

Sailor, Deserter, Slave-Trader

From 'Men of Destiny' By Dr Peter Masters



John Newton

JOHN NEWTON WAS THE only son of a sea captain who owned a small fleet of private trading vessels. Captain Newton planned a rugged upbringing for John. He would go to school not a day longer than was necessary, then he would go straight to sea, visiting ports and meeting people of all nationalities. John's mother had died when he was seven, but not before she had stored his young mind with a good knowledge of bible teaching. After her death he was sent to boarding school until his father's plan came into operation. John was then taken away from school to be given his first taste of life at sea, in a vessel trading round Mediterranean ports.

He entered into the life with relish and soon picked up the ways and language of the seamen. Frequently he went to extremes of coarse behaviour, but when the voyage was over he returned home feeling sickened and ashamed of himself. Pangs of conscience, however, were soon brushed aside, and weeks spent on dry land made him bored, moody and frustrated. His father soon found a space for him on another ship, and life became worth living once again. Voyage followed voyage, and on each one his conduct became more abandoned and his conscience more hardened.

Once, when he was home, John arranged to meet some friends to look over a warship anchored in the harbour. He arrived at the quayside too late to meet his friends, and spotted them in a small boat which was taking visitors to the warship. His disappointment suddenly turned to horror as the small boat capsized, drowning all his friends. The tragedy haunted him for weeks, bringing home to him the reality of death, and stirring within him a fear of ever meeting God with a guilty conscience. In later years he reflected, 'I often saw religion as a means of escaping hell, but I loved sin and was unwilling to leave it'.

When he was fifteen, John went into a highly religious phase, in which he meditated and prayed every day, became a vegetarian and fasted twice every week. For two years he regretted his former conduct and tried to make amends by abstaining from all normal enjoyments. All the time he thought he had the ability to earn God's forgiveness, but he later said that this proud idea made him 'gloomy, stupid, unsociable, and useless'. It certainly did not bring him into touch with God in any meaningful way, and when he gave up his self-infused discipline he quickly went to the other extreme of moral abandon.

At seventeen, John's father saw that he was becoming more moody than ever and arranged for him to go on an unusually long voyage. Before going, John was given three days to carry out some

business for his father in Deal, Kent. In the house where he lodged he met Mary Catlett, a girl who immediately became the idol of his life. The three days became three weeks and John returned home to face the fury of his father for having missed his ship. What was to be done with the boy now? Captain Newton's only answer was another voyage, but to the lovesick John the voyage seemed to last for years, and as soon as he returned, he made straight for Mary. Again he frustrated the plans of his father by overstaying his visit. Captain Newton lost his patience- he even thought of disowning his son- but then, out of the blue, disaster struck, but in a way which Captain Newton secretly welcomed.

Young Newton was roaming the streets wearing his seaman's check shirt when he was spotted by a press-gang lieutenant of the Royal Navy. The navy desperately needed crews to fight the French fleet and John Newton became one of those who were ruthlessly press-ganged aboard a man-of-war, the Harwich.

On hearing the news, Captain Newton made no effort to claim his son, but instead sent a note to the captain of the Harwich recommending him for a midshipman's rank. This gave Newton many privileges, but he resented his enlistment and despised his appointment.

The Harwich set sail and took up station in the English Channel waiting for the rest of the fleet to assemble. Newton was given a day's leave ashore. He spent three days with Mary at Deal and returned to suffer the discipline of the Royal Navy. The fleet left Spithead in January 1745 and immediately ran into a freak southwesterly gale.

Many ships were driven on to the Cornish coast, while others, including the Harwich, fled for the shelter of Plymouth harbour.

Somehow Newton heard that his father was in Torbay- about twenty miles away. If only they could speak together he was sure that he could persuade his father to give him a permanent position in his Mediterranean trading fleet. Newton had been warned once against desertion, but how else could he reach his father? The opportunity came when he was put in charge of a landing party with orders to watch out for possible deserters. He made a break for it himself and followed the road to Torbay. He was just outside Torbay when he was stopped and interrogated by a group of soldiers, who put him in irons and marched him back to Plymouth.

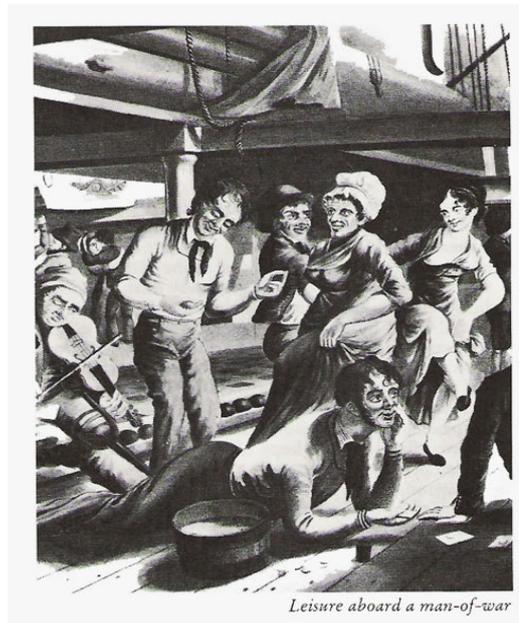
Onboard the Harwich, a humiliating punishment awaited Newton. A gathering of the whole ship's company was called, and in the presence of them all Newton was stripped, whipped, and degraded to the lowest rank. His midshipmen friends were then forbidden to speak to him.

Newton became indescribably depressed. His back was cut to ribbons; he had no friends to speak to, and he was made to do the dirtiest jobs aboard ship. Worst of all he had little or no hope of ever seeing Mary again, for the fleet was leaving Plymouth for five years service in the East Indies. There was nothing left to live for, and in his bitterness Newton began to blame God for his predicament.

Life among the press-ganged seamen of the 'lower deck' was cruel, coarse and crude. After a period of suicidal depression Newton adapted to his environment. He won general approval by acting the young tearaway, retailing filthy and blasphemous jokes to humour the admiration of all. In fact, he lived for the pleasure of being regarded as the instigator of everything obscene.

After some time, the fleet called in at Madeira for stores. On the last morning of their stay Newton heard that the commodore of the fleet had ordered the Harwich to exchange two of its crew for two men from a ship bound for Sierra Leone. He immediately pleaded to be allowed to transfer ships, and within half an hour was discharged from the navy and installed in the new vessel. Newton's conduct on joining this private vessel became worse than ever, as he subsequently recorded: 'From that time on I became totally corrupt. Not only did I sin, but I got others to sin with me.' Newton was insolent and lazy in his work, incurring the intense dislike of his captain.

A man named Clow, who was a part-owner of the new ship, was aboard travelling as a passenger. Clow owned a plantation in Sierra Leone where he also bought slaves for resale. It was obvious to Newton that the slave-trading paid Clow very well, and he decided to cultivate a friendship with him, and to try to get work with him. When the vessel arrived at Sierra Leone he went ashore, a penniless but optimistic recruit to the slave-trade.



Newton settled with Clow on the largest of three islands known as the Plantanes, just two miles off the Sierra Leone coastline where the River Sherbro meets the sea. He had high hopes of doing well for his new employer, but within days of their arrival Newton went down with malaria. Clow set off on an expedition leaving Newton in the hands of his negro mistress, who for some reason had taken an instant dislike to him and decided to abandon him to the fever. Delirious and unable to move, he was left out in the torturing sun to die. But the woman had underestimated his strength, and after a few weeks he began to show signs of recovery. Starved and semiconscious, he attempted to walk, and groups of slaves were incited to jeer at him and mimic his staggering movements.

To keep alive he had to crawl to the plantation at the dead of night to unearth and eat raw root vegetables. Somehow he recovered his strength, and when the opportunity came, he sent a letter appealing to his father for help.

When Clow returned Newton complained bitterly about his treatment, but Clow would not believe him. For a while matters improved as Newton did his utmost to please Clow on a trading voyage, but then another trader convinced Clow that Newton stole from him and swindled him whenever his back was turned. As it happened dishonesty was about the only vice Newton could not be charged with, but Clow grew intensely suspicious from that moment. Clow's resentment rapidly fanned into hatred, and this found many outlets.

For long months he would subject Newton to endless victimisation, denying him food and clothing. Newton recalled: 'My clothes were threadbare. What clothes they were! I had a shirt, a pair of trousers, a cotton handkerchief instead of a cap, and about two yards of cotton to wrap around me. With no more than that I have been exposed to up to forty hours of incessant rains and gales, without the least shelter, when my master was on shore. I developed violent pains... I used to creep out at night to wash my shirt on the rocks, and put it on wet so that it would dry while I slept. When a ship's boat came to the island I would hide in the trees, ashamed to be seen by strangers. And yet... my conduct, my principles, and my heart were still darker than my outward condition.'

After about a year under Clow's cruel domination - and several more letters home - Clow allowed him to leave and join another trader on the same island. Overnight, his fortunes changed. Newton's new employer trusted him, and rewarded his efforts with highly comfortable lifestyle. Soon he posted him to help manage one of his factories on the coast of the mainland.

Back in England, Captain Newton had received one of his son's letters and had arranged for a trading ship named *The Greyhound* to call at Clow's settlement to collect him. Help was on the way. *The Greyhound* had a crew of about thirty and traded at most of the settlements along the West African coast. When the captain put ashore for Newton at the Benanoes (islands near to the Plantanes) he was told that he had moved a great way inland, and so all idea of collecting him was abandoned. The vessel was about a hundred miles further long the coast when the ship's watch reported a smoke signal from the shore. Such signals usually indicated that trading was invited, so *The Greyhound* dropped anchor and discovered Newton and a friend. They had signalled the passing vessel - an unusual event at that point of the coastline - in the hope of obtaining some long-needed personal supplies.

Newton, now aged twenty-one, was no longer so interested in returning home. His new employment gave him scope for an easy life free from moral inhibitions. But the captain of *The Greyhound* told him a false story of a great legacy awaiting him at home, and this, together with his memories of Mary, enticed him on board.

Newton was welcomed aboard as a passenger and gentleman and settled down to a life of comfort. *The Greyhound* was due to continue trading for another year before heading for home - up to 1,000 miles further from England than the coast of Sierra Leone. The only useful thing Newton had to do was to master and learn by heart Euclid. 'Except for that,' he recorded, 'my life was one of continual godlessness and profanity. I do not know that I have ever met a man with a mouth more vile than my own.'

Newton channelled his behaviour and thinking even further into the exploration of debased humour and conversation. He 'preached' from the ship's Bible, twisting the text into vile stories. Eventually hardened seamen found his talk sickening, and the ship's captain began to dislike him intensely, regarding him as a Jonah who would bring disaster to the ship. He would promote drinking contests to see which crew member could hold his liquor best.

As soon as *The Greyhound* finished its trading calls, after a few days at Annabona (400 miles west of Gabon), they put out to open sea to return home. Keeping to trade winds they had a 7,000 mile voyage before them.

First they sailed due west, near to the coast of Brazil, then they turned northward to Newfoundland, where that stopped to take on fish. They left, heading east for home, on march 1st, 1748.



Newton, who was now an experienced and hardened seaman, was very uneasy about the state of the vessel. After a long expedition in a tropical zone, she was badly in need of repair. The sails and rigging in particular were in no fit state to withstand stormy weather. On March 9th Newton happened to pick up and read a religious book, but he soon pushed it aside, and 'went to bed that night feeling as indifferent to God as I had ever been'. Suddenly he was startled out of his sleep by the force of a violent storm. Pounding waves drove the raging sea below deck so that water poured into the cabin where he lay. He climbed to the upper deck to find mountainous waves crashing across the vessel. 'I'll man the pumps.' Shouted Newton. 'No,' yelled the captain, 'fetch me a knife from below.' Turning to obey, Newton saw the man at the pumps swept overboard by another gigantic wave. If he had done as he intended he would have been lost.

One side of the ship was almost entirely battered to pieces and water flooded in so rapidly that it could not be pumped out. It amazed everyone that the ship remained afloat. The terrified and despondent crew were convinced that the end had come, and the captain cursed Newton – their 'Jonah' – for ever having come aboard. At first Newton seemed impervious to danger and rallied the spirits of the crew. But gradually, lashed to the deck for safety, and working the pumps, he began to realise the staggering reality of the situation. It was surely impossible for The Greyhound to ride any more of these colossal waves. He turned to look at the flooded area of the ship which he had been pumping. 'If that won't do,' he said 'the Lord have mercy upon us.' Suddenly, for the first time in years, his blasphemous words seemed to bite back at him. 'What mercy do I deserve?' he thought. The answer was painfully obvious.

The colour drained from his face and his mocking, arrogant manner gave way to deep fear and clamouring thoughts. 'Is there a God?' he began to ask. 'Is there life after death?' The very thought of death seemed to confirm that there was. His instincts warned him to prepare himself to meet his maker, the very thing which frightened him most. How could he face the God Whom he had insulted for so long? He began to feel a crushing despair.

He was moved from the pumps to take a turn wrestling with the helm and as he did so, his thoughts raced feverishly over all that he knew about God. Scripture passages read years before now came to his mind with startling clarity. 'I now began to think of that Lord Jesus Whom I had so often ridiculed. I remembered the details of His life and death, a death for the punishment of sins not His own, but for the sake of all those who should put their trust in Him. How could I trust Him to bear my punishment? I really wanted proof that God could do this. I wished that these things were true.'

Expecting to die at any moment, Newton now prayed desperately to God for help and safety. The answer to his frantic prayers was to come more quickly than he could have expected. As daylight came the fury of the storm diminished and the backbreaking work of operating the pumps seemed to be having some effect. The damaged side of the vessel was crudely patched with planks and sealed with blankets. Then it was Newton's turn for some rest. But how could he rest? Seizing a Bible, he went into his cabin and read these words of Christ:- And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone?... If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?

Under threat of death, Newton thought more clearly than ever before. 'Upon this I reasoned – if the Bible is true as a whole, then this particular passage must be true. The writer, if he is God, has promised to give the Spirit to all who ask for it. Therefore I must ask for it. And if I am given it, then I must trust the whole Bible as God's Word.'

With his mind grappling with the spiritual problems, one other thing worried him. He could see that God could forgive sinners, but would that include him? In everyday life, one can forgive a friend, but to forgive your arch-enemy is impossible. Why should he expect God to do this? The answer lay in the Bible, where Newton read about Saul of Tarsus, a man who hated Christ and persecuted Christians; yet Saul was freely forgiven, renamed Paul, and called by God to be an apostle. If there was mercy for Saul, thought Newton, surely there could be mercy for him too.

Newton found other passages in the Bible which challenged his heart. He read the parable of the barren fig tree in Luke 13, and saw that when the useless tree was condemned to be cut down by its owner, then the keeper pleaded for the tree to be given one more chance to bear fruit. Newton grasped the Lord's meaning in the parable – that there would be mercy for repenting sinners regardless of their past lives.

Another parable which gave him great encouragement to go to Christ in prayer for mercy and new life was the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15. 'I felt that no one more perfectly fitted the picture of the prodigal than I did. The goodness of the father in not only receiving, but in running to meet such a son – an illustration of the Lord's goodness to returning sinners – deeply moved me.'

The furious storm had given way to a gentle breeze, but not before rendering them helpless. The ship was unseaworthy and they had no clear knowledge of their position. Every man aboard knew that the slightest change in the wind would be enough to send them all to the bottom. The damaged side of the ship had to be turned constantly to face the wind in order to keep the vessel leaning in the opposite direction. At all costs the broken side had to be kept out of the water. An approximate course was set, and they prepared for the perilous journey back to England.

Day after day, the men manned the pumps to keep down the water constantly seeping into the stricken hull. They tried to satisfy their hunger on rationed portions of salted cod, the only food each day being half a fish divided among twelve crew members. All their bread, livestock and spare clothing had been washed overboard, and as the temperature dropped to near freezing point they began to feel the effects of exposure and starvation. As the days passed, they grew too weak and emaciated to operate the pumps and one seaman died. The day came when the food ran out, followed soon after by the water, and everything seemed lost at last. Only the pain of exhaustion tempered the misery and despair that now gripped every mind. But that very day – exactly four weeks after the great storm broke upon them – the battered Greyhound sighted a small island off Lough Swilly, on the north coast of Ireland, and the next day they reached port, knowing they had survived the impossible. 'About that time,' wrote Newton, 'I began to know that there is a God Who hears and answers prayer. I felt a peace and satisfaction on that day which I had never known before.'

How different was the man who emerged from that terrible voyage. Newton, like Saul of Tarsus, had met the Lord and given his life to Him. Clothed with a new humility and character, all his inner motives and desires were changed. Newton stepped off the gangplank of the half-wrecked Greyhound as a man with a new life within, and a new start ahead of him. He had come to life in a spiritual way. In the words of Christ he had been 'born again'.

Although Newton continued to sail with - and command - slave ships for seven more years, in time he came to be one of the most implacable opponents of slavery. It was Newton who more than anyone else inspired and encouraged William Wilberforce in his campaign to abolish slavery. He married Mary Catlett, an earnest Christian believer whom he had loved since his early youth, and longed to devote himself to the Lord Who had forgiven his sins and granted him a new life. For some years he held the post of Tide Surveyor at Liverpool, serving also as lay pastor in a local independent church. He caught up on a missed classical education, and was in due course appointed curate of Olney Parish Church in Bedfordshire.

Newton drew large numbers of people to his preaching, started one of the first Sunday schools in the country, and wrote some of the finest and best-known hymns in the English language, including Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God; How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear; and, Amazing grace! How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.

Together with his close companion the poet William Cowper, who also lived at Olney, he compiled a hymnbook – The Olney Hymne Book – from which scores of hymns are still in use today. One of these great 'Olney' hymns fits perfectly Newton's own approach to the Lord while on board The Greyhound:-

*Approach, my soul, the mercy-seat
Where Jesus answers prayer;
There humbly fall before His feet,
For none can perish there!*

*Thy promise is my only plea,
With this I venture nigh;
Thou callest burdened souls to Thee,
And such, O Lord, am I.*

*Bowed down beneath a load of sin,
By Satan sorely pressed:
By war without, and fears within,
I come to Thee for rest.*

*Oh, wondrous love! To bleed and die,
To bear the cross and shame,
That guilty sinners, such as I,
Might plead Thy gracious name.*

*'Poor tempest-tossèd soul, be still,
My promised grace receive.'
'Tis Jesus speaks – I must, I will,
I can, I do believe.*

After sixteen years at Olney, Newton was appointed to the united parishes of St Mary Woolnoth, and St Mary Lombard Street, in the City of London. Here, in a pulpit of great influence, he ministered for 27 years. He was certainly one of the greatest preachers of his day, being the confident and counsellor of some of the most powerful political figures, and a campaigning reformer whose influence was felt in all the momentous social advances of his time. He was also one of the greatest letter writers of his age. One of his volumes of letters entitled *Cardiphonia* (or 'letters to the heart') has been republished many times down to the present day, exemplifying the highest literary order of letter writing, and the most profound and tender spiritual advice.

John Newton preached the good news of forgiveness and conversion as a gift from God to all who sincerely repent, and he preached it with characteristic vigour and urgency until he was past eighty years of age. When advised to stop preaching for the sake of his health, Newton replied, 'Shall the old African blasphemer stop while he can speak?'

In his will, Newton penned these words:- 'I commit my soul to my gracious God and Saviour, Whom mercifully spared and preserved me when I was an apostate, a blasphemer, and an infidel, and delivered me from that state of misery on the coast of Africa into which my obstinate wickedness had plunged me... I rely with humble confidence upon the atonement and mediation of the Lord Jesus Christ, God and Man... as the only foundation whereupon a sinner can build his hope, trusting that He will guard and guide me through the uncertain remainder of my life, and that He will then admit me into His presence in His heavenly kingdom.'

No sketch of the life of John Newton can possibly leave out the words which he ordered to be used on his own gravestone:-

'Once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy.'