

the most senseless and fit men

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the most senseless and fit men

by [whalersandsailors](#)

Summary

Jopson investigates a terrible noise from the great cabin. He certainly did not expect to see all three lieutenants looking as though they just finished battle.

Notes

written for the terror bingo prompt **unreliable narrator**

title is from my fav shakespeare comedy *much ado about nothing*

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

It is midafternoon, and with the sun high in the cloudless sky, the white disk reflecting off the sea like a pearl, Jopson can almost fool himself into thinking that they are farther south; somewhere hot like the Mediterranean or along the coast of Africa. Either way, the warm day fills him to the brim with vigor, and he tries to lend some of his good cheer to the captain as the men prepare the whaleboat for his trip to *Erebus*.

“It will be over before you know it, sir.”

Crozier snorts, his face already sinking into a sullen pout. “Ten minutes will be like an eternity.”

Jopson tactfully ignores the complaint. “Is there anything you would like upon your return?”

“Nothing special, Jopson.” Crozier pauses as he descends to the boat. “On second thought, if you lay out those biscuits and marmalade, I could eat an entire tin for suffering through this.”

Jopson nods, keeping his smile small though he feels the desire to laugh swelling in his chest. “Of course, sir.”

He doesn’t stay to watch Crozier and the mate cross the water toward *Erebus*. He saves Crozier the embarrassment. Instead, he heads down the hatch, winding his way around the other crewmembers until he reaches his pantry. He finds the biscuits Crozier desired, and he marks off his mental check list: fixing the captain’s bedclothes, wiping the glassware, polishing the shelves and table, scrubbing the floor, replenishing the coal bucket by the stove, preparing tea for Crozier’s return. A manageable list if promptly started. He grabs the tin of biscuits and hurries toward the great cabin.

He doesn’t make it past the galley before a loud crash sounds from the end of the passageway. The door to the great cabin is shut, but even through the wood, Jopson hears several voices overlapping and arguing.

He presses his lips together, keeping his face neutral as he reaches the door and slides it open without knocking.

The scene that greets him is not what he expected, and the chaos is untold; a blanket or large sheet of some kind is lying abandoned in front of the stove, the chairs surrounding the table are all toppled except one, several books lean precariously from the shelves ready to come crashing down at a moment’s notice, a tub of soapy water is upended with its contents spilled across the floor, and some of the tea service has fallen from the cupboard—nothing broken thankfully. In the midst of the wreckage is the largest surprise of them all: all three lieutenants and the ship’s dog, each in a state of flustered panic. Lieutenant Little is pinned against a cabinet with Neptune sprawled across his lap. Lieutenant Irving is halfway to his knees by the bench under the window. And Lieutenant Hodgson—absolutely drenched from the waist down—leans against the bookshelf, his hands held to his chest.

Jopson lets out a long exhale and drops his eyes to the floor. “Am I interrupting, sirs?”

Hodgson is the first to answer, “Only a slight mishap! No harm or foul play! Right, boys?”

There is a strained quality to his voice that makes Jopson raise his eyes. Hodgson is smiling, but there is a tightness in his face that is quite unlike him. Irving stands and straightens his jacket, his face turning pink. Little remains seated on the floor, but he releases his tight hold on Neptune’s fur. The dog trots to Jopson with his tail wagging.

Jopson offers the dog his hand who plops his snout into his palm, sniffing for a few seconds before he wriggles past Jopson to go running down the passageway.

“Wait, don’t let him—” Irving says, hopping around the table. He nearly trips on one of the fallen chairs.

Neptune is long gone, having hidden himself in the fo’c’sle among the men, in the sick bay beneath a hammock, or in a cabin behind the safety of a curtained entryway. Irving hovers by the stove, staring over Jopson’s shoulder where Neptune disappeared. Hodgson picks up one of the chairs to sit in while Little, amazingly, remains on the floor.

Jopson resists the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose.

“What happened, if I may ask?”

None of the lieutenants seem eager to answer, each of them mortified that they have been caught behaving no better than wet-eared midshipmen. When Neptune barks from somewhere deep in the ship, Irving whirls about, his eyes flashing.

“That dog,” he says, jabbing his finger toward the open door behind Jopson, “is a *menace*!”

“Now that’s putting it strongly,” says Hodgson.

Jopson slides the door shut before Irving continues his tirade.

“Never have I encountered such an ill-behaved rascal! He roams about the ship wherever he pleases, steals food off men’s plates, he...” Irving frowns, his voice dropping to a dramatic whisper. “He *defecates* wherever he pleases. A ship’s dog is fine, but that—that *creature*—must be contained.”

“What did he do, sir?”

Little sighs. Hodgson groans. Irving ignores them both.

“I’ll tell you what that monster did.”

I was finishing my painting class with the AB’s—

Hodgson interrupts, “I thought you were teaching them how to read?”

“We alternate; reading on Mondays and Thursdays, painting on Tuesdays and Saturdays. May I continue?”

“Very well, yes.”

As I was saying, I was finishing the class. There weren't many in attendance today, so we ended early. I had a few things to return to my cabin, but when I arrived, the door was ajar. Not much, but wide enough that I found it strange. What I found inside was worse than I could have expected: all my books were strewn about the floor, half the drawers open, papers everywhere—

“How would a dog do all that?” Hodgson interrupts again. Jopson bites his lip to keep himself from smirking. “He doesn't have *thumbs*, you know.”

“May I *please* finish without further interruption?”

“Of course.”

I didn't suspect the dog at first. I had reason to believe—well, I had reason to believe it was someone else. But then I saw that my bed was covered in that thing's hair. The pillow was damp as well. I noticed one of my books missing from my shelf, and so I set out to find where the rogue had gone. I came to the great cabin first since he is here most often, and I encountered Edward being attacked by the brute. They were wrestling quite ferociously.

“I was handling myself,” Little mumbles. Only Jopson hears him, and when their eyes meet, Little frowns and looks away.

I feared that the dog had gone mad. I yelled that he stay back, and I tried to grab him by the neck. He is incredibly strong, stronger than a man I daresay. And it was then that I noticed that my missing book were here, lying on the floor. It was Neptune who took it, and I found the culprit red-handed.

“Red-pawed,” Hodgson blurts.

“Will you *please*?”

“Yes, pardon me, go on.”

“Thank you,” says Irving in a huff, tugging on his jacket once again. “Well. That’s about when you got here George, yelling nonsense and throwing yourself into the table, and then Mr. Jopson arrived.”

Jopson turns to Hodgson who has the decency to look somewhat ashamed.

Hodgson clears his throat. “Well, I thought it best to intervene when you and Edward were fighting.”

“Fighting?” Jopson asks.

“It was really quite spectacular. Lucky for us all that no one witnessed them, especially the captain.”

I was on deck, commencing my routine checkup for the cannons with Sergeant Tozer. As a matter of fact, I saw you and Captain Crozier before he left. I would have seen him off as well, but he seemed rather put-out by the journey so I thought better of it. I finished with the sergeant and returned below deck when I heard a great amount of tussling coming from in here. A great many, ah, names being shouted.

Now I know John can be passionate, but I never thought he would direct such attention at our dear Edward. Both of them are so alike in many ways. I always thought they got along swimmingly.

I burst in just in time to see John pinning Edward against the wall, grabbing him by the jacket. He was reeling back as though for a punch—I cried out for them to stop—Neptune was barking up a storm, and I valiantly shoved in between them. There was a scuffle where some of the furniture overturned. I took a bit of beating myself. You’ll see me with a few bruises tomorrow, I’m sure. It was most ungentlemanly of us all.

I held them apart, one hand on each shoulder, and I begged them to see reason.

‘There’s no need to fight,’ I argued, ‘for we are all brothers-in-arms, and we mustn’t let minor differences in belief or lifestyle divide us so easily.’

Here, Irving interrupts. “Wait. *What* differences?”

Hodgson splutters, caught up in the valor of his retelling. His eyes dart from Irving and Little as his face turns an impressive shade. “Well, such differences as...avenues of life... partnerships and...the people with whom we...choose to...you see...”

Again, Jopson catches Little’s eye, and he wonders if Little understands Hodgson’s meaning since he is looking increasingly mortified with his wide eyes staring at the floor, his shoulders hunching to his ears. He looks as though he would like nothing more than for his coat to swallow him whole.

“You’re not speaking sense,” Irving insists.

“I heard you call Little the ‘worst and most deviant kind of villain’!”

Irving stares open-mouthed. “I was referring to the *dog*.”

A thick silence descends upon the room. Hodgson turns his gaze to the windows as though deep in thought. Little sinks further into his coat. Irving seems to belatedly understand something of Hodgson’s accusations and looks ready to faint. Jopson mentally adjusts his already ruined schedule for the day.

“Ah,” Hodgson says at last. “That does rather make more sense.”

“What on earth could you possibly have thought I meant, saying something like that to Edward of all people?”

Hodgson abruptly stands, waving his hand. “Oh, never mind that. It was just a silly misunderstanding. I best get changed before I drip even more water on the floorboards. Pardon me, Mr. Jopson.”

Jopson steps out of his way, nodding at him as he leaves, walking stiffly in his wet trousers. Irving is hot on his tail, refusing to let his comments go.

“George, *George*, what do you mean differences...”

Jopson firmly slides the door shut behind them. After a second, their voices and footsteps fade into the lower deck, and Jopson looks over at Little.

He is resting his head in his hands, his knees bent to his chest. Jopson lets out another sigh and glances over the room, assessing the damage. The worst of it is the spilled tub, but the

water will be easy enough to clean. Jopson goes to one of the overturned chairs, turning it upright. Lying beside the leg of the table is a worn copy of Shakespearean sonnets, a book he does not recognize from the ship's library. He picks it up, flipping it open to see Irving's name inscribed inside the cover.

"I didn't know Lieutenant Irving enjoyed verse," he says, keeping his tone light. "I'm not familiar with Shakespeare's work myself."

Little is quiet still, and it is only when Jopson removes the blanket from the floor that he jerks his chin up and stands.

"Here, let me help you with that." He picks the silver teapot from the floor, setting it on the cupboard. He then steps over the worst of the puddle to right another chair. "This is really all my fault."

Jopson raises a brow. "I thought it was mostly the dog's fault." With a tilt of his head, he adds, "Or perhaps Lieutenant Hodgson's heroics."

"No, it was...It's rather ridiculous. I don't want to waste your time."

It is too late for that, Jopson thinks somewhat irritably to himself, but he manages a smile to soothe some of Little's nerves.

"I know how to clean a mess, lieutenant. Why don't you tell me what happened, in your own words, while I make the room presentable?"

Little nods. "All right."

While it is true that the book was missing from Irving's cabin and that his berth was in disarray, that was entirely my fault. I was...I wanted to borrow the book from his collection, and it was foolish of me to do so without first asking him.

Neptune, being a curious sort, followed me in there. He startled me, and he... Well, he's such a large creature that he managed to knock over some of John's paints that he had sitting on his desk. It wasn't horrible. The worst of it landed on Neptune himself, so I decided that I would clean him first and then return to Irving's cabin to fix it.

It was only supposed to take a few minutes, but Neptune would have none of it. I had to chase him all about the room before I finally had him pinned by the table. At this point, John arrived, understandably upset. He saw me struggling with Neptune and intervened. At some point during the entire debacle, I end up against the shelves, John is on top of me, and Neptune is jumping all about our feet.

George arrives, sees us, and tries to separate us. He stepped into the tub of water and tripped. It upended, and—that's about the end of it. You came in just a few seconds later.

“And that was all?” Jopson asks as he finishes polishing the table. “No acts of valor from Irving or Hodgson both?”

Despite Jopson’s insisting against all help, Little ended up swabbing the floor for him, and if Jopson is completely honest with himself, it’s rather endearing watching the ship’s second-in-command scrubbing floors like an AB.

Little gives him a half smile, standing with a quiet groan. “Not the way they imagine, no.”

With nothing more to do, he stands awkwardly, his hands lying flat on thighs. Jopson gives him his privacy, going to the cupboard to prepare the tea service. The book of sonnets lies there beside the tray, its gilt lettering gleaming up at Jopson.

“Is there anything more you require, Mr. Jopson?”

Little’s voice is much closer than it was a few seconds earlier, and Jopson just barely keeps himself from flinching. The cups clatter in the saucers as he finishes arranging them

“None, sir, thank you. You’ve done more than enough. I can finish on my own.” Filled with sudden bravery, Jopson schools his face into a polite smile and turns to present the book to Little. “Here.”

Sure enough, the man hovers not a foot behind him. He stares at Jopson through his eyelashes like a chastised child, tensing when he sees the book.

Jopson holds it in front of himself until Little accepts it.

“Thank you,” he murmurs.

“I would return it to Lieutenant Irving before there’s another incident.”

“Yes.” He looks ready to say more—Jopson realizes that he wouldn’t mind—but then he visibly swallows, nods, thanks him again before turning to leave.

Jopson doesn’t let himself watch Little leave. He goes into the captain’s berth, fixing the bedclothes where they were starting to untuck from beneath the mattress. He pulls off the top blanket and shakes it before folding it back onto the sheets. By the time he returns to the great cabin on his way to fetch hot water for tea, he sees Neptune sitting in front of the door to Little’s cabin. His nose is pressed against the wood as he whines, and when he hears Jopson, he cranes his head back to stare plaintively at him.

In a strange way, Jopson imagines that he has much to thank the dog for, but he just shakes his head with a smile, patting Neptune on the head as he steps over him.

“Don’t look at *me*, old boy,” he says, glancing at the door as he passes though he cannot see anything of Little through the narrow slats.

Well, he thinks to himself, more's the pity.

End Notes

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