

**A Matter of Honour**  
**The Story of England's Last Duel**

**By**

**Martyn Beardsley**

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### **Part One**

#### **The Road to Stoke's Bay**

*The yellow gorse bordering the beach was in full bloom, but the late springtime afternoon was bleak and drizzly as the four men assembled on the shingle in their long black coats and hats and began to open their mahogany cases and carefully remove the elegantly crafted but deadly contents. They had chosen as remote a spot as you could get along this narrow strip of coastline: away from the isolated cottages and hamlets inland; a good long walk from Gosport, and just out of sight, at least to the naked eye, of the Coastguard's base further east along the shore. The Isle of Wight was clearly visible across the choppy grey waters of the Solent as the men glanced apprehensively about them to ensure that there would be neither witnesses nor interruptions to what was about to happen. A small yacht stood close into the shoreline, bobbing at anchor. This isolated spot was a long way from medical help should the need arise, and the little vessel was on standby to act as*

## The Road to Stoke's Bay

*an ambulance. The famous Haslar naval hospital was a short trip along the coast, and Portsmouth itself not much further on.*

*The seconds placed their principals on their marks fifteen paces apart, carefully handed over the finely balanced, hair-trigger duelling pistols, and retired to a safe distance further up the beach. Lieutenant Henry Hawkey and his opponent James Alexander Seton assumed side-on stances in order to offer a narrower target, pistols were still pointing at the ground by their feet. But then the second who had been chosen to officiate called out for Hawkey and Seton to make ready. Satisfied that they were settled and prepared, he barked out the fatal command:*

*"FIRE!"*

*One small explosion, and a flash of yellow-red flame stood out against the grey background of the Solent – almost simultaneously there was one feeble, metallic click.*

*Hawkey and Seton must have stared at each other for a second, trying to make sense of what had happened. One pistol had failed to fire, the other had missed its target.*

*Now came the most controversial part of the duel. Second pistols were demanded, and duly placed in the hands of the combatants. This should never have been allowed, but either both seconds acquiesced, or one protested and his objections were dismissed.*

*After following the same procedure as before, the order to fire was given again - and this time, above the mewling of the gulls and the lapping of the waves, two fierce cracks reverberated along the seashore and two little clouds of black smoke drifted above the scene leaving an acrid smell familiar to these military men. One duellist clutched his lower abdomen in a vain attempt to stem a jet of blood which was spurting out to a distance of several feet. His own bright red life-blood splattered before his eyes onto the shingle; he staggered, then fell with a heavy scrunching sound onto the damp, cold beach.*

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**Blackguards and Scoundrels**

*His language was such that no man could stand...*

**Letter from Seton's second to a friend, 19<sup>th</sup> May 1845**

The events leading up to the Last Duel were compressed into a few short weeks. Fate brought the Hawkeys and the Setons to Portsmouth, and fate saw to it that the two couples, rather like adversaries from a children's fairy tale, came to reside at King's Terrace and Queen's Terrace respectively. Isabella Hawkey was later to say that she first saw Seton in April 1845. No doubt he saw her too – and their destinies were sealed. The Last Duel was less than six weeks away.

Henry Charles Moorhead Hawkey had enlisted in the Royal Marines as a second lieutenant around four years previously; he was from a military family and his easy entry into a service drastically shrinking after many years of war was due to the sacrifice of previous generation of Hawkeys. And it was as a direct result of this career choice that he met Isabella, the daughter of Royal Marines Major Augustus Keppel Colley, whom he almost certainly met on the Royal Marines social circuit. As well as the usual venues such as local assembly rooms, balls were a regular feature at barracks. Perhaps Elizabeth Colley, Isabella's widowed mother would have preferred her daughter to have done a little better than a second lieutenant of her husband's regiment; but Hawkey's first promotion was imminent and maybe he was seen as a promising prospect – or perhaps she could see that they were very

much in love and there was no point in pouring cold water on the union.

He was posted to the battleship *Caledonia*<sup>1</sup> and was awarded the Turkish Medal during the capture of Acre and “operations connected with it on the coast of Syria”<sup>2</sup> in 1840. His brother, named Charles after their father, was in the very same campaign as a midshipman on board the six-gun paddle sloop *Stromboli*. During a hiatus in his Mediterranean service in 1840, Hawkey applied for three months leave: for which there can only have been one reason – the marriage to Isabella. After arriving back in England, Hawkey headed for London and took rooms at the Black Bull in Holborn, Middlesex, and on the 21<sup>st</sup> August 1840 he and Isabella Colley were married at the parish church there. He would have been 21 years old at the time. Isabella, born in Kent, would have been a comparatively well-off woman when Hawkey married her. Her father had married Elizabeth Smith, herself a woman of independent means, and his death some time before 1833 is likely to have meant that she was left a substantial sum of money. Additionally, a relative of Elizabeth’s left a sizeable amount in government stocks to be divided between her children. There are later references to Isabella being a property owner in her own right – something which would probably have been beyond the means of Hawkey on his lieutenant’s pay.

After the wedding Henry returned to duty on board the *Caledonia*, now based at Plymouth, and Isabella spent at least part of that time with her mother in Rochester, where her first child was born. She then joined him in Plymouth, where she gave birth to at least one more child but where their first-born, a boy, subsequently died. Then came Hawkey’s transfer to Portsmouth – probably at around the same time as the Setons arrived, although they almost certainly didn’t know each other.

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<sup>1</sup> The ship on which Jane Austen's brother, William, had served some years previously.

<sup>2</sup> Hart's Army List.

Hawkey came to Portsmouth as a first lieutenant in 1843. There was a rumour that he had already taken part in a “meeting” or two while serving in the Mediterranean. No records of his involvement in any earlier duel exist, but then things that happened abroad were often kept abroad, away from the prying eyes of the British legal system. We do know, though, that Henry’s own father, Charles, had taken part in a duel almost thirty years previously and in fact killed his opponent. In 1815 while a commander in the Royal Navy, some unknown difference arose between him and a Major Clason of the 20<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Native Infantry, East India Company on a voyage to China. During a stopover at Cape Town, Charles Hawkey settled it with pistols. Clason, aged 29, died from his wounds.

So duelling might be said to have been in the blood, and the impression we usually get of Henry Hawkey from most accounts of the Last Duel is that of a brooding presence. Isabella, his own wife, would eventually describe him as being “very tenacious”, a phrase which was clearly a euphemism for what she saw as his short temper. But just as we will see the image of the other duellist, James Seton as the debonair Hussars captain, begins to crumble under the weight of close scrutiny, it might be that Hawkey has received an unfair press over the years.

Henry Hawkey formally introduced his wife Isabella to James Seton one evening in early May 1845 at the King’s Rooms on Portsmouth beach. James Alexander Seton, ex-Eleventh Hussars, and his wife Anne had probably been in Portsmouth for a relatively short time. They had a young daughter, although she isn’t mentioned in any of the reports of the duel and it’s possible that she was living with relatives at this time. According to Isabella, it was Seton who made the first move, approaching them and telling Hawkey that, as his friends had left, he hoped he might be introduced to the lady and perhaps dance with her. Hawkey agreed, a friendly, sociable gesture he would come to regret for the rest of his life. A few days later she came across Seton with his wife while they were out walking in Gosport. Following the introductions, the Hawkeys were due to visit the Setons at their lodgings that evening and Seton crossed the street to hail them, saying he had called at their house earlier and finding them out had left a music book he thought Isabella might like. He said he would call on them again.

With the benefit of hindsight it is already possible to see how Seton was attempting to cultivate this new friendship in order to insinuate himself into Isabella's affections; to what extent she acquiesced is another matter, and one which is impossible to judge at this distance. Hawkey had intended to go out for a ride but now he changed his mind – he wanted to be home when Seton called. Was this simply to avoid missing out on the company of his new friend, or was there was something about Seton's manner that already caused Hawkey to harbour doubts about his motives?

When they did meet up at the Seton's Queen's Terrace house, James took an impressive-looking ring from his desk and proudly showed it to Isabella. This seemingly inconsequential act would take on greater significance in the near future. Later in the evening he asked Isabella if she would be home around noon the following day as he wanted to bring her a book she might like. Seton would have been aware that Hawkey was always on duty at this time of day, and he even suggested that he might escort her to see the Marines at drill practice, an arrangement to which Hawkey gave his consent.

Seton called just after mid-day and stayed with Isabella for about an hour before they set off for the Royal Marines' Clarence Barracks in Old Portsmouth, between modern Pembroke Road and Penny Street – a very short walk from where the Hawkeys, and particularly the Setons, had lodgings. As they were strolling towards the Marines' headquarters, Seton offered Isabella his arm. She declined, but Seton wasn't one to give in easily.

“If one lady takes it, another may,” he chided her, and pointed out his wife who had now joined them along with another friend of theirs. “You see my wife is walking with Mr Mugginn.” But still Isabella resisted Seton's offer, informing him that while it might be all right for Mrs Seton and their friend, her own husband didn't like her being quite so familiar with other men. Reading between the lines of statements subsequently made by Isabella, it seems that the situation soon become rather tense. It appears that on the High Road two other men who knew her, one of them a naval officer, joined them and Seton beat a hasty retreat because, “there was not enough room for us all to walk together”. But at a subsequent meeting between Isabella and Seton he informed her that he had

been “quizzed”, and complained that he “ought not to be turned out, particularly by a naval man.” (Seton was particularly snobbish and patronising towards other branches of the armed forces.) It seems highly likely, then, that the two men had become aware that Seton was pestering Isabella and gallantly decided to intervene.

Seton now allegedly became more earnest in his pursuit of Isabella – but what must be borne in mind during the following accounts, particularly those in which Isabella and Seton were the only players, is that most of the inside information we have comes from Isabella’s statements in court.

Seton called a day or so after this incident only to find Isabella was out, but he was successful on a later occasion when he openly admitted he had called because he knew Hawkey was away. Nothing out of the ordinary appears to have happened at this meeting, but later he asked her if Hawkey would be attending a forthcoming race meeting. When she told him he was, Seton said he intended to come and visit her then, and that he had “a great deal to say” to her. As it happened, bad weather put Hawkey off going to the races. He stayed at home, and he and Isabella were joined for lunch by their good friend, Royal Marine Lieutenant Edward Pym. Seton arrived expecting Isabella to be alone, Hawkey and Pym happened to be sitting in a position that hid them from anyone at the doorway. It was only as Seton approached Isabella that he suddenly realised his mistake. Isabella later said in court that Seton’s startled reaction, “I think attracted my husband and Mr Pym’s notice.”

At the next soirée at the King’s Rooms, Seton presented Isabella with a bouquet of flowers, something which, outwardly at least, didn’t trouble Hawkey. Nothing untoward happened that evening, but Seton was circling like a predator and almost ready to make his move. A few days later, after Hawkey had gone on duty and while his own wife was out of town, Seton arrived at the Hawkey lodgings – and the time for playing games was clearly over.

“It’s no use humbugging with you any longer – do you mean to give me an opportunity or not?” was his rather unsubtle gambit, according to Isabella. He said he was well aware that Hawkey was a “quarrelsome fellow”, and blithely admitted that he even believed



he would have to “go out” with him: that is, it would end in a duel. But, he: “should not go out on the Common for nothing...” If he “gained his point”, he would not mind it. Isabella was no doubt swept off her feet by this romantic proposition – but then, with all the timing of an amateur dramatic society performance there came a knock at the door, and Seton’s bravado instantly evaporated.

“Good God, here’s Hawkey!” He cried, running to grab his hat. “Can’t you let me out?”

The caller was not Hawkey, however, but Pym, and a major scene was averted. The incident must have upset Isabella, because as soon as he returned home Hawkey could tell that his wife was troubled. His instinct told him it had something to do with Seton. It’s unlikely that Isabella told him the whole story for fear of what he might do; but Hawkey clearly knew that something was amiss, and for a “quarrelsome fellow” he continued to behave with surprising restraint.

The next time Seton met Isabella, he tried to foist a glittering, very valuable ring upon her, and when she spurned this gift he said, “Perhaps you do not think it sufficiently valuable?” to which she warned him not to insult her with any further such offers.

Seton boasted that he had once given a woman £1,000 worth of jewellery. “Would that be any inducement to you?”

“No,” she replied.

“If those are your ideas, a man has no chance.”

He persisted nevertheless, putting forward a scheme to drive the two of them to London in a cab. Isabella remonstrated with him, indignantly pointing out that he was a married man. His only response was that he didn’t care about his wife, and furthermore the feeling was mutual. Isabella rather feebly threatened that if he persisted with his pursuit of her she would flee to her mother in Rochester. This did little to dampen Seton’s ardour, but he left the house with his philandering ambitions unfulfilled.

Isabella again refrained from telling her husband about the latest episode.

A high percentage of duels were over women, either because a lady or her reputation were deemed to have been insulted, or because one man tried to come between another and his beloved. There was a sad example in 1819, when the wife of Lieutenant

Theophilus Walsh of the Life Guards absconded with Captain Pellew, nephew of Admiral Edward Pellew who had captained the *Conqueror* at Trafalgar. Pellew and Mrs Walsh took themselves off to Paris, but the cuckolded husband followed and a duel took place at twelve paces. Pellew himself did not aim or discharge his weapon, and is reported to have signalled his intention to his second that he would refrain from firing. Walsh's bullet hit the young officer in the head, killing him instantly.

So Isabella might have been sensible in trying to keep things from her husband but she had been rattled by the incident and needed to unburden herself to someone; she turned to their young friend Lieutenant Pym. She must, though, have known in her heart of hearts that Pym would feel honour-bound to pass what he had heard on to Hawkey.

The day before the duel would take place was a Sunday. Hawkey and Isabella went to church as usual and then took a long stroll in the vicinity of Anglesey, a village near the coast not far from Gosport and close to where the duel would be fought. The story that Pym had told him had been playing on Hawkey's mind, and this was the moment he chose to broach the subject of Seton's advances. Once it was all out in the open he remained ominously silent on the subject, although Isabella became aware that he subsequently had further discussions with Pym about it. He and Pym must have had the measure of Seton by then and known that he was likely to continue his pursuit of Isabella; and quite possibly they now decided upon a strategy to deal with him.

The following day, Hawkey spoke to Mary Ann Stanmore, the owner of his lodgings, while Isabella was out.

"Mrs Stanmore, I want to beg a favour of you."

"What is it, sir?"

"Mrs Stanmore, do you know Captain<sup>3</sup> Seton?"

"Yes, sir. I have seen him once."

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<sup>3</sup> If this was not a reporting error (the conversation is taken from a *Times* article) and Hawkey genuinely believed Seton's correct title was "Captain", this subsequently much-repeated fallacy may be of Seton's own creation.

“I expect he will call here. Should he call, you’ll be kind enough to come in and out of the room often, and don’t leave him and Mrs Hawkey alone long, for he has insulted her very much and she is dreadfully afeared of him.”

Mrs Stanmore promised that she would “come to Mrs Hawkey’s assistance” if Seton did call. Hawkey suggested she could pretend she needed something on the piano or sideboard. They were interrupted for a moment when Private Bearman, Hawkey’s servant, came in, but after Bearman left Hawkey persisted, “Mrs Stanmore, you’ll bear what I said in mind.” And the extent to which it was playing on Hawkey’s mind is shown by the fact that he reminded her yet again shortly afterwards when she was out in the garden. She was holding a plant in her hand, and he said, “Mrs Stanmore, bear in mind what I have said – take care of *my* plant – Mrs Hawkey.”

In the event Seton didn’t call, but he and the Hawkeys encountered each other later that day when they were out walking, and Seton came over. Isabella politely bowed to him, and Seton made to enter into conversation with her – but Hawkey wouldn’t have it, and led her away.

When it came to the ball that evening, the Hawkeys merely acknowledged their erstwhile friend with a formal bow; he must have known from their demeanour that the game was up. But by now, whether through drink, lust, sheer arrogance or some combination of the three, Seton became reckless in the pursuit of his quarry. He managed to get to Isabella when she was alone, where he reminded her that she had agreed to a dance with him on this particular evening – and now he insisted that she should keep her promise. When she refused, Seton said, “Then it must be Hawkey’s fault,” and warned that he would seek him out for an explanation. Isabella countered that Hawkey would surely give him one, but this was no more than bluster, and, ever fearful of being the cause of an embarrassing scene she first went to see Edward Pym, who advised her not to dance with Seton. Then she went to get a second opinion from her husband.

Hawkey grudgingly agreed that since she had promised Seton a dance she should honour it – though he stipulated that it should be a quadrille, where there was a minimum of physical contact between

dancers, rather than the more intimate polka which Seton had requested. It is surprising that he agreed to anything of the kind, and it may well be that Hawkey had already decided what he was going to do that evening and how it was likely to end. In view of what was to follow, one innocent dance was neither here nor there, and to allow it to go ahead would deprive Seton of one possible source of ammunition to use against him in future.

With Hawkey glaring at them as they danced, Seton could clearly sense what was in the air and muttered to Isabella, "Whatever your husband does to me, I shall not go out with him; it's quite impossible a light cavalryman can ever mix himself up with an infantryman."

This sudden change of tune, as well as being a highly dubious convention of duelling, was also a gross insult to Hawkey's standing as a proud Royal Marines officer. Seton, an ex-cavalryman of low rank who had almost certainly never lifted a sabre in anger during his paltry 12 month stint, was as good as saying that Hawkey, a career officer with almost ten years' service and a promotion under his belt, was beneath him and thus unworthy to face him in an honourable duel. The Marines were a might touchy about this kind of thing. Royal Marines lived in an awkward world of not quite being soldiers in the usual sense, but certainly not sailors either. A Captain of Marines, for example, was equivalent only to the rank of a lieutenant in the Royal Navy, and sailors in particular were renowned for burying their respect for their red-coated colleagues beneath a veneer of good-natured mockery and jocular contempt.

Isabella and Seton danced their quadrille. When Isabella went to sit down, Seton followed and placed himself next to her. By now, her husband was moving in. Hawkey asked Isabella if she would take his arm and walk with him; he wanted to speak with her. She, no doubt almost quaking at the thought that this gathering storm was about to break, pleaded tiredness. Hawkey then demanded to sit next to his wife but Seton wouldn't move to accommodate him, and after repeating his request more than once and receiving the same response, the Marine had had enough. "Sir, I should like to have a few private words with you."

"That is what I wish myself," replied Seton darkly.

There was a smaller room just off the ballroom where those who wanted to get away from the music and dancing could retire to talk or play cards. It was either vacant when they entered or, like a saloon in a Western when two gunslingers square up to each other, quickly emptied when it became clear that trouble was brewing. The two antagonists remained in there for just a few intense minutes. Snippets would emerge later, but never a full account of what was said; Seton came out first in a state of some agitation and made straight for Isabella.

“For God’s sake settle this matter,” he pleaded, “or there will be such an exposure!”

But Isabella had had enough of the whole business, and certainly did not want to be around when the inevitable eruption happened; she brushed him off, found Edward Pym and got him to take her home.

Seton seems to have next approached his friend Lieutenant Byrom George Rowles of the Royal Navy and told him what had passed. Rowles in turn sought out Acting-Adjutant Andrew Savage, who was performing the role of steward at the soirée. Hawkey, Rowles complained, had called Seton a scoundrel and a blackguard, and asked Savage if he might report this reprehensible behaviour to his commanding officer, Colonel Jones. Savage, with no first-hand knowledge of the quarrel, didn’t want to get involved to that extent; he did, however, agree to Rowles’ request to have a discrete talk with Hawkey to stop things getting out of hand. He duly took Hawkey to one side and explained the situation, but found him to be in an “excited” state and in no mood to back down. He had, he told Savage, received “an injury, not an insult” and as far as he was concerned the business had gone beyond the point where it could be settled with a few quiet words and a handshake. The only trouble was Seton’s continued insistence that they could not go out together because of this infantry versus light cavalry business. The assumption must be that it had been Hawkey’s intention to force the issue by saying things which would leave him with no choice but to defend his honour by making a challenge, but Seton had used the cavalry/infantry subterfuge to avoid having to take the bait. There are also hints from what Isabella was to say later that more serious words concerning herself were exchanged which no one but

Seton and Hawkey heard, but which played a significant part in causing Hawkey to snap. The implication is that Seton, sensing that the game was over and that the object of his infatuation was lost to him vented his anger by attacking the reputation of Isabella herself, making a deeply insulting remark about her to Hawkey. This is the impression that Isabella was to give – though she never publicly revealed the actual words used.

Things came to a head at around midnight when Seton was leaving the ballroom. Hawkey had strategically positioned himself on a sofa by the door, and as Seton passed Hawkey kicked out at him, again calling him a blackguard and a scoundrel, and threatening to horsewhip him up and down the High Street if Seton wouldn't fight him. Others must have heard this, and by the standards of the day this public humiliation could not be overlooked.

It may have simply been Hawkey's temper at work, but it could also have been a calculated act to ensure that Seton felt he had no choice but to settle the matter in the time-honoured way. What had not worked in private must be made public. Words like "blackguard", "scoundrel" and "rascal" might seem quaint and trifling to a modern ear accustomed to the commonplace use of far uglier language, but in this era such words uttered by one gentleman to another were heavily loaded and almost impossible to ignore. Among many examples from the history of duelling is one from 1792 when there had been public unrest in the Mount Street area of London, and Captain Cuthbert of the Guards regiment had been detailed to prevent any carriage from using that route. Lord Lonsdale, on finding himself obstructed when attempting to enter Mount Street, accosted Captain Cuthbert:

"You rascal, do you know that I am a peer of the realm?"

The officer was unimpressed. "I don't know that you are a peer, but I know that you are a scoundrel for applying such a term to an officer on duty, and I will make you answer for it."

Two shots each were ineffectual when they finally met – though it was discovered that one of Lord Lonsdale's bullets had struck a button of Cuthbert's coat, quite possibly saving his life.

In the King's Rooms, 1845, the insult and the reasons behind it were clear, and the die was cast. Henry Hawkey almost certainly

knew it would come, and by this point it was almost certainly what he wanted.