

THE HICKORY STICK

*The serious, hilarious and saucy antics of a young Norfolk
Police Constable in the early days of Queen Victoria*

TED BOCKING



CHAPTER ONE

I was thinking of Annie Stoddard as I hunched my back against the wind's bitter chill and dragged the solid oak baulk across the wet sand. Twice longer than I stood tall, this huge piece of flotsam would keep our cottage fire aflame for at least a week. It was always worth my while to walk the couple of miles along Brancaster's shoreline and to scavenge anything useful that had fallen overboard from the many ships that frequented these difficult North Norfolk waters. This particular piece of wood had obviously been cut to shape and carved by some shipwright goodness knows how long ago. What had happened to the ship? What had happened to the crew? Was this old lump of oak the last sad piece of what was once a fine ship?

It was the sort of day that I would be first onto the sands in the morning sometimes to find nothing of interest, sometimes to find an odd barrel of water or spirit or, once, a seaman's chest containing pitifully few items of value of interest. Perhaps he had perished and his belongings had been cast over the

side with him. Such walks also gave me the time to think and ponder life's mysteries and, not least, my relationship with Annie Stoddard. Now there was a mystery!

The icy chips of the sea's spray and wind-borne sand penetrated my scarf and collar in stark contrast to the warm, tender and comfortable thoughts of Annie Stoddard in my mind, but they encouraged my efforts to drag this baulk homeward. Unsuccessfully, I tried to bring thoughts to my mind other than that sweet young woman.

Did I love her? Truly? Or was she just an infatuation. She was not the only handsome woman in Brancaster – but there were many who could not by any means merit that description – and she had a kind and generous heart. She liked giving and I liked receiving. She and I had an understanding – or, at least, I thought we did and that's the problem.

The cold wind across my sweating brows eventually brought me back to reality. What was I doing with my life? Was it enough to spend my days mending boats and fishing nets, and testing the elements with occasional fishing trips at sea? Somehow I longed for more, or should I be satisfied with the embraces of Annie Stoddard and the yowling cries of our inevitable offspring? Would a small and overcrowded cottage in Brancaster and a lifetime doing much as I was now going to be enough? Until most recently I had thought so.

CHAPTER TWO

It all began with that darned tinker. Until he came along I was quite happy to become a builder of boats and to take what opportunities came my way to go out on the occasional fishing boat for a day. I knew even then, though, that I would not be following in the footsteps of my father and spend a lifetime at sea as a Master Mariner.

Father had gone to sea at thirteen. I was now nineteen and I suppose like everyone at that age, I felt in my prime. I had the good fortune to inherit my father's stature as I was the length of a fathom or more and weighed in at all of fifteen stones. I reckon I might not have been good looking, but then I reckon I wasn't ugly either. I still found that some women were attracted to me.

Annie Stoddard was a beautiful girl and she was fully aware of that fact. I'd had my occasional tangles with her on Barrow Common and they were times I hoped we'd both be happy to remember. In a place like Brancaster it was difficult to do anything much without everybody knowing about it and a few folk

reckoned on me and Annie getting wed. I must admit that sometimes that thought occurred to me too.

We had often walked hand in hand along the Burnham Road and then snuck off up the hillside to Barrow Common. There we'd sit and look across the marshes to see the waves breaking on the sand bars of Scolt Head some four or five miles away.

On clear days we'd sit quietly with our shoulders touching just marvelling at the view of the coast from Titchwell in the west to Burnham Norton in the east. We could pick out the three churches of Titchwell, Brancaster and Burnham Deepdale. Little did I then know how much that little round tower at Burnham Deepdale would come to mean to me in years to come.

The low tides would show the sea at rest with all the little boats asleep on the mud flats and in the salt-ings. Sometimes we'd be there to see the incoming tide wake everything up – and sometimes we'd see nothing but each other.

We'd kiss and roll in the warm summer grass. We had never actually talked of marriage, but in the meantime, well, that was another matter! As times went on we discovered the joys of exploring each other and the fun of experimenting with each other's physical and mental emotions. We were never caught out on these occasions and, so far as I know, we were never seen. There'd have been a few demands for a sudden wedding I think!

But then again there was that darned tinker. Every so often he'd come to Brancaster and roll his wagon

onto the bit of grass in Mill Hill near the cross roads, tether his horse and spend the rest of the day selling his pots, pans, kettles, trivets, hooks and whatever. From his patter, you'd think that no woman could be a good wife or mother without buying at least one thing from him on each visit.

Since his first visit a few years ago I'd never been too pleased to see him. The reason was simple. Annie had caught his eye as quickly as she had caught mine, and when Michael the tinker was in town I stood no chance of so much as a quick cuddle at her Ma's back door. I was very jealous of this tinker getting the benefit of all my explorations with Annie.

About three weeks ago, Michael had shown his face in the village and as sure as one tide follows another, Annie had taken to him again. But on this occasion Michael had gone to the trouble of seeking me out, even though he knew he wasn't exactly my best friend.

'Barney, me old friend' he said. That in itself made me a bit wary. I hadn't ever passed more than a dozen words with him, and none of them were too civil.

'Barney, me boy, Oi've got something wonderful for ye'. I hadn't had too many 'wonderful' things in my life (apart from those times with Annie of course, but that was different) so I have to admit, I was a bit curious.

'What have you got that might be the slightest bit of interest to me?'

‘Barney, Oi have in my own hand here a piece of paper that will change your own darlin’ loife. He laughed and produced from his pocket a folded piece of paper. I looked at a piece of newspaper. It was the Norfolk Chronicle of 11th January 1840.

‘Oi’ve always thought of you as an upright young feller’ said Michael, ‘and you’ve always a mind to poke yer nose into things when ye ain’t wanted. Poke yer nose into that then me boyo’.

He laughed again and strode off down the street and left me holding a tatty bit of paper. Normally such remarks would have provoked my mother’s temper in me, and would have left Michael with a good clout round the head. But I looked at the paper. I read

NORFOLK CONSTABULARY FORCE

Such persons as may be desirous of offering their services for employment in this force may have an opportunity of stating their qualifications at the Kings Arms, East Dereham, on Tuesday the fourteenth instant between the hours of ten and four o’clock. It will be perfectly useless for any to apply who may not be furnished with the highest testimonials both for character and efficiency. To write a good hand and keep accounts will also be indispensable.

Richard Montague Oaks. Chief Constable.

As I stood there the world seemed to have gone very quiet. I read again the words on that piece of paper. Now I was sure that I would never go to sea as my father had done. Brancaster was not the horizon to my life. Up to now, other than Burnham Market and Docking my land life had been spent around Brancaster and the Staithe. But then it occurred to me that if I was going to do anything about this, today was Saturday and I had to be in Dereham by next Tuesday!

Looking up I saw that the Irish tinker had retaken his place on his wagon and was giving the patter and chatter to his listeners. I acknowledged him with a brief wave which he returned with a wide grin. I wondered if this was some complicated way of getting rid of me so that he could be sure of his way with Annie Stoddard. Surely not? After all, the advertisement had been in the Norfolk Chronicle hadn’t it?

CHAPTER THREE

I went slowly home to the cottage where, with William and Tom my older brothers and Bess my younger sister, I had been quite strictly raised by devoted parents.

My father had made only short appearances during our childhood and for all that time Elizabeth, our mother, had borne the duties of both father and mother. It was she who had marched us down to the village school so that we could all learn to read and to write. It had always remained something of an embarrassment to her that our father could do neither. It was mother who had lathered us – with soap when we were dirty and with an old leather belt of father’s (left at home for the purpose I don’t doubt) when we had been caught out in some misdemeanour or had just been getting a bit above ourselves. I never could remember Bess getting the belt.

Our love for our mother was unbounded. It was to her that we went with all our troubles and all our confidences (well, some of them). It was to her that we all gathered when her father the blacksmith at

Holt had died last year. We saw the grief in her eyes, and her grief became our grief. She cried softly upon our small shoulders and we had bawled loudly on hers. It was mother who used to insist that we went to Church on Sundays, and who taught us to say The Grace before our meals.

Father had only become a real father to us, and a real friend, when he returned from the seas for the last time just three years ago. He was now sixty five years old and had as much hair on his head now as he did at thirty. Mother told us that even at that age he had a great shock of grey hair. Thomas Madden, our father, went to sea when he was thirteen years old. At some time or another he had seen most countries of the world. He was still a big man, but the demanding years at sea had taken their toll and he was now gaunt, thin, but as upright as any man.

His embarrassment was not the same as our mother’s. ‘Readin’ and writin’ never helped me to read the clouds afore a storm’ He said. His great embarrassment was the loss of his right hand, cruelly mangled when caught in a fast running block aboard ship many years ago. His arm had been saved by the crudest of surgery by the ship’s carpenter, but he still tried to keep that arm tucked out of sight. That was as much as we knew about it. He did not refer to it, but it was about the only thing which caused him impatience almost to the loss of his temper – but not quite, that was mother’s department.

Like many, I had been deeply affected by the events of September 1833 when, at the tender age

of 12 years, I had witnessed the furore in the village after the shipwrecking of the 'Earl of Wemyss' on the scurves off Brancaster.

The packet, bound from London for its home port of Leith, had foundered with many other ships on that dreadful night when storms hit the whole of the east coast of England – although we did not hear of the extent of the disaster until later, and then only by word of mouth from travellers passing through.

There had been much interest in the ship because its sad passage onto the mud had been observed for many hours before its final abandonment. When the ship had clearly been stuck fast, the crew left the ship taking with them anything they could lay their hands on. A few passengers were also helped to wade ashore by local people.

When a ship is abandoned, there is usually a free-for-all to salvage whatever may be useful. In truth, the salvage of anything on the shore belonged to the Lord of the Manor, then a Mr Law Simms, an elderly man. He had sent his son-in-law, Mr Newman Reeve, to oversee the salvage of anything he could get.

It was only when we saw the curate, Reverend Jimmy Holloway, rushing between the Ship Inn and the shore line and shouting at the top of his voice to all who might listen to him that we guessed something was afoot. As young boys, the short run from the village centre to the shoreline was nothing and we sped backwards and forwards trying to find anything useful for ourselves. We heard that some of

the bodies from the 'Wemyss' had been taken to the Ship Inn and we had tried to get in there to see them, but without success. We then heard the rumour that some of the passengers had indeed not perished but had been abandoned below decks by the Captain and his crew. Nevertheless, their belongings had been stolen from them, including rings and other jewellery. I recall that Mother had been down to the shore line and had come back white in the face and with a mouth tightly shut about what was going on. We never heard her mention the event again, but the village was agog with the fact that some of the 'bodies' taken to the Ship Inn had not been dead, and that some were even seen to bleed and heard to moan.

The Reverend Holloway was desperately trying to get some medical attention for these poor souls and was wreaking God's verbal fury on all who failed to help him. It was a matter for adults to deal with and we young lads, despite our age being sufficient for us to risk life and limb aboard the fishing vessels, were not allowed to get involved in the ruckus generally.

We heard later of course that Mr Newman Reeve had been taken to task at the Norwich Assizes (where, later in life, I was myself to be attending) but had been exonerated of all blame. The whole village was agog with the 'goings-on' and with tales of who had done what, and to whom, and so on.

It all left a nasty feeling in the village, with accusations flying all over the place. I know that there were some folk who swore never to speak to others again in

Brancaster after the events of that night. Even up to the day I left home, I knew that to be the case. Some of the dead were buried in the Brancaster churchyard. I often wondered what my father would have done had he been home at the time.

It was then to those beloved parents of mine that I turned for guidance. Whilst having a healthy respect for God I had not such faith as some, nor indeed the cheek to ask him to make the decision for me. It was natural that I should turn to my mother and father for their help.

At first, mother was quite shocked by the idea. 'Just what, pray, does a constable do?' she had asked.

'Well I don't know do I? I've only just seen this bit o' paper like you have.' I was a bit sharp, and a quick glance from father reminded me to look out. Even at my age and size mother was still capable of giving me a clout with her old brush handle!

'He's a peace-maker' said father quietly from his chair. Mother had repeatedly read aloud the notice in the newspaper, ostensibly for her own benefit, but we all knew it was for father's.

'He keeps the law of the land, and that ain't none too easy if you ask me' Nobody had, but he was going to say so anyway.

'But mother' I said, 'it's a chance to be something, a chance to travel'. Deep down I had already decided that with father retired, mother too old for any really active field work – and indeed why should she have to – the Madden household could do with one less

mouth to feed even though I did bring in the occasional shilling or two each week. William, two years my senior, had designs on moving out, but then only if Molly Bridgeman said 'yes', and again only if Elias Prior would employ him on his farm near Thornham so that he and Mollie could have the one-up and one-down cottage that went with the job.

It was clear to me that after all the advice mother and father could give me, it was still for me to make up my own mind. If I was to go, it would have to be immediately. I thought it would take me two or three days to be sure of getting to Dereham in time, but never having been that far before, I wasn't really sure.

The following day, Sunday, had dawned cold and with a good nor'easter blowing. Not a gale, but hard enough to let you know it was about. The sun was hidden under a grey blanket of that January morning.

Over my breakfast of bread and hot tea (a favourite of my father's which I had quite taken to as well), I had announced my decision. To my slight disappointment nobody appeared the slightest bit surprised. It was as though the whole trick had been perpetrated by the family – except of course for the involvement of that blasted Irish tinker. I still wasn't too sure about his part in all this. I was however convinced that had I not had any sort of involvement with Annie Stoddard, he would never have bothered to tell me about that notice.

I said that I would leave the following day for Dereham and went to tell my colleagues at the

boatyard of my decision. There were only a few working on this Sabbath but when I told them, far from there being angry scenes about my leaving the job with almost no warning, there was general merriment and backslapping. It was as though they were pleased to see me go! Having arranged to see my workmates at the Brancaster White Horse that evening, I had just one more call to make. I just hoped that the tinker wasn't already with Annie Stoddard.

'Barnaby are you sure?' She always called me by my full name. 'It's a fair step to go an' you don't really know what's at the other end do you?'

'Annie, I'm going and that's that.' It suddenly occurred to me that neither I nor anybody else had considered the possibility that I might not be suitable for the job of a Constable of the County. What if this Colonel Oaks didn't want me? Would I dare come back? I put such thoughts out of my mind, because I had sought out Annie and I think we both knew that this was to be our last visit to Barrow Common together.

'Kiss me, Barnaby' she said, and she held tightly to me as I did as I was asked. Perhaps it was the thought that we would not likely ever again enjoy each other's company that made our embrace more urgent than usual.

'Love me, my darling' she whispered, 'just one more time'. I wasn't going to argue with her – she was always very persuasive.

In the hard chill of an old flint knapper's hut on Barrow Common Annie Stoddard and I made

love as though it was our first time. It was gentle and then, as our emotions inflamed further, it was with a blinding, almost animal, passion that eventually left us both utterly spent in each other's arms. The pale afternoon sun wasn't even warm enough to thaw the rime on the fir trees we could see through the small dirty window. And we hadn't thought to light a fire in the hearth – well, it didn't seem worth it now.

'Hold me again, Barnaby, hold me tight.'

'Perhaps I ought to think again about going away?'

'What?' She sat up with her eyes staring at me. 'Not go? Why on earth would you not want to go? This is your great chance Barnaby, the chance of a lifetime, a chance for you to make something of yourself and to see something of the world.' I wasn't sure what she thought I was going to do, but I didn't expect to see the whole world as a Police Constable.

Annie continued, her voice raised and earnest. 'As much as I love you Barnaby Madden, if you change your mind now I'll never speak to you again.'

Tears rushed down her flushed cheeks and onto her naked breasts. Unashamed, beautiful, dear Annie.

Annie and I had said our farewells. We neither of us thought we would never meet again: it was a feeling we could not explain. We had sealed off part of our lives which no-one could take away from us. A memory, a secret jewel to be locked safely away and

treasured for ever. We had both shed a tear at our parting.

‘C’mon Barnaby’ she had said as she dabbed my cheek with her headscarf, ‘away you go now.’

‘Good luck, Annie’

‘Good luck yourself, my darling boy, good luck.’
We didn’t look back – we just went our separate ways.

CHAPTER FOUR

The following morning was a melancholy affair. The previous night’s ale had left me a little delicate from its after-effects. William and Tom had helped me put away quite a few pints. Father had left after only just a couple, I think in order to make sure mother was safely tucked away before we all came home a lot later and somewhat the worse for wear.

Sam Dowdy, the landlord of the White Horse, had been pleased to see us go. Good customers though we were, I think we had started to make a nuisance of ourselves. Charlie Powell the blacksmith and his young lad Joe were having a rare old time with us. Neither Annie nor the tinker had been at the White Horse, and that caused me to wonder where they were. I decided not to try to find out.

Apart from the ale, I was starting to feel very emotional myself, and wondering if I really was doing the right thing. I knew I was going to miss my family and friends and I faced the day with some trepidation.

The word was about the village that Barnaby Madden was going to Dereham to become a County