

"THE SLAVE TRADER"

An original screenplay

by

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WGAW-registered

FADE IN

INT. REVEREND NEWTON'S STUDY. DAY. (1773)

REVEREND JOHN NEWTON (48), in casual clothing, his hair pulled back in a pigtail, sits PENSIVELY at his desk.

Around him are books, sheet music, treasures from a sailing life. Nearby a cheerful fire.

Outside his window, the trees and stone houses of a pleasant English village in early morning.

Reverend Newton SIGHS and bends to write.

REVEREND NEWTON (V.O.)

I first went to sea on my eleventh birthday, completing five voyages to the Mediterranean before I was eighteen. An unruly dreamy lad, I seemed little cut out for the discipline of the sea, though that did not deter my father, the ship's captain, from attempting it...

CUT TO:

EXT. LONDON. DAY. (THIRTY YEARS EARLIER: SUMMER, 1743)

Noisy, lively, crowded. The streets ring with the cries of BALLAD-SELLERS, KNIFE-GRINDERS, OYSTER-MONGERS, and the like.

REVEREND NEWTON (V.O.)

I obeyed in my father's presence, for I was much afraid of that good but stern man...

PEDESTRIANS range from the GAILY RICH to the TATTERED POOR. And weaving in and out among them, a GROUP OF TEENAGE BOYS on the prowl. Looking for adventure or mischief.

REVEREND NEWTON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

...But in his absence, I ran wild.

JOHNNY NEWTON (18) is their obvious leader. His hair is pulled back in a ribbon on his neck. His rolling gait that of a seasoned sailor.

JOB LEWIS (15), his best friend, is a gentle innocent. With a rolling gait in imitation of Newton's.

Job stops to look at the wares of an OLD MAN with a PEG LEG, who carries a tray with a long strap about his neck.

THE OLD MAN'S WARES: glass eyes, ivory teeth, spectacles.

JOB

Ey, Johnny, lookee here!

NEWTON, poring over a pile of used books in front of a shop, waves Job off without looking up.

THE OTHER BOYS, however, swarm around Job, manhandling the old man's goods and laughing.

NEWTON finds, flips through EUCLID'S ELEMENTS OF GEOMETRY, fascinated.

THE OLD MAN slaps the boys hands away.

OLD MAN

God's wounds! His bloody wounds!

NEWTON looks up, tosses a coin to the SELLER for the book.

NEWTON

(calling out)

Ey, ye merciless rascals, don't be tormenting an old sailor who left his leg in some far clime for king and country!

The boys return the wares. The man tips his hat to Newton.

OLD MAN

Y'ur a good'un, lad! I thank thee.

When the Old Man turns away, Newton steals an EYEBALL. He grins, tosses it to Job, and walks off WHISTLING.

JOB, disconcerted, hurries the eyeball back to the Old Man, who pats Job's face kindly. Newton watches with a grin.

He rushes to catch up with Newton. A LARGE IRISHMAN carrying the front poles of a sedan chair rams a pole into Job's back.

Job cries out, falls to his knees.

NEWTON

Damn you for an impudent son of an Irish whore! You owe my friend an apology.

The large man, a murderous look on his face, drops the sedan chair with a BANG. A MUTED HOWL from within.

His IRISH PARTNER cheerfully drops his end, to another muted HOWL. He cries out the traditional appeal to circle around for a fight.

IRISH PARTNER
Ring! Ring!

MEN and WOMEN eagerly crowd around. Job grabs Newton's arm.

JOB
Johnny, let's get out of here!

The other boys HOOT and HOLLER, egging Newton on. Newton grins at them, removes his coat, hands it to Job.

The Large Irishman tosses his coat onto the chair poles. Pulls a lethal-looking CUDGEL out of his waistband.

Newton pales, circles warily.

JOB
The bastard's not fighting fair!

A MAN IN THE CROWD
Aye, the lad's unarmed and not but
half his weight.

A BUXOM PIE-SELLER, a pipe in her mouth and a basket of pies on her head, seizes a silver-knobbed CANE from a nearby gentleman and shoves it into Newton's hands.

Newton grins his thanks, just as the large Irishman lunges.

JOB
John!

The cudgel crashes toward Newton's head, but the cane takes the blow, forcing Newton to his knees.

The large man swings again. Newton fends it off, the cane splintering, and crashes into the side of the sedan chair.

YOUNG DANDY (O.S.)
DESIST, YOU RUFFIANS! DESIST, I
SAY!

A very drunk YOUNG DANDY pokes his head out of the window next to Newton. He GLARES up at the wild-eyed Irishman.

YOUNG DANDY (CONT'D)
Am I paying you to fight, you lazy,
lolloping laggard?
(MORE)

YOUNG DANDY (CONT'D)
 Hoist me off at once or you can go
 to hell without a halfpenny! I
 shall count to ten.

The YOUNG DANDY closes the CURTAINS.

YOUNG DANDY (O.S.) (CONT'D)
 One... Two...

The Irish Partner grabs the front poles.

IRISH PARTNER
 Seamus! Come now! My children are
 hungry.

YOUNG DANDY (O.S.)
 Three... Four...

The Large Irishman gives Newton a scowl, but his clothing
 reveals how much he needs this fare.

YOUNG DANDY (O.S.) (CONT'D)
 Five... Six...

He grabs the rear poles.

LARGE IRISHMAN
 (to Newton)
 Don't go forgetting me, now will
 you...you scurvy shit-breech lad?

The men move off with the chair.

NEWTON
 (calling after)
 No, I certainly shall not. I've
 learned my lesson, Seamus, sir!
 (beat)
 Sir Fart-Catcher!

The crowd ROARS, as the Large Irishman hunches his shoulders
 and hurries off.

The Boys pat Newton on the back, a frightened Job joining in
 at last. The Gentleman retrieves his ruined cane with a
 scowl. The Crowd breaks up. The Boys dart off.

Newton sees the Buxom Pie-Seller puffing on her pipe,
 watching him. He kneels at her feet, kisses her rough hand.

NEWTON
 Marry me now, and end my blood's
 wanton alarms!

JOB
 (shocked)
 Johnny!

But the Pie-Seller just laughs.

BUXOM PIE-SELLER
 Ye are a ripe one! I'll grant you
 that! A rare ripe one.

She pulls down her basket, and offers the boys MEAT PIES.

BUXOM PIE-SELLER
 Each of you take one for your
 troubles...take two, and see if you
 can stay out of it next time.

Newton and Job grin at each other.

EXT. THAMES RIVER. NIGHT.

The sun is setting and streaking the Thames with color.
 WHERRIES, CORACLES, SAILING SHIPS ply the river.

Newton and Job sit companionably against a piling. John is
 dreamy, far-away, his pies now just crumbs in his lap.

Job watches the river trade eagerly, a whole pie halfway to
 his lips, but stalled there as he watches a NAVAL VESSEL.

JOB
 Johnny...I've been thinking of
 joining the Navy.

Newton turns around shocked.

NEWTON
 What?!

JOB
 We could enter together, be ship
 mates!

NEWTON
 And be treated like wild beasts by
 a bunch of officers who would as
 soon cane us bloody as look at us?

JOB
 No, Johnny, they're not all like--

NEWTON

And share our every waking moment
with the spewings and refuse of
jails, which may I remind you, Job
Lewis, make up most of the
foremastmen? Are you quite mad?!

Job shakes his head.

JOB

Rumor has it we'll be at war with
France in a few months, Johnny. If
the press gangs catch us, we'll be
in whether we like it or not.

NEWTON

They won't catch me! But you had
best lie low until my father
returns. He'll take you on again
for the Mediterranean trade.

JOB

Aye, he's a good man, I've thought
of that--

NEWTON

The old gentleman's a bloody
tyrant, but he's a damned sight
better than the Navy.

Job sputters.

JOB

Watch your tongue, John! That's
breaking the Fifth Commandment.
Captain Newton's a stern man, 'tis
true, but always fair and always--

NEWTON

Oh, to the Devil with the
Commandments and with my father!

Job, shocked, stares at John, his pie falling off his lap.

Newton eyes it. Looks up innocently. Job, appetite ruined,
nods. John takes the pie and eats happily.

After a moment, Job's eyes narrows.

JOB

'Tis a good thing I know you better than that, John Newton, for who was it but you spent our last voyage in pious prayer, Bible study, and the singing of hymns until the whole crew was ready to throttle him... But for my piteous pleadings!

Newton laughs, sheepish. Job, regaining his good humor, retrieves his mangled pie.

The MUSIC from a beautiful, lantern-lit boat catches Newton's attention. He watches ELEGANT COUPLES under a bright pavilion as they dance, hovered over by WHITE-GLOVED SERVANTS.

He leans back with a smile.

NEWTON

Job, lad, what would you think if I told you that I am to become a king, of sorts?

Job looks at him with dismay once more.

JOB

You must take your life more seriously, Johnny! If I join the Navy and work hard, I can rise to midshipman--

NEWTON

In thirty years!

JOB

Some have made it in far less. And with your father's connections you could START as a midshipman and have your own command one day. I'd be proud to sail under you, John.

Newton SNORTS. Job rises up in dignity.

JOB (CONT'D)

You cannot just drift here and there wherever the tide takes you. You're a man now, Johnny. You must take your life more seriously.

Newton laughs at this "mother hen" boy, then becomes solemn.

NEWTON
 Seriously enough, I guess. I'm to
 leave for Jamaica in three days.

Job is shocked at the news.

NEWTON (CONT'D)
 Father procured a place for me. As
 a plantation manager.

JOB
 Over the Blacks?

Newton nods.

NEWTON
 So, you see, I shall be a king, of
 sorts...with all the white-gloved
 servants and comforts I please. And
 if I do well, I shall return home
 in, say, five years a wealthy man.

JOB
 Five years?

Newton nods dreamily.

JOB (CONT'D)
 When...when do you leave?

ON JOB'S WAN FACE

NEWTON (O.S.)
 My ship sails in three days...

EXT. COUNTRY LANE. DAY.

Newton, dressed in neat riding attire, canters along.

REVEREND NEWTON (V.O.)
 But I had an errand to run for my
 father first. He had ordered me to
 pay a visit to some old friends of
 my mother's who lived in Chatham.

Newton sees the CHATHAM SIGNPOST. Is tempted to ride past.
 Forces himself to turn his horse up the lane.

The hedges along the road have been shorn into JAGGED SPIKES.

REVEREND NEWTON (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 Mother had died at their home when
 I was six, but I had not seen them
 since and was loath to bother...
 (mocking tone)
 On the eve of my "kingship"--

Newton's horse suddenly SHIES, and he is thrown hard to the ground. The spikes graze his temple, raising welts.

EXT. CATLETT HOME. NIGHT.

A solid, sensible tradesman's home with a pretty garden lies in the TWILIGHT. Newton, pale and shaken, KNOCKS.

The door is flung open. Framed in the light is POLLY CATLETT (15), a lovely, fresh-faced girl. Newton is entranced...

POLLY
 Yes?

...And terribly tongue-tied. Polly stares quizzically at this queer young man who does not speak.

NEWTON
 I am...Newt Johnson. No...that's
 not right...I am, I mean...

Polly does not help out, is obviously enjoying herself.

POLLY
 Yes...Newt?

MRS. CATLETT, followed by three CHILDREN, pushes past Polly.

MRS. CATLETT
 Polly, where are your manners! I'd
 recognize Elizabeth Newton's boy
 anywhere.

To JACK, her ten-year-old:

MRS. CATLETT (CONT'D)
 Jack, see that John's horse is
 stabled and fed.
 (Back to Newton)
 Come in, dear, and let me see you
 in the light. Are you hungry?

Newton, tearing his eyes away from Polly, nods as Mrs. Catlett pulls him inside.

INT. CATLETT HOUSE. FOYER. SAME

MRS. CATLETT (CONT'D)
 Children, this is John Newton.
 John, this is--oh, my dear, you've
 hurt yourself!

Newton had forgotten. He touches his temple.

NEWTON
 Oh, yes, my horse spilled me and--

Newton sees SARAH (4), peeping shyly out from behind her mother. He makes a silly face at her. Her eyes grow wide, then she and Newton laugh.

INT. CATLETT HOUSE - LIVING ROOM. LATER.

The fire burns low. John sits by it, the center of attention, obviously in the middle of a thrilling tale.

Small Sarah lies asleep in Newton's lap. Jack lies on his belly at John's feet, chin in his hands, enthralled.

BETH (12), bespectacled, eyes alight on John, snuggles with her mother on the couch. Mrs. Catlett, rapt, sits with her arm draped around MR. CATLETT...

A large kind-faced man who rocks a cradle with his foot, and seems to have forgotten that he is trying to light his pipe.

Polly pretends not to watch, as she clears dishes from the adjoining dining room.

MR. CATLETT
 (match burning his finger)
 And what happened then, John?

JACK
 Yes! After the gale stove in the planking, tangled up the rigging, and you'd lost most of the animals overboard!

Newton laughs.

NEWTON
 We baled!

Newton, confidence overflowing, turns to look at Polly. She appraises him coolly, returns to her work. His face falls.