth while still looking out the window.* Do you think Haraden is a good man? I've met him once, but do you think he would compromise his crew for glory or pride?

ELIZABETH: I myself have only met Captain Haraden a few times, but from what I have heard about him, he is a good man. I truly believe he would not endanger any of his crew for his own ego's sake. William is probably safer with Haraden than with any other captain, Sarah. He is too smart to make any moves that could get the *General Pickering* caught.

SARAH: *Looks pleadingly at Elizabeth, tears are in her eyes again.* So, do you think the information I received was wrong? Could William really be okay?

ELIZABETH: Yes, I really do think there is that possibility. You need to try and think positively Sarah. I am worried that you are going to make yourself ill.

SARAH: I do try to stay positive Elizabeth, but as each day goes by, my fears grow. *Comes back over to couch and sits down next to her sister.* What is concerning me most right now is what am I going to tell my children? Emily and Habakkuk are getting older; they are not little babes any more.

ELIZABETH: *Smiling.* No they are not. They are beautiful children, who are going to grow into beautiful adults. *She takes the letter out of Sarah's hand, and while still holding her hand, puts the letter on the table next to the couch.* That Hab of yours is exceptionally bright. He will probably be the first in his class when he graduates from Harvard.

SARAH: *Smiles lightly.* He is so inquisitive, isn't he? Do you really think he could get accepted to Harvard someday? I would love something like that for him.

ELIZABETH: Yes, I do. And what about that beautiful Emily? I have seen the stitching she has done on that sampler of hers. It's meticulous. What's more, she helps you with every chore she possibly can, and she has such a kind heart like her mother. She is going to make a good wife someday, and that will be thanks to you.

SARAH: Thank you, Elizabeth. They are my joys and I do love them so. I do not know what I would do with out them. But what if Habakkuk wants to go to sea like his father? I could not bear it if I lost him as well.

ELIZABETH: *Gently.* Sarah, you need to stop. Habakkuk is too young to be going to sea yet. And I am sure his only worries are whether or not his mother is going to properly tuck him in a night. When he is older there is every chance that he may pick a profession that keeps him on dry land. *She pauses for a moment, taps her finger on her chin.* How does this sound? We will get Mary to make us some tea, and I will tell you about how things are going at home...like Polly's engagement.

SARAH: What? Cousin Polly is getting married! *Sarah smiles.* Why didn't you tell me sooner?

ELIZABETH: *Gets up and walks over to the study door, calls into the other room.* Mary? *Walks back over and sits down with Sarah.* Please Sarah, you've been miserable, and I did not want you to feel like I was flaunting Polly's happiness in you face.

SARAH: *Understanding.* I know that was kind. *She calls her sister by her childhood nickname and smiles.* I love you Liza and you've been so sweet coming here. I am just so glad to have some good news. Who is Polly marrying?

MARY: *Walks in from other room.* Excuse me, you called Mrs. Jacobs?

ELIZABETH: Mary, Mrs. Harker and I would like some tea please, and if you could find some small biscuits, please bring those in as well.

MARY: Yes Mrs. Jacobs. Will there be anything else I can get for you or Mrs. Harker? *She looks over at Sarah, worry is visible on her face.*

ELIZABETH: No Mary that will be all. Thank you. *Turns back to Sarah.* What was I saying? Oh yes, do you remember the young boy who used to visit Polly's brother Nathaniel?

SARAH: Was he the small red-headed boy who was so bashful that Nathaniel always spoke for him?

ELIZABETH: Yes, that is him. Polly is marrying that red-headed bashful boy. Except now he is a very distinguished red-headed man named Adam Layton. He loves her dearly. You should have seen them when he was courting her. *She chuckles at the memories.*

SARAH: My goodness, that is wonderful. Polly is very lucky. What does Mr. Layton do for a living?

ELIZABETH: He is a bookkeeper out of Boston. *She does not say anything else, and definitely seems to be keeping something back.*

SARAH: *She looks at her sister funny, and knows that she is not telling her everything.* Well, that is a respectable job. For whom does he work?

ELIZABETH: Well, he does not really work for a company, he actually... *She pauses but reluctantly tells Sarah what she did not want her to know.* Fine, Adam Layton is actually a supercargo on a ship in Boston.

SARAH: *Huffs a little laugh.* So he's a bookkeeper on a ship. I should have realized it would be something like that. It doesn't seem that any of us aren't affected by the damned sea.

ELIZABETH: Sarah, he is not just a bookkeeper. You know a supercargo does much more than that. Polly tells me he is an officer and deals with the ship's sales and such.

SARAH: I suppose that is good for Polly. At least she will have a husband who is an officer, and I know that a supercargo is a much respected member of the crew. I am sure he will take good care of her.

ELIZABETH: She is happy Sarah. She knows that Adam will be gone for long periods of time, and that she will have to have faith in his returning to her.

SARAH: Well, I wish Polly strength because her faith will be tested. *We can hear the bitterness in her voice.* Every time her husband is away for more than a year, she will find herself wrestling with her doubts and worries. *Sarah's emotions begin to boil over again.* Will he come back this time? What will I tell our children when they ask when their father is coming home? How will I not turn to dust and blow away because the man I love is dead at the bottom of the sea? *Her breathing is heavy as she tries to maintain her calm.* I suppose they are planning for many children?

ELIZABETH: Yes, Polly has been telling me she cannot wait to start her family. Adam is the middle child in a family of ten. Can you imagine having that many siblings?

SARAH: Actually I could. Before William left, we discussed having more brothers and sisters for Habakkuk and Emily.

Elizabeth starts to answer her sister, but Mary comes in bringing a tray. A tea service for two is set. Elizabeth sighs, bothered at being interrupted.

MARY: Here you are. Please be careful because things are hot. *Mary pours the tea for the ladies.*

SARAH: Mary, when you go to the market later on, would you make sure to pick up some English pickled walnuts.

MARY: Yes, ma'am. Would you like anything else?

SARAH: No, that will be fine. Again, thank you. *Looks over at Elizabeth.* I was looking at the Salem Gazette yesterday and one British ship that was captured recently had walnuts as part of their cargo. I do not recall which one it was but I do know they sold the cargo off at auction a few days ago. An advertisement in the paper said the walnuts were being sold at the market today.

ELIZABETH: *Smiles and tries a bit of levity.* See the ocean is not that bad. It brought you pickled walnuts.

SARAH: *Upset. Sarah walks over to her husband's portrait. She touches the corner of the frame and then the painting.* Elizabeth that is horrible. How can you make such jokes when I am worried so?

ELIZABETH: I am truly sorry Sarah. *She is embarrassed.* I am just doing my best to comfort you, and it is breaking my heart that you are so distraught.

SARAH: *Ashamed at having yelled at her sister.* Please do not apologize. I am sorry. I should not have snapped at you. You have been wonderful my dear sister and I do not know if I could have kept my strength through all of this if it were not for you. Some of the other women in town have tried to be supportive as well, but I cannot bear to listen to them. *She places emphasis on the word "them."*

ELIZABETH: Why? What was said?

SARAH: Some of them said I should not hold out hope for William's return. They told me that I should carry on with my life and look for another husband. *Pacing around the room.* How can they feel that way? I did not just marry William to have financial support. I loved him. *Corrects herself.* No, I love him.

ELIZABETH: Sarah dear, I'm sure those women did not mean any harm by what they said. They just want to make sure that you and your children are well taken care of if the worst happens. But, they are right in a way you know. If God calls William home, I'm

sure he would not want you to be alone, or without love. *She sighs heavily.* Do you really think that loving again would be the end of you?

SARAH: *Angry and upset.* The end of me? If you look out that window Elizabeth you will see what will be the end of me. It will be that damned ocean, that white foamed thief. It stole William away from me, and if he does not return to me soon, it will have carried me away as well, because as William would say, the wind will forever be knocked out of my sails, and I don't know if I can live the rest of my life "sailing by ash breeze."

(Latham, p47) How can I think about any other man at this time? No, I will not, and I do not care if I am forever alone.

ELIZABETH: *Somewhat exasperated.* My goodness, Sarah. No matter what happens you are not alone. I am with you, and everyone else in the family will help you...whatever you need. As a matter of fact, I have an idea. *A positive energy comes over her.* Why don't we have father inquire into the whereabouts of the *General Pickering*. He can see if he can find out any more information. Does that sound good? That way there is no more feeling helpless.

Sarah comes back to the couch and sits down. She takes a sip of her tea which has been sitting awhile. Realizing it is cold; she grimaces and puts the cup back down.

SARAH: You are so right. I have felt completely helpless through all of this. *She sounds defeated and tired.* I knew when I married William that there would be expectations of

me. I was a lieutenant's wife and I would have been lacking in my wifely duties if I was nothing but supportive and patient. No matter what happened, I had to go on with my life through all tribulations. *Sits silently for a moment.* There were two times I waited for over a year for William to come back to me, and I never nagged. *Puts her hand on Elizabeth's hand, but stares straight ahead.* But can I tell you a secret Elizabeth?

ELIZABETH: *She touches her sister's cheek and straightens a misplaced curl.* Yes, dear heart. You say whatever you feel, and please believe that I will not judge you.

SARAH: *Quietly.* I'm tired and angry. I want my husband home, and at this moment I do not care that he is out there protecting us. *She looks at Elizabeth.* Am I a horrible woman to say this? I know it is disrespectful to my husband to feel this way, but I cannot stop. William is out there putting his life in danger to provide for his family and protect this land, but I cannot help how I feel.

ELIZABETH: You are not a horrible woman. You are a wife and you are scared for your husband and your family. William knows you love and respect him. Please do not feel that you are betraying him in any way. *Elizabeth lifts Sarah's chin so that she looks her directly in the face.* What you have said will stay between us, and I want you to know that I understand how you feel.

While Elizabeth is talking, there is a knock at the front door.

MARY: *Comes running in from the front hallway.* Mrs. Harker! Mrs. Harker come quickly!

SARAH: Mary what are you doing, don't come running in without knocking...

MARY: *Cutting her mistress off. She is very excited.* I'm sorry Mrs., but a messenger just arrived with news. The *General Pickering*...it is heading into harbor!

SARAH: William? *There is disbelief and shock on her face.*

Sarah looks at Elizabeth and then runs for the front door. She knocks over one of the oil lamps as she breezes by. Her sister Elizabeth picks up the lamp and chases after her.

ELIZABETH: Sarah, wait! Wait! I'm coming with you.

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