

10. "Quickly aboard bestow you..."

The order for the maids to board came at last. Mary Nicholls was first. She stepped across the gangway into the new world of pitch, wood, oakum and sail that would be home for months to come.

The change was immediate. When Mary looked behind her, she saw men with staves glaring at her and the others; while before her were sailors who smiled and gave her a hand in the darkness, guiding her across the deck to the steps reaching steeply down to the hold. Here, there were no harsh words or curses: sailors knew hard luck first-hand. They also knew with moral certainty that a ten-inch plank was all that separated them from their Maker. That did not make them soft or cuddly, nor abolish their varied (and sometimes quite imaginative) vulgarity. Still less did it do away with their profound appreciation for a good-hearted whore or those they dreamed was such -- but it did spare them that certain habit of contempt for the "mean and common folk" practiced so widely among what passed as the better classes of London society.

Guided by these well-meaning, calloused hands (and by the firm injunction to touch nothing, absolutely *nothing* around them), the Bridewellians passed over the gangway, across the deck, and down the ladders: down, down into the 'tween decks and cargo spaces prepared for them, with the lantern barely bright enough to show the way. They

went in an almost sacred silence. The few steps from shore to ship had brought them abruptly to a different world filled with new smells and strange shapes, with sounds and motions that detached them already from their prior lives. It made them as ghosts to the old London world disappearing in the fog behind as they glided in a soundless space through the hatchway, and down the ladders.

Maggie had already disappeared below when the last of the lads came aboard: Will, Henry King, Willy Weston, little Richie Davis and the several others. The gangplank rang firm but hollow as Will crossed it and set foot on *Jonathan's* smooth wooden deck. The breeze had freshened as evening came on.

While the breeze was already beginning to chase the fog, and would soon be rattling the halyards against the masts, Will was barely aware of it. He stumbled on, completely and utterly drained. His trial just hours ago already belonged to a different world. That liar, Guylliam, hadn't appeared in court and Constable Tewman swore the only reason he'd arrested Will was because he'd heard Guylliam say that Will was the thief. To Will's astonishment, the judge cut off the officer and said he didn't care whether Tewman had heard Guylliam *say this* or heard him *say that*, and that unless the good constable had any real evidence -- and not just what he'd "heard say" by someone else -- then the trial was over. Tewman had turned his palms up empty and shrugged, and the judge had declared the accused "exonerated." Not knowing the word, Will feared the worst until the judge explained that he wasn't to be hanged after all, and that the Company now was free to ship him to Virginia instead. The constable was

red-faced with embarrassment; the victimized baker red-faced with anger.

As a result, it had been a chastened Constable Tewman who led Will back to Bridewell and tried to explain to the Registrar that Will had been acquitted, but didn't really want to say why or how. This left the Registrar at a loss as to what to record in the registry book. He and Tewman were still debating the matter when the Director walked in with Mr. Pelham and two others. The debate over Will was immediately forgotten. He stood against the wall as the Registrar said "yes sir, and "certainly sir," to the Director and then "whatever the Company wants, Mr. Pelham" as they spelled out how Bridewell was to gather the designated transportees, group them for the wagons and send each wagon to the right ship.

Will had been at a complete loss when he'd found himself assigned to *Duty*. But the mistake had been corrected, he now was aboard *Joanthan*, Maggie was already below, and that was all that mattered for now....

He looked up at the sky, where the breaking clouds unveiled Venus, low in the west: a sparkling gem; untouched; a virgin star. The winter air reached deep in his lungs and he found that the pain in his ribs from his arrest was completely gone. The humiliations and fear of the last few days was behind him. The stars, the stars were calling him forward; calling for Virginia. And Maggie was waiting below.

He'd almost never seen the stars on Dolittle Lane. The tenements leaned so far over the lane, they blocked much of the sky. As for rest, the sea-coal smoke that rose throughout the city darkened the air most days anyway. He only dimly remembered the open country skies of his

childhood. They seemed impossibly distant now, farther even than Chesapeake Bay.

When he lowered his gaze, he saw an impatient Mr. Pelham stamping his feet and swinging his arms to keep warm, and obviously wishing for the boarding to be completed. "We're all that stand between him and his fire and a hot supper," thought Will. He rather enjoyed making Mr. Pelham wait.

At last, he saw Pelham take out some papers and call to the mate. "Mr. uh...uh. Sir," he said.

"Eh?" the sailor replied. "Red Sam; just call me Red Sam. But if you want papers signed, you'll have to come back tomorrow to see the Captain." He bent down to remove the gangplank.

"Mr. uh Sam, then," said Pelham, "I really must insist that you acknowledge the Bill of Lading. I've delivered the five-score shipment as per the contracts. I've got signatures from *Duty* and the *Merchant* already, so if you would be so kind...." he trailed off.

Red Sam looked at Mr. Pelham's fine cloak and fashionable hat. He was about to say "you've done your bloody job, mate, so just you let me do mine!" when a carriage came clattering up alongside and voice boomed out.

"Excuse me. I'm looking for *Jonathan*, a Virginia Company ship bound for Chesapeake. Can you tell me which one is she?"

"You're Mr. Keyes, sir?" replied the mate. "Mr. Thomas Keyes? Thought I recognized you. I'm Red Sam, the mate, at your service. I was with Cap'n Each when you were discussing with him last week. This is our *Jonathan* right here. You coming with us, then?"

“Indeed I am! Paid six pounds to the agent; all goods and tools are crated to go; said my farewells to home and hearth -- all except a final fare-ye-well to fresh-brewed English stingo, which is what I mean to do now if I can bring my dunnage aboard tomorrow. Will the morrow serve?”

“Have everything here at least an hour before the tide turns and I’ll see to it myself, Mr. Keyes. Everything below is packed so tight, you can’t hardly f-- that is, we’re packed right tight, but I can take of it. So have as many pints as you please, Mr. Keyes -- so long as you’re here tomorrow early!” He gave a jealous grin: “But truth to tell, you’ll have another chance for nut-brown English ale in a couple of weeks when we gets ‘round to Plymouth. We’ll fill up our water and add final supplies there and I’m planning to fill up on good English ale myself ‘cause we won’t have a decent brew after that for many a month!”

The unexpected mention of ‘Plymouth’ had brought a gasp from behind Will where Richie Davis -- barely eleven -- exclaimed “Plymouth? It’s *Plymouth!* So we’re not going to Virginia at all!” Richie pushed past Will and ran madly ahead to the hatchway ladder pushing and shouting all the way until his cry “not going! not going to Virginia at all!” was swallowed up in the *Jonathan’s* hold.

Below, in the dim light of a few lanterns and ignoring Richie’s shouts, the Bridewellians had stumbled forward, gone into their designated compartments, lads crammed into the larger compartments and the maids in others. They barely had time to cast down their sacks and see where the chamber pots were found before the rough wood door was closed and left them in nearly total darkness. Some threw

themselves onto their bag of clothing and sobbed; some lay back and gazed up blankly overhead; some joked or whispered with their friends.

Will's group was the last to be lodged. Their door was closed and barred and they were all left in the dark. Will lay on his bag against one wall. He punched and pulled the sack until it was as comfortable as it could be got. With the ship tied tightly to the quay, there was almost no motion onboard. Lying in the dark here wasn't much different than lying in the dark on Dolittle Lane, thought Will. And Maggie was there somewhere, too: not far away, just like on Dolittle Lane. He almost chuckled as he thought that, all in all, not much had changed these last few weeks....

As he lay there, waiting for sleep, a bit of verse sprang to mind. It was something Samson Hollyday had heard somewhere and had recited time and again in Bridewell's crowded courtyard:

*Virginia, Earth's only paradise.
Britons, you stay too long:
Quickly aboard bestow you,
And with a merry gale
Swell your stretch'd sail
With vows as strong
As the winds that blow you.
Virginia,
Britons you stay too long.....*

"*Earth's only paradise,*" he repeated to himself. Will Micklewood was no theologian, but he was pretty sure neither Adam nor Eve had been shipped to Eden from Bridewell. Smiling at the thought, and rocked ever so gently by the river, he soon was fast asleep.