

Julie Bozza

**The Fine Point
of His Soul**

LIBRAtiger

This almost certainly never happened.

'Her immortal part with angels lives...'

She was laid out in her wedding clothes, a modest ensemble first worn seven years before. My eyes dwelt long on the worn bible in her hands and the scattered silk lilies, for I dreaded my last sight of her beautiful face. When I finally lifted my gaze I was near undone.

There are times when death brings serenity to a person; I had seen this often enough even in the midst of war, and I always gave thanks for such grace. It was not so now. Her face, which I remembered in shared laughter, which had radiated a profound kind of contentment – her face was now troubled and drawn. She had died but the day before, and the undertaker's best arts had been applied, and yet she did not seem tranquil.

She was gone. Peace was destroyed.

Seven Souls Heavy – October 1820

His Majesty's Ship *Boadicea* dropped anchor amidst a mass of ships in the Bay of Naples. We'd been far too long from home and were desperate for news, so we were delighted to hear from one of the local merchants that the brig *Maria Crowther* was lately arrived from England, and was anchored about half a nautical mile from us. The querying look I cast my captain was hardly needed. "Lieutenant Sullivan," he called in response, "take a boat over, and offer my compliments."

I picked the six nearest men to accompany me, and others were already readying a boat to be lowered. The swarm of merchants and other hopefuls plying their trades from various watercraft made way for us, and cheerfully took the opportunity to importune us as we passed.

The men rowed with vigour, as I steered us through the crowd of ships. I had no direct sight of the brig for most of the journey, but had plotted our course while still on board the *Boadicea* with a view of the intervening anchorages. The Bay was so full that I thought there must be as many people on the sea as on land.

Soon we were alongside the *Maria Crowther*. A gathering of dismayed faces peered down at us from the deck, but I gave this no thought, even when one of my men queried uncertainly, "Sir...?"

A Jacob's ladder hung down the side of the brig, so I leapt onto it and ran up, crying, "What news from Mother England?"

Amidst the dismayed faces, one young man was bubbling irresistibly into laughter. Everyone else was shocked immobile yet the young man was full of ironic merriment. "Oh, the worst, the worst," he replied, though the tears he wiped from his eyes were not springing from grief.

A babble from the others soon had me completely taken aback. "Quarantine, sir," said an older man, who I took from his authoritative bearing to be the captain. "We are in *quarantine*." It seemed there had been an outbreak of typhus in England, and the authorities in Naples were being overly cautious.

"Welcome to Purgatory," the young man intoned. He'd had his hand on his heart, but when he saw me staring at him, he offered a salute half polite and half merry.

And it was too late. I turned, and could already see the harbourmaster's boat approaching to order us confined, and a crowded ship became seven unwelcome souls heavier.

My six men helped the brig's crew cheerfully enough, or kept to themselves as much as they could on an eighty-foot boat carrying eighteen people. They were good men and never said a word about my poor judgement, though they could hardly be happy about this confinement. Meanwhile I tried to make myself as pleasant a companion as circumstances permitted.

The young man who had so enjoyed the irony of my precipitate arrival was named John Keats, one of four passengers on the brig which had sailed from London over a month before. Keats had a well-proportioned compact form, strong handsome features, and thick reddish-brown curls. Despite his energy and good-humoured engagement with all around him, it was soon obvious that he was severely ill.

"I am to winter in Rome," he explained, "where the dry classical air is to heal me." Catching his friend's fretful glance, Keats added, "Alternatively, I may join the ancients resting in that eternal city – but I do not intend to do so until I am quite hoary myself."

I introduced myself: "Sullivan. Lieutenant Andrew Sullivan of the frigate *Boadicea*."

"Joseph Severn," Keats' friend said in turn, shaking my hand. Severn had little of Keats' confident manner. He was slim and seemed forever uncertain, with a narrow face hidden amidst overly long brown curls.

"Severn is an artist," Keats provided when his friend did not. "The Royal Academy awarded him a Gold Medal for his last work – a prize they have not seen fit to award for twelve years. He seeks subject matter for future glories in Rome!"

"Indeed, I do paint," Severn supplied with a blush, "but that is nothing. Keats here is a poet, and his words will be stirring hearts for decades after my works have turned to dust and are forgotten."

"Ah! I will outdo you in modesty, as I swear your *Cave of Despair* will hang with the most revered works for centuries."

“Now, do not be foolish,” his friend chided Keats sincerely. “You know full well I will be forgotten, while through the ages you will rank second only to Shakespeare.”

“Shakespeare!” I cried in surprise. They both looked at me with silent enquiry. “What know you of Shakespeare?”

“A little,” said Keats.

“He is being modest again,” Severn supplied.

“And his plays? *Othello*, *the Moor of Venice*, for instance? Or...” I racked my memory. “Or *Hamlet*, *Prince of Denmark*?”

“Yes.” And he waited with a raised brow, obviously wondering what my sudden interest could mean.

But these seemingly small innocuous matters may have led me into deep and turbulent waters. I judged it better to retreat for now. “Then perhaps we will speak of them by and by.”

Keats nodded. “I have a copy of Shakespeare’s *Works* with me,” he said, before tactfully redirecting the conversation. “What do you read, Lieutenant? You are required to be expert in mathematics, I suppose.”

“I try to study geometry as thoroughly as I may, which is essential for navigation, and I have some interest in natural philosophy.”

“Of course!” And we spoke for a while of that, and of the beautiful Bay of Naples, and of Mount Vesuvius which loomed over us with its ever-present columns of smoke turning amber and then gold in the sunlight. We spoke of anything, in fact, but Shakespeare and *Othello*. Yet I could think of little else.

The other two passengers were women, one of whom – a Miss Cotterell – was evidently even more poorly than Keats. It was soon clear she was consumptive; tragic in a pretty creature not yet twenty. She would be so racked with coughs that she fainted, and Keats and Severn would take care of her as best they might. I discovered that Keats had some medical training himself, and had qualified as an apothecary.

One afternoon, once Miss Cotterell was settled quietly in the cabin again, Keats came back out on deck with a bitter set to his mouth. It can’t have been pleasant to be so intimately reminded of his mortality. He coughed a little in the brisk air, and I thought I spied drops of blood on

his handkerchief before he pushed it back into his trouser pocket. He took something small and white from his other pocket and toyed with it for a few moments before returning it home.

I wandered over to him as he sat down and picked up the volume he'd been browsing. It was his Shakespeare, of course. I wondered if he'd been reading *Othello*. He smiled politely when he saw I'd noticed the book, and left a pause, but when I didn't introduce the topic he spoke of something else. "I had no idea the Bay was so vast," Keats said, "nor that it could contain so very many ships. How many do you think there are?"

"Perhaps fifty boats in the local fishing fleet," I hazarded. "Maybe twenty times that number in ships of all kinds."

Keats shook his head, and looked about him once more. "A bristling thicket of masts. Cobwebs of rigging. And here we are, trapped in the midst of it all. But if we're the prey, who's the spider?"

I laughed at his fancies. Then I asked, "Did you know that it's only the spiral threads of a cobweb that are sticky? The radiating threads are not – and they're what the spider must use, else trap itself."

"Is that so?" he asked with an interested gleam in his eye. But my fund of natural philosophy didn't hold his interest for long. Soon enough he was gazing at the sandy-coloured stone of the old fort, then the jumbled rooftops and spires rising up the foothills, and beyond them the vineyards climbing steeper still. Keats sighed. "One wishes for an end to it all, an end to the struggles – whether one succeeds by breaking free or by attracting the attention of the spider."

At least we were well-provisioned in our web, for the harbourmaster did not seem to care who drew their boats up alongside the *Maria Crowther*, just so long as none of us left the ship and no one else boarded her. The crew had devised a system of ropes and pulleys to raise the goods up the side and lower any payments required, any mail to be dispatched.

My captain sent supplies, more than enough for all eighteen. Miss Cotterell's brother Charles, a banker in Naples, had all manner of treats brought out. And then night and day the local merchants rowed from ship to ship, selling fresh food and trinkets, exchanging banter and gossip. The

two women bought colourful woven shawls and my men endeavoured to outdo them with brightly patterned neckerchiefs.

We all tried to make the wait bearable. And yet we seasoned men were as giddy with relief as Miss Cotterell was when the quarantine was finally lifted on the last day of October.

I accompanied Keats and Severn ashore, and saw them settled into lodgings in the Guanti Nuovi district. And then my six men and I returned to the *Boadicea*. The whole party had split apart within an hour or two of the end of our confinement. I'm sure most of us had no desire to ever set eyes on the others again. And yet it was my fate to become intimately acquainted with John Keats during the next few months.

My Captain's Request - November 1820

I took two visitors with me to see Keats the next morning. "May I introduce Captain Sir William Mitchell of the *Boadicea*, and our ship's surgeon, Mr Geraint Bannon."

"A great pleasure to make your acquaintance," Keats said, shaking their hands in turn. He seemed to be caught a little off-guard, though he hid it well, and he was soon genuinely engaging in conversation. Severn, on the other hand, barely spoke; I knew already that he would retreat into shyness when flummoxed. "We must thank you again, Captain, for your generosity in supplying our ship during the unfortunate quarantine."

"The least we could do after Sullivan here blundered aboard. We must apologise again for the inconvenience he and the men caused."

"Not at all!" Keats cried. "The Lieutenant was the most amiable of companions, and I do believe the men worked so hard on the ship they were soon considered more a convenience than otherwise."

"Excellent, excellent," Mitchell responded. Then he glanced at me and at Bannon, and said, "But our time here must be short."

Bannon cleared his throat, and with a tilt of his head invited Keats to step aside. "Forgive the impertinence, Mr Keats," he said in a low voice that I could nevertheless hear. "I understand from Lieutenant Sullivan that you have come to Italy for your health."

Keats confirmed this, and soon the two were conferring quietly with heads together, with utter dispassion as if they were discussing a third party. I heard enough to gather there was some doubt as to whether Keats' heart, stomach or lungs were the most likely cause of his illness. I did not think it could be his heart.

The Captain and I tried to converse with Severn on art and on Italy, but we hadn't made much headway before Mitchell spied Keats' stacked volumes of Shakespeare; he soon had his nose buried amidst the pages. Severn and I managed to occupy ourselves with talk of visas and passports and the best road to Rome.

"I greatly appreciate your advice," Keats said as he and Bannon finally rejoined us. "It is contrary to some, but it accords with my own instincts."

"Then I wish you better health in the days to come." They shook hands.

Keats looked around, about to address us all, but then he paused as he felt our expectant silence. A moment passed.

"This Iago fellow," Captain Mitchell precipitately began, indicating the book he held. "What can you tell me of him?"

"A villain," Keats promptly responded. "Perhaps the most sinister in all of Shakespeare's plays, for he deceives everyone into thinking him honest and wholly reliable."

"But he destroys them all, doesn't he? Othello's wife, his own wife, and Othello himself..."

"Yes, and Desdemona was innocent, while Othello was guilty of little more than jealousy."

"*Why* does he do it?"

Keats took a breath. "There is much discussion on that very question. No one agrees." But he saw that such an answer would not do. "Iago declares that he resents being passed over for promotion; that is supposedly his main motive. Though as you'd know, Othello is a Moor, and Iago refers to him with disgust as a *black ram*; that might add to his reasons. He also says he suspects that Othello might have betrayed Iago with his wife Emilia." Keats gestured expansively. "It could be all these things or none of them."

Mitchell sighed, and did not respond. His eyes drifted back to the book, and he turned a page or two as if looking for answers there.

"May I ask," Keats said carefully, "why you are interested? It might help me find something of use to you."

I didn't think Mitchell would tell him anything of the matter. But he glanced at me, as if asking again whether Keats was to be trusted; I nodded once firmly. And then my captain said in a rough voice, "My wife... My wife's brother has stolen something from me. And now I understand he is in Rome. I... I hear he is calling himself Iago."

Keats frowned. Severn could not hide his astonishment.

"And so I seek to fathom his reasons... If indeed he has any," Mitchell added bitterly.

"I see," said Keats slowly. "Well, if you would let me read the play again this evening, and mull it over..."

"We have little time." Even as Mitchell spoke, his gaze darted down towards the street, and we all heard a carriage approaching at speed.

“Sullivan goes to Rome on my behalf,” Mitchell said with urgency. “Mr Keats, you would do me a great favour if you’d permit him to travel with you and Mr Severn as your companion.”

“Of course,” Keats immediately said, though he was almost as astonished as Severn by now.

“A greater favour still, if you would advise him in any way you can on this villain.”

“Yes. Yes, of course,” Keats reassured him. “But do you not —?”

“Captain Mitchell!” bellowed a voice from below. “Captain Mitchell, are you in there, sir?”

We heard at least three sets of feet pounding up the stairs, and the clatter of weaponry. Severn looked bewildered and terrified. Keats was obviously surprised, but stood firm. The Captain glanced at me, and I nodded my understanding; I quickly stepped further back in the room, so that I stood aligned with Keats and Severn rather than with Mitchell and Bannon.

They had the courtesy to knock on the door, though they did not wait for an invitation before pushing it open. Severn shrank back to the wall. “It is the British Consul,” I murmured to him and Keats. He had brought two soldiers.

“*You*, sir,” the Consul spluttered, pointing a damning finger at Captain Mitchell, “were under oath not to set foot ashore. Explain yourself, sir!”

“A social visit,” Mitchell said with a calm shrug. He indicated Keats. “A cousin of my dearest friend. I wanted news of him.”

The Consul was shaking his head, determined not to believe a word of it. “You could have had him brought to the *Boadicea*.”

Keats gave a sincere shudder. “I have had enough of boats to last me a lifetime.”

A dismissive stare from the Consul swept over Keats and returned to Mitchell. “You will return to your ship *now*, sir.”

Mitchell cocked an eyebrow at him, yet said peaceably, “As you wish.” He nodded farewell at the three of us. “Gentlemen.” Then he swept out, with Bannon right behind him. The Consul glared at us, and then followed them out, bawling at the soldiers to accompany Mitchell and Bannon to the docks and see them afloat.

After a few minutes, peace returned. Keats went to Severn, examined his expression, and then grasped his shoulder reassuringly. “All right, dearheart?”

“Yes.” Though Severn went to sit down, and it seemed his hands were shaking.

Keats looked at me next. “I don’t entirely understand...”

“I don’t have the full story myself. Some of the particulars relate to Captain Mitchell’s family, and some to state matters.”

“*State* matters?”

I nodded confirmation, hardly trusting myself to know what best to divulge. Yet my captain had himself involved Keats in this.

“Then I take it the Captain has heard of his brother-in-law’s doings through his wife, but also through other channels? Naval? Diplomatic?”

“The Captain’s wife is dead.”

“I am sorry,” Keats murmured. He sighed and turned away. “It is a strange thing, to take on such a name... But I will re-read the play. Perhaps it will give us some clue.”

“Perhaps,” I said. I didn’t hold much hope.

For a moment we were all stranded in a contemplative silence. But then Keats clapped his hands together as if to awaken us, and declared, “Well, I for one want a hearty meal.”

Severn looked at him worriedly. “Are you sure that –”

“It is my new medical regime, on advice from Mr Bannon,” Keats briskly replied. He seemed rather pleased about it.

“John, I know you are trained and know far more of this than I do, but you promised me you would heed the best advice of others.”

“And so I am. Let’s go and eat like *men*.”

The three of us applied for both British and Papal visas, and were advised they would take a week or more to be approved. To try to avoid any embarrassment for Captain Mitchell, I applied as Mr Sullivan: no longer an officer, but still a gentleman. Also, I stated that I was a carpenter, which was after all the trade I had been in before I was pressed into service.

Charles Cotterell helped occupy our days with tours of vineyards and extravagant churches and the ruins of Pompeii. We also attended my first and no doubt my last opera. Keats started helping me through it with murmured explanations of the plot and of the more unexpected traits of such productions, until he realised that the soldiers posted by the stage weren't part of the cast or scenic decorations. After that he was too angry to enjoy the rest of the performance, and his mutterings were now only complaints at the idea of them being there to suppress the populace, a visible token of a tyrannous regime.

On the following day, one of the midshipmen brought my belongings and dress uniform ashore, neatly stowed in a newly sewn canvas bag. We met at one of the dockside taverns, where we might go unnoticed or at least remain anonymous. Such precautions were perhaps unnecessary, but I would have hated to fail my captain by being discovered and sent back to the *Boadicea* with nothing to show for our trouble. Of course the midshipman tried to quiz me on what I was doing ashore, but I repelled his curiosity with talk of possible new supplies of wood and other gear. I don't think he believed me, but it did at least dampen his conversation.

There were long afternoons when a constant drizzle of rain made outings inadvisable for Keats and unpleasant for Severn and me. Keats would sit and read quietly, whether novels or plays, poetry or histories; so lost in the words he hardly moved for hours at a stretch. Often he would take the small white object from his pocket, and absently play with it in one hand. I finally saw that it was a small stone, almost spherical and highly polished, with a few transparent lines running through the opaque frozen milkiness. It seemed precious to him; occasionally he would hold it in his fisted hand against his heart.

Meanwhile Severn would sketch the view from the window or from his imagination, or he would draw Keats' profile again and again, trying to complete it in one perfect line. I read, too, though I was little in the mood for the geometry tome my captain had sent me in that new canvas bag, and Shakespeare's versifying felt beyond me. Instead, I borrowed tools from the neighbours, and fixed two of the chairs in our lodgings. When I found an odd block of wood, a discarded off-cut, I began carving, uncovering a strong-featured face with thick curly hair.

A letter came for Keats one morning. He read it through thoughtfully, and then took it to Severn before wandering across to the window with his hands stuffed deep in his pockets. "Shelley again," Keats announced to his friend. "He suggests we go to him in Pisa."

Severn's eyes darted over it back and forth and back again, before he responded with a discontented frown. "He does not offer you the same hospitality as he did in his last."

Keats shrugged. "He would take us in if he found us on his doorstep."

"I should hope so!"

"His last letter was the quintessence of generosity, and only *mildly* condescending." He smiled mischievously. "Really, it was beneath me to even notice."

"Who is Shelley?" I asked.

"A poet," Keats replied. "*Queen Mab. Alastor. The Revolt of Islam.*"

"The eldest son of a baronet," Severn supplied.

"In any event," Keats said with a nod to me, "we are committed to Rome now."

"Captain Mitchell asked only that I travel with you," I said. "Though if you have any advice on the issue of the name Iago, I would appreciate it."

He shook his head. "I'm not coming up with anything more than the obvious: The man intends irony, humour or harm. I don't know that I can be much use to you in Rome."

Severn said fretfully, "The weather in Rome is no doubt warmer and drier. It is so much further south than Pisa! And further inland, too, I believe. The warmer climate was the whole object of our disastrous voyage, was it not?"

"Of course, my friend," Keats gently confirmed with a smile. "Well, Andrew, we will see you settled in Rome, at least, and take a look around ourselves. And then we will decide."

Eventually the passports were ready for collection. We said our farewells to Cotterell, hired a carriage, and set off along the old Appian Way. It was the eighth of November, and it would take us until the fifteenth to reach Rome.

It was a tedious journey through an impoverished countryside. I was used to the meagre comforts of life aboard ship, and had considered our shared lodgings in Naples a pleasant and refreshing change, but the dirt and squalor we now faced each evening disheartened even me. The pity of it was that this was how the people here lived, day in and day out.

“I would rather be back in our cabin on board the *Maria Crowther*,” Severn muttered at the end of our second day.

Keats shuddered, and pointed out, “This room is not three foot deep in brine.”

“True.”

“And there is no Miss Cotterell to wake us with her hacking coughs... Well, though,” Keats added after a moment, with a shamed look on his face, “you still have to put up with mine.”

Severn was gazing at him anxiously. “You have been better, I swear it. You’ve hardly coughed at all these past few nights. Is that not so, Sullivan?”

“You have been better,” I affirmed, though I could sleep through anything – a necessary survival trait on a ship – and Keats had never woken me. But during the days he seemed brighter and more comfortable in himself, and was slowly gaining in energy.

“There, you see,” Keats said to Severn. “Mr Bannon’s advice is bearing fruit.”

But Severn was still sceptical. “We will consult with Dr Clark in Rome. You’ll recall he is a specialist in this field.”

“All right, dearheart.” Keats smiled as he watched Severn set about making the room as presentable as possible.

It was obvious that Keats was very fond of Severn though the man was timid and liked everything to be *just so*, which of course it never was and never could be. Severn seemed far younger than Keats, though Severn was almost twenty-seven, while Keats had just turned twenty-five, my own age. And yet Severn had been brave enough to accompany his friend to Italy, committing himself to nurse Keats through a potentially desperate illness, despite a very real chance that Keats might die and leave him there alone to cope with his grief and all the mundane practicalities. For that he deserved to be honoured.

The next day I walked alongside the carriage for much of the way, as had become my habit. It gave me exercise, saved me from the constant

jolting of the uneven roads, and it allowed the others more room and comfort. Severn would occasionally join me for a while.

He did so when we reached a long plain of grasslands brightened with wildflowers. The prospect delighted us all. To share it with his friend, Severn strode far and wide gathering armfuls of colour, and then he ran back and tossed them through the carriage window to lie at the poet's feet. Keats laughed happily, and watched his friend with true affection. In that moment I even began to warm towards Severn myself.

The approach to Rome itself was less happy. Along each side of the Appian Way were displayed the bodies of executed criminals in various stages of decay. Our hearts had lifted at the thought of our journey at last ending, but now Severn blanched and shrank back into the darkest corner of the carriage. Even the usually steady Keats seemed horrified by this reminder of the fate that awaited him. He pushed his hand into his pocket and clutched at the white stone for comfort, apparently without being conscious of the action. Death threatens us all, of course, but some it presses closer than others.

"The city itself will be bursting with life," I offered. "All will be different once we pass through the walls."

"Perhaps," said Keats.

"Come, Severn, think about the lodgings we will have tonight. They will seem fit for a king after what we have endured this past week."

Severn did little more than nod in acknowledgement of my efforts, but soon enough he was visibly thinking and planning, and paid no more attention to the grim parade beyond the carriage windows.

Published by LIBRAtiger via CreateSpace

ISBN: 978–1533691927

First published: 2012

Revised edition: 2016

Text: © Julie Bozza 2016

Editing and proofreading: Two Marshmallows | twommarshmallows.net

Book format: © Julie Bozza 2016

Set in Adobe Caslon and Pristina

Cover image: © bpk Bildagentur für Kunst, Kultur und Geschichte, Berlin
| from the Kurfürstlichen Galerie Schleißheim | location Bayerische
Staatgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek München | attributed to
Giorgione da Castelfranco, *Brustbild einen jungen Mannes* (Half-length
portrait of a young man)

Cover design: © Michelle Peart 2016

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