

5. Bridewell

Cold it was and colder still: as the short winter afternoon drew to a close, the chill cracked though Will Micklewood's coat and scarf and pierced an unmatched pair of mittens that had worn so thin that holes might appear unannounced at any of a dozen unhappy spots. Cold and colder still: the sun disappeared, red and mutinous, into the coal-tainted twilight haze; and the damp rose from the river, with its ever-present mist.

Will shivered under a wagon on Trig Lane. He grasped tightly his small sack of chestnuts and wizened apples at his side, waiting for nightfall. It was hot in Virginia, they said. So hot in summer that sweat ran like a river and a man didn't need a shirt, couldn't bear a shirt, they said. Will tried to imagine a hot summer day where the air was still and the heat pressed down from a tropical sun. He tried to feel the heat weighing heavy on his chest and creeping down his arms and his legs, seeping at last into fingers and toes.

It was no use: the cold would not go away.

He figured that if he turned himself in now, they'd toss him into a cell in Bridewell with a dozen other lads, heated by little more than the animal warmth of the crowd. But they would feed him, he thought. He was pretty certain of that; soup perhaps; some bread. And he'd have a roof over his head all night long. So what if they then shipped him on a six-penny bark that leaked to let in the whole Virginia Ocean? His stomach growled, loud enough to summon

every watchman in the Ward. But the quiet of the lane was undisturbed. A hacker drove by with a fare from time to time; Widow Denton huffed along the wall with a child in tow: the ordinary flow of the city.

Will hugged his knees against his empty belly and waited for full night, for the stars to appear. Life had been a blur these last days, ever since Maggie had told him that her uncle wasn't going to send *her* to Virginia, no matter what. He'd sworn it, and told her he'd send her away to some cousins until the storm blew over. Will had decided that if Maggie wasn't going to Virginia, then he wasn't either. He'd been on the run ever since.

He was safe in the great sea of London humanity beyond Dolittle Lane, he thought – safe, but penniless, hungry and cold. Worse, he had to keep coming back to the Lane each night after dark, looking for a bite of bread, a cup of small beer, or a sack of nuts and apples like what he had now. Each time he came, though, there were some who eyed him while trying to look like they weren't. He knew who the snitches were, and would settle up with them when he had a chance. The cook's boy up on the Strand might be one: he'd given Micklewood a funny look when he'd spotted him in the street that very afternoon. And that rogue Will Guylliam was always looking for trouble, too. There could be others; and everyone knew the Watch was picking up anyone they could from the streets these days, bundling them off to Bridewell.

The darkness deepened. Will had begun to relax when a flurry of voices broke out behind him. "There 'e is! Micklewood! Micklewood! Behind the cart, there! I told you 'e'd be 'ere!" cried a voice up the lane.

Will was blinded by a rush of dancing torches that blocked the narrow space between the wagon and the wall, then by others behind: vague shapes hurrying up in the

dark. He pitched under the wagon and rolled a full turn toward the center of the alley – but rolled back underneath as the watchmen rushed to find him on the other side.

Will grabbed his sack and waited a moment. The waving torches and confused cries flowed around him. As soon as the watchmen saw that Will hadn't come out on the street, they raced, cursing, back toward the wall. Now for it! He rolled again under the wagon: one turn, two turns; then leaped to his feet and ran, tossing the nuts behind him, where they rattled and clattered on the cobbles, bouncing and rolling underfoot. His pursuers dashed after him, but slipped and stumbled on the nuts. No one fell, but a stumble was enough. Just as the constable nabbed at Will's sleeve, he slipped on a nut: his knee gave a twist; his arms threw up madly, grabbing for a support. At that point, his torch leaped from his grasp and arced like a comet across the darkening sky. While the torch landed safely on the cold, hard cobblestones where nothing would burn, the constable himself landed on the warm, soft bosom of unsuspecting Widow Denton and set it ablaze despite Tewman's frantic efforts to damp the flames: "Beg pardon, Madam!" he cried, pulling himself away, breathing hard. "Had no wish, none at all, I assure you, Madam, to fling myself like...." Her sudden smile vanished and she snapped up her child's hand and dragged it away down the lane.

The posse poured past by them, a dozen or more; some after the bounty, but most for the joy of the chase. Torches flared; boots pounded the street like horse hooves after a fox.

Ahead in the darkness, Will Micklewood let the breeze clear his head. He cut right onto Little Carter Lane, then doubled back down Sermon Lane. He felt the cathedral's imposing presence behind him before he stopped abruptly:

the wrong, wrong, way, he thought: the church yard was open space where a watchman's call could carry to the far side and summon someone to bar the way. No, he thought, he needed to work his way through Breadstreet and so to Cheapside, where he could blend into the street life again. He just needed to catch his breath a moment....

At that moment however, a hand came down on his shoulder, and seized the scruff of his neck. He never even saw who it was, but they dragged him down the lane, into the street, and into Constable Tewman's waiting grasp. They yanked him around another corner and slung him into a waiting high-walled wagon. The gate slammed shut and Will heard the chain rattle into place. Exhaustion and cold overcame him. He slumped against the siding as the driver gave a whistle. The horse whinnied and the wagon click-clacked over the cobblestones: the only sound of civilization in a city frozen in silence, and already, or so it seemed, a world away.

It was the onion soup that wakened him: sharp, sour, half-rotted onions kept in a basket from August, perhaps; but onions in soup for all that, with a carrot or two thrown in for good measure. He opened his eyes and stared blankly into the darkness. He was alone. The other lads must have followed the smell of the soup without bothering to waken him from his stupor, since less for him meant more for them. He scratched his unkempt hair and tried to sit up but dropped back with a faint groan from the pain in his side. He probed his ribs gingerly, wincing as he found the mark. "Damn you, Tewman," he muttered.

He tried lying unmoving, but his empty belly would hardly let him. From downstairs came the muted sound of benches scraping on stone and the dull clatter of wooden cups and bowls. Visions of an empty soup pot rose before

him, with the left-over steam swirling above the copper, there where gallons of soup ought to have been; and his stomach growled again. With another curse, he forced himself to sit up, leaning against the wall. He was just preparing to try standing when he heard footsteps in the corridor: light steps on the stone floor; the swish of a dress.

“Will,” called a soft voice, “Will, are you awake now?” She pushed the door and a dim light came in.

“Maggie? Oh Maggie! That’s you! Thank God you’re here!” He stopped. “But why are you here? In Bridewell?”

“Don’t fret about all that, now. I brought you some soup that I saved for you. Come, let me help you with it. Careful now: if you spill it, there’ll be no more.”

She set a bowl on the stone floor, pulled some thick bread from a pocket in her apron, and bent down in front of him. “Let me help you up now; take my hands.” He grabbed her wrists, held his breath, and pulled himself up. His side still ached, and he wavered a bit, but at least he was on his feet again.

In the faint light from the corridor, he could just see her, in a dark dress and a white apron. Her hair was pulled back under a sort of wimple, from which a few blond strands escaped at the temples. Her breath was full and warm. He finished the soup while still standing. Then Maggie took his hand and led him down the corridor towards the common room where several long rows of plain tables and benches stood nearly bare. A half-dozen girls dressed like Maggie were finishing the clean-up. In the near corner, there was a large wedge of very dark bread next to a wooden bowl.

“Hurry now, William,” she whispered, “supper’s done and I must hurry back to work. We can’t speak during meals here, anyway. Have what’s left of the soup; you can take the bread with you.” She turned to go.

“But Maggie, is *this* Bridewell?” asked Will in the same low whisper. “And where’d you get that dress?”

“Of course, it’s Bridewell! And they *gave* me the dress, Will. *Gave* it the morning after I was registered! Can you believe it? Ain’t it the finest thing you’ve ever seen? You’ll get your new shirt tomorrow – well not tomorrow, seeing it’s Sunday, but surely on Monday for work.”

“But what –“ Will was cut off by a wide-hipped, red-cheeked woman at the far door who clapped imperiously to summon Maggie. The woman looked as though she had not smiled this century, thought Will. Maggie ran towards the door and, her eyes lowered and meek, slipped out under the woman’s unblinking gaze.

The unsmiling woman spoke to someone in the next chamber and pointed dismissively back at Will. So he grabbed the bowl with both hands and swallowed the rest of the soup as quickly as he could. He was just in time for a tall, heavy-jowled man appeared in the doorway.

“You!” he commanded. “Get cracking, boy!”

While the last drops of soup dribbled down his old shirt, Will scooped up the rest of the bread and trotted between the benches, trying to ignore his aching ribs.

Will’s first meal at Bridewell was his best, as he soon discovered, for Bridewell was devoted to *work*, or rather to certain ideas about work that Will and his new companions found particularly confusing. As explained by their jailors (for jailors they were, for all the high-minded talk), Bridewell’s purpose in life was to make the poor work – to *teach* them to work – and work as they ought to have worked before they were brought in, since if they had only worked beforehand, they wouldn’t have been so poor as to be sent to Bridewell in the first place.

Will's new friend Tom Cornish explained it all to a bewildered Will one evening as they lay on opposite sides of the dividing board in a common bed in a long row of such beds. The inch-wide board in the middle gave a pretense of privacy, but what theory said was twenty-four inches of bedding for each sleeper had been condensed by practice – sharp practice indeed – to a good deal less. Tom Cornish explained that some long-forgotten carpenter must have convinced Bridewell that a forty-two inch wide bed could pass for the required forty-eight inch variety.

It was what Cornish called 'sterling reasoning' After all, a little bit of extra sterling under the table was a very sound reason indeed in Bridewell, since there was never very much of either sterling or reason. Besides, since a plain two-by-four was a quarter-inch less than two inches and a quarter-inch less than four, why couldn't twelve times two equal twenty-one which after all was exactly half of forty-two, Tom explained to a thoroughly befuddled Will.

"You'll get along just fine, here," Tom assured him, "if ya just remember that Bedlam has more sense than Bridewell!"

The new arrivals soon saw how they stood out in Bridewell like gentlemen in Billingsgate. Most were younger than the others, of course. More important, though was that, what official reason had been given the ancient scrivener who recorded their names in Bridewell's thick register book, the newcomers knew (or soon learned) that they'd been brought to Bridewell for the sole purpose of being shipped away.

Mocking their official register entries was one of the first things the new Bridewellians (as they called themselves) had in common; and they delighted in sharing the official reasons for their arrest. Liza Harris explained

sheepishly that she had been ‘taken for a vagrant’ when in truth her uncle had shouted ‘and good riddance, too!’ as Constable Tewman had led her away. Mary Nicholls boasted that she had been brought in from the Bridge as a ‘lewd vagrant’, and offered to prove it to any who doubted her – and after her first three days in Bridewell, there were no doubters at all.

For Ann Momford, however, the constable had told the Register that she’d been brought in because she lived an ‘incontinent life’ and would ‘take no warning’. Since Ann didn’t know what ‘incontinent’ meant, she figured it referred to her habit of kicking any drunken rogue who tried to fondle her; so in Bridewell she declared she’d be ‘incontinent’ whenever she wished. In fact, Ann looked at her arrest as reward for good behavior, since she was dressed better now than any time since her mum had died. She knew Virginia was further away than Calais, which she had seen once, across the water from Dover – but didn’t care so long as it wasn’t as cold as the bloody London rain.

When someone said that the maids brought in from St. Brides should be called the ‘Brides’ bound for Virginia, the name stuck; and someone else declared it only fair for the lads to be the “Grooms”, although many were young enough they could only hope to be horse grooms for some years to come.

The influx of all these newcomers confounded the harassed men and women in charge of Bridewell. For one thing, they were instructed that these recent arrivals were not whipped at registration. It wasn’t natural since everyone brought in to Bridewell was greeted with a dozen lashes (and every child with six). It was an expected public spectacle: not as popular as bear-baiting in Southwarke perhaps, but attractive for those who took delight, hidden or open, in watching young women be stripped to the waist

and whipped. Thus it had been for many years for the prisoners sent from the courts for various petty, and sometimes not so petty crimes. Yet the Lord Mayor had directed that those arrested only for shipping to the plantations should be 'kept at work' as usual, but should not be whipped at registration. But a stream of ordinary prisoners continued to arrive, including some reprieved from execution and transported to Virginia as well as the usual flow of petty thieves and other rogues, all of whom would have been whipped at Registration in the usual scheme of things.

This all created confusion as to who should be whipped and who spared. The Registrar settled the matter in a pragmatic way by whipping all newcomers on some days and none on the others. This was bound to cause problems eventually, of course, but the Registrar hoped those held for shipment by the Company's would be gone before real trouble arose.

Will had arrived on a no-whipping day, which was just as well since Constable Tewman and the posse had already paid him nicely for the trouble he had caused them. On his first Monday, he got his promised shirt, oversized to be sure, but it came with a firm admonition to be sure to grow into the sleeves before the elbows were worn through.

With the shirt came a promise for new shoes as soon as they could be made. Bridewell wasn't ready to outfit a hundred new arrivals with shirts and shoes. While Bridewell expected to receive 40 shillings apiece from the Company for clothing the transportees, the Company had not yet reached firm agreement with the City and so the money had yet been paid. Two hundred new shoes were yet to be ordered, but less delivered. Yet another headache!

As Tom explained to Will, the good folk who ran Bridewell thought there was more work to be done than folks to do it, rather than the other way round. For them it was pretty clear that the reason for all the poor thieves and beggars in London was because of all the poor thieves and beggars found there....

Even worse, thought the authorities, were all blackguards who would work for wages so low they could barely eat – which meant everyone else had to do near the same!

Tom Cornish had been in Bridewell for a couple of weeks already, brought in by the judges of the Middlesex Sessions court for theft; at the lordly age of 17 or perhaps 18 (he'd never known for certain which), he was an acknowledged expert. Bridewell's reasoning was unassailable: since there wouldn't be no poverty without the poor, then the poor were plainly the source of the problem! It stood to reason! For Bridewell the solution was straightforward. Because masters in the City wouldn't pay servants to do work they didn't have, Bridewell would force the poor to work for even less – for nothing at all, in fact – and make goods that were so shabby no one would buy them anyway.... It was a perfect solution, said Tom – before breaking into gales of laughter. All that was left, he added between fits, was to order the merchants to buy all the brummagem stuff that Bridewell produced and pay full price for it all!

This had all been explained to the children in great earnestness, in different terms, of course, and indeed explained several times to those who had been there a week or two. They in turn regaled the newcomers by going over it again, just as Samson Hollyday did the next day after the Sunday service. He held forth in the courtyard on Will's first Sunday in Bridewell. A baker's dozen of newcomers,

some freshly clothed, others still in their street-worn rags like Will, gather about Hollyday with puzzled faces.

“Didn’t ya listen?” said Hollyday would say with a grin. “If you ‘aven’t figured it out by now, then God save you a’cause I can’t. But it’s like this: the Cooper he won’t take you ‘prentice because he can’t sell all the barrels he’d teach you to make, right? An’ the mason he won’t take you since he’s a’teaching his own lad and don’t have no brick to lay this winter anyway. So you run from dawn to dusk trying to find a fetch-and-carry for the day so’s you can eat your daily bread.

When you find nothing, they bring you here and set ya at a broken loom t’weave cloth so bad even the lice don’t want to be seen on it! Then comes the Sabbath and they tells us we’re damned to Hell since God must not love us ‘cause we’re in here instead of on the street.

“There ya have it, lads! Stay a few weeks and you’ll get it all down pat. But not from me, ‘cause I’m for Virginia, soon as the first ship sails. Ain’t no Bridewell in Virginia, that’s for sure! No, nor no Clink and no Newgate prison neither!”