

7. Mr. Pelham's interview

In a spacious room not far from Bridewell, Sir Robert Naunton, Principal Secretary to his royal majesty James Stuart, leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling, as he often did when he worked. One hand rested easily on an untied stack of papers on his desk while with the other he fingered a large, unfolded letter. Before him sat a solitary, straight-backed chair, presently occupied by a smooth-chinned, insignificant-looking young man with a stylish cloak and an anxious face. He was perched on the edge of the chair, plainly unhappy with his assigned task.

And well he ought to be, thought Sir Robert, well he ought to be.

Having formally delivered the Company's letter, the poor fellow – Naunton had already forgotten his name – was now insistently repeating that he'd been sent by Mr. Collingwood, the Secretary of the Virginia Company, whom, he understood, Sir Robert knew, of course; that Mr.

Collingwood worked under the Treasurer, that is to say the principal officer, as it were, of the Virginia Company, Sir Edwin Sandys – Sir Robert surely knew Sir Edwin, too? – and that Sir Edwin had asked Mr. Collingwood to deliver this request to the Principal Secretary, that is to say Sir Robert; but as Mr. Collingwood was suddenly indisposed, he had sent his assistant, himself, instead.

The young man paused at last, wiped his narrow forehead with a silk handkerchief, and endeavored a smile. “The Company’s request to the Council is quite clear, I should hope,” he concluded, smiling again.

Naunton had let the poor messenger flounder on – Pelham, that was his name – tedious as it was. Naunton knew perfectly well that Collingwood was chief scrivener for the Virginia Company; that the Company was a band of grasping upstarts for the most part; and that Collingwood’s sudden indisposition this morning must certainly have come as he turned Sir Edwin’s scribbled notes into the Company’s formal request and realized how unpleasant it might be to present it. That, and much more, was all *too* clear to Sir Robert, especially after the most informative conversation he had had with Alderman Johnson yesterday afternoon....

“In sum then, Mr. Pelham,” replied Naunton at last, “the Virginia Company seeks a warrant from the Privy Council to allow the Company to do what the Company has already done *without* such authority. Have I stated the matter succinctly?”

“Why, no, sir,” exclaimed Pelham. “That is to say –.” He saw Sir Robert’s arched eyebrow and tilted head, and he struggled for a better reply. “Uh, I mean, fairly

succinctly, perhaps, but perhaps rather...that is to say, the Company seeks...uh, seeks what the letter requests....”

Sir Robert’s silent stare brought an end to Pelham’s miserable efforts. “...you’ve stated perhaps...”, he concluded, “perhaps the nub...the nub of the matter, I mean....”

I usually do, thought Sir Robert; I would be deaf, blind or fit for Bedlam not to see the nub of these interviews when men came with pitiful lies to beg the Crown for ‘just this small favor’ or some ‘unimportant indulgence’ – a mere trifle, they would say, they would *always* say – ‘not really needing formal action’ – or whatever other sonorous lies they might invent. He had seen such charades dozens of times since becoming one of the King’s principal advisors. It had grown tedious long ago.

He ignored Mr. Pelham and re-read the Company’s letter: *Right Honorable*, Sir Edwin Sandys had written, *being unable to give my personal attendance upon the Lordships, I have presumed to address my petition in these few lines unto your Honor....*

Even this was a lie, thought Sir Robert. Since the letter was dated this morning, Sir Edwin was plainly in London and could very well have come from his fine home near Aldersgate. Only pride had prevented him: a stubborn refusal to admit that the Company was in a very nice pickle of Sandys’ own doing and that he had no choice but to beg the Crown to resolve it.

Continuing to read, Sir Robert saw that the City had chosen some hundred children “*out of their superfluous multitude*” (Sandys could always turn a phrase, thought Naunton) to be transported to Virginia as bound apprentices. The City had agreed to pay five hundred pounds sterling to transport and clothe the chosen

hundred, who would receive ‘*very beneficial conditions*’ at the end of their term – conditions left both undefined and unfunded, mused Sir Robert.

He came at last to the Company’s request from the Privy Council:

Now it falleth out that sundry of those Children are ill-disposed (fitter for any remote place than for this City) and now declare their unwillingness to go to Virginia. But this City lacks the authority to deliver (and the Virginia Company the authority to transport) these persons against their wills. Hence, the burden is laid upon me by this humble petition to the Lordships to procure higher authority warranting their transportation.

Sir Robert’s pulse quickened in spite of his unmoving face. A Company of fools they were, from Southampton (Earl that he was) on down: hundreds of seemingly sensible merchants and gentlemen caught up in this mad idea of building a new England in the wilderness – or growing rich while someone *else* built it for them. Each time they proclaimed a duty to Christianize the Virginia savages, they seemed to forget how many papists remained in need of conversion in this very kingdom! If the Company believed in its evangelical mission, why not send pastors to convert *them* instead? Why, whole villages in Cornwall and Devon were reported to cling to the old superstitions: lighting candles and mumbling Latin charms before golden statues, like the Israelites had done with their golden calf! Or the Company could send its ships mere hours away to Calais, where millions of romanists could be found in France, Spain and even Rome itself -- all within reach of a comfortable coach with decent food and water along the way? Wasn’t there anyone at the Virginia Company with an

ounce of practical sense? Small wonder they were perpetually in need of funds and couldn't even pay the poor scrivener they'd hired to make a register of their own shareholders!

Turning back to poor Pelham, Sir Robert dropped the Company's letter dismissively on his desk and picked up another in its place and showed it to Pelham. "Is this the Lord Mayor's order directing the constables to round up the lads for Virginia?"

"Quite, so, Sir Robert," replied Pelham after a glance. "But of course it's not just lads. They're to take up wenches as well, you see, all at least twelve years or more."

"And where are you holding them? Newgate? Or have you tossed them in the Clink?"

"Not in the Clink, my Lord!" exclaimed Pelham. "Nor in Newgate, either. Many are mere vagrants. No, they're being assembled in Bridewell, awaiting shipment, per the order. And as you see there, the City has indeed promised to pay for shipping."

Sir Robert smiled slightly – a very bad sign, for those who knew him. "Ah yes, five hundred pounds to ship one hundred children: five pounds apiece. Now, that's the going rate for passage to Virginia, isn't it?"

"Yes, your Honor. It varies a little, of course. A gentleman might pay six, for example. But five pounds is about the cost of passage for the common sort."

Sir Robert smiled again. "I see, then. The City will pay almost exactly what the Company needs for shipping to Virginia."

"There you have it, your Honor," replied Mr. Pelham, relaxing a bit. "And clothing is included as well. We at the Company have worked with the City for some months on

this, building on what was learned with last year's shipment, too."

"Leave last year's shipment to one side for now, shall we? But help me with my calculations: if it costs five hundred pounds to ship a hundred waifs, and the City has agreed to pay five hundred pounds, who will pay for all the rest they will require in Virginia? For tools to be used in the trades they will learn? Or food to eat on their arrival, perhaps? Is the Company planning for them to eat?"

"Why as for such additional details," said Mr. Pelham as his face turned pale, "Sir Edwin can give you the Company's costs, I'm certain. He is so deeply knowledgeable of the Company's affairs."

While Sir Robert began to reply quietly, his tone soon began to rise. "Come, come, Mr. Pelham: we both know the cost of planting a new settler in Virginia isn't just five pounds for passage, but a *full twenty* pounds. I have an itemized list of what is required right here!" He tapped on yet another pile of papers. "Your five pounds from the City will merely transport an English body to the Virginia strand, which means you will be lacking fifteen pounds of sterling for food, tools, housing, and all the rest! Will the savages provide all that?"

He left no chance for Pelham to look for an answer. "And turning back to last year's shipment, why did you not ask for authority from the Privy Council then? Did your Company think it might ship whichever of his Majesty's subjects wherever, whenever and however you pleased?"

"Uh, certainly not, your Honor," Pelham stammered. "There was, uh, no question of sending anyone unwillingly last year! While I did not have the honor of serving Mr. Collingwood last year, men of such high honor and station

as those of the Virginia Company would certainly never have presumed –"

"Leave honor and station aside, sir!" interrupted Naunton. He picked up yet another sheet and waved it before Pelham's unhappy face. "See here! The Privy Council has already received complaints of your abuses. In Dorset, this man Evans, Owen Evans, says your Company hired him to press maidens for Virginia and so he paid four shillings for four maidens in Ottery Parish. A shilling a head – or a maidenhead, you might say, Mr. Pelham! And look here! Thomas Crocker swore he was warned he'd be hanged if he failed to press maidens to be shipped to Virginia! No, no! do not deny it, Mr. Pelham, the sworn testimony is all right here. Evans bought Mary...uh Diamond" – Naunton glanced down again – "Mary *Crystel*, that is. Bought her from her father for twelve pence. Evans' gang has so raised up the people in Dorset that dozens of maids – *forty!* it says here – have fled their homes for fear of being kid napped and sold for Virginia. Not even their families can find them now! This is what your Virginia Company has done already and only *now* do you beg the Council for a warrant?"

Mr. Pelham said nothing. His eyes darted around the room, looking for someone, anyone, something to help him. But the room was bare and Sir Robert bored in. "Mr. Pelham?" he demanded.

"Why, my Highness, I mean your Lord," mumbled Pelham miserably, "this is...I do not rightly know what to say. I don't know this Evans – that is, I have heard some few mentions that the Company sometimes engages certain services...but that was before I assumed my present duties –that is, I was not here when the Company

hired him. What I mean is that Evans was not actually *employed* by the Company when he bought those maids in Dorset. Rather, we – *they*, I mean, that is *the Company* – let it be known that they sought maidens to make wives for planters in Virginia. And, uh, the Company may have provided some, uh, monetary assistance for those helping to find such maids. But those were not *Company* men, not Company men at all, just acting as per a particular agreement, or contract, if you will. But separate and distinct from us – I mean, from them, the Company – separate and distinct like two of Monsieur Descartes’ ideas. You have read M. Descartes, perhaps?”

Sir Robert stared, unblinking and unyielding; and Mr. Pelham fumbled frantically for a way to end the matter. “And the Company did not *buy* maidens for shipping against their will,” he exclaimed at last. “Nor send lads unwillingly, either. They all went quite willingly in the end, I believe.”

“Those shipped last year went willingly? You could testify as to that?”

“Why, Sir Robert, how could it have been otherwise?”

“As you say, it could *not* have been otherwise,” replied Sir Robert (even if perhaps it *was*, he added silently).

Pelham gazed miserably at the floor like a condemned man awaiting the fall of the axe.

Mercifully, Sir Robert brought the meeting to an end. “Our interview today is over. Tell Mr. Collingwood and Sir Edwin that I will *not* recommend approval of a warrant at this time. Your Company is asking to ship ordinary subjects out of the kingdom against their wills – not prisoners, not condemned men – but ordinary subjects of the Crown, however mean and common they may be. You

say they will be bound apprentices with beneficial conditions – but no such conditions appear in your letter. Moreover, they would be bound to serve your *Company*, some amorphous amalgam of a thousand or more men in London! Which of these thousand masters will teach a lad a trade? Will the Goldsmiths teach gold work in Virginia - - where there is no gold to be had? Will a Merchant Tailor teach a lad to trade all manner of broadcloth or kersey to savages who wear no clothes at all? Moreover, the five hundred pounds promised by the City will provide just enough to for these hundred souls to starve in Virginia until fifteen hundred pounds sterling *more* might magically appear to feed them! Even worse as of today, the City has merely *promised* five hundred pounds, but not a single silver penny has actually been *paid!*”

Sir Robert shook his head in utter disbelief. “Yet you dare seek a warrant to *force* the King’s subjects to sail under such terms? Could the Crown ship Sir Edwin Sandys to Virginia along with his shilling-apiece maids? Would that be a lawful act, Mr. Pelham? Would not your Company cry out against such tyranny! Or do your Fishmongers, Girdlers, Drapers and Dyers think that that is justice and the law? If so, know that the King values justice and the law more highly than Edwin Sandys and his *gentlemen* at the Virginia Company, no matter how many friends they claim to have in Parliament!

“This blackguard Evans in Dorset has already raised an entire parish against you! Do you wish all London to join them? To bring Wat Tyler springing from his grave to lead the mob? When such a rabble rises up, will you offer *your* head for the pike?”

Pelham sat speechless, shrunk deep in his chair and unable to bear Naunton's ferocious glare.

Sir Robert's voice turned suddenly soft and reasonable. "Now, Mr. Pelham, I have a suggestion. Surely, your Company can reach a fairer agreement if you try again. I suggest you return to the Lord Mayor and see what can be done. If you bring revised terms back, I promise you the Council will review them and decide whether to grant the authority you seek. Please inform the Company of my suggestion. In the mean time, I bid you a good day, sir."

Just a few moments later, Sir Robert gazed out a window on the courtyard below just as the unfortunate Mr. Pelham came running out, nearly flattening two gentlemen on the pavement as he rushed away.

Sir Robert smiled. Within a few days, Company would certainly give in to the City's demands, promising better conditions for the deportees, at least on paper. The Privy Council could then proceed to authorize the Company to do whatever was necessary to dispose of these unfortunate waifs.

All in all, Naunton was pleased with his work this morning: King James will be happy to have brought Edwin Sandys down a peg or two and remind him who governs England. The City's aldermen will be happy to see the riff-raff finally taken off the streets, with the real costs to be borne by the Company, not the City. In sum, everyone will be pleased except the Company's investors -- but since they had already lost so much on their ill-advised Virginia venture, the waste of a few pounds more would scarcely be noticed.

As for the poor souls being shipped into an uncertain future...well, Sir Robert reflected, it was hardly possible to please everyone. He sat again at his desk, untied the string on the next dossier, and summoned his assistant to admit the next petitioner.