

BOOK ONE OF A SEA OF SWANS :
JONATHAN'S SEED

P. M. Marston

Nobody but me remembers Will Micklewood and Margaret Withering anymore, but that's because for me they weren't just another name on a list: they were Papa Will and Mama Meg – my only family for twenty-five years. And no matter how the judges ruled later on, they're the reason I was born English and will die Virginian. That makes their tale is worth the telling, down and down the years, since you can't know me if you don't know them.

Now, Papa Will always said it began on one of the most miserable January afternoons London had ever seen, so that's where I'll start. It was the winter of 1620; and this is their story -- and the beginning of mine....

-- Elizabeth G.

Part I: England, 1619-1620

Orders of 10 January To all aldermen

These are to ... Charge & Command that...all Constables within your ward... forthwith... apprehend all such vagrant Children both Boyes and Girls as they shall finde in the streets and in the marketts or wandring in the night to bee apprehended by the watch and... to comitt them to Bridewell there to remaine untill further order...

* * * *

[Give charge to] the Deputy and Churchwardens of every parish to... inquire of them that are overcharged and burthened with poore children, if they will have any of their Children either boyes or girles of the age of twelve yeares and upwardes and how many sent to Virginia... And if such poore persons shall denie or refuse to send any of their Children... that then you take such order that they receive noe further releife from the parishe wherein they inhabite.

Lord Mayor of London

-- 31 Journal of the Common Council, folios 125v, 126r

1. Dolittle Lane

"*Griffin Beadle! George Piser! Mary Nicholls!*" The constable bellowed the names down the narrow London alley. He dangled the scroll to cover the laced seams of his doublet that opened a half-inch across his belly at each deep breath,

and paused between each name. He looked up to glare at the crowd before squinting again at his list.

Perched high above, at an open garret window, Will Micklewood was enjoying the scene. He was a wiry lad, fourteen or so; and he'd hoisted himself onto the sill like a young tomcat mounting a fence. While the constable ploughed on, Will looked at the faces that were appearing at the other windows alongside or below him, or across the lane. Some were hard; some curious; but all were tired at the end of this day. Will nodded at one or two and waved to sweet Maggie Withering, who was looking up at him from across the way. She smiled at him as she always did; but Maggie smiled at near everyone, he told himself. She tucked a stray blond wisp underneath a red headband and smiled again. Will grinned, then lowered his eyes: Maggie smiled at near everyone, he repeated.

Down in the alley, fat old Constable Tewman plunged doggedly through his list, and raised his voice to be heard over the murmurs beginning to rise from the crowd.

"Tabitha Austyn! Thomas Riggle!"

The names echoed down the alley and bounced from lintel to post beneath the overhanging gables that brought an early twilight to the mean, narrow cul-de-sac that opened off the mean, narrow lane that bore the unpromising name of Dolittle Lane. The inhabitants there did their best to live down to the name, doing as little as needed to survive from one day to the next -- at least most days. Even so small a thing took all they had, and when they prayed each morning for their daily bread, it was as heartfelt and earnest as prayer can be. Each of their days was much like the others, except perchance another waif wandered in from the countryside: another child without a name from some town that no one knew. At this fag end of a cold January day, they eyed the officer with one part

of exhaustion, two of contempt – but mostly with just hope for a show.

"Tobias Destiny! James Feats!"

A little gasp came from somewhere: surprise perhaps, or recognition. Constable Tewman officer looked up sharply and squinted around him but saw only a growing crowd of silent, hostile faces. He was no fool; he too knew how to survive, and could do his duty very nicely in the wider space, before the Lane plunged into the twisting alley; there was no call to go any further. Still, as he read through the names, more men and a not a few women were emerging from the unlit tenements and joining the back of the crowd. Abruptly -- whether a jokester had given a deliberate shove or an old crone had slipped on the stone -- the whole murmuring mass muddled forward like a troubled herd: one step; then two.

Tewman stood his ground, but his voice took a sharper edge. *"Margaret Withering! Lodowick Middleton! William Micklewood!"* he shouted.

"Will ain't here!" called a pox-faced woman in front -- and the murmuring vanished. She elbowed those behind to hold her place. "Nor Maggie, neither," she added. "We don't know none of the others."

"Where have they gone?" the constable commanded, lowering the scroll but raising his voice.

"How should I know," she spat. "They ain't mine."

"Tell me when they return," commanded Tewman. "The same goes for all of you!" The scroll flapped as he waved it wide. "It's an order, I say! A direct order from the Lord Mayor for all those to be sent to Virginia."

Scattered laughter rose from the crowd. "Well ain't that sweet!" cried a voice in back, "he's ordered us to rat on Will and Maggie!"

At the windows above, Will stared across the lane to where Maggie Withering stared back, her smile gone. Will pulled back into the shadows but still peered out just above the sill.

"And rat on this Griffin Beadle, too!" cackled another, "which I'd happily do, Constable, since I don't know no Griffin Beadle. No, no, no," he chuckled, "don't know no Griffin Beadle at all."

"It's the Beadle he wants?" croaked Old Pete, a bald fellow with a hunched-over back and a few tufts of white hair around his ears. Everyone knew that Old Pete was half-deaf, so it was possible – just possible – he had misunderstood; but a malicious glint in his eye told otherwise. "Why, he musts want the Beadle's boy, lads, our Baynards Castle Beadle!" he called. The crowd howled; Tewman scowled, and Old Pete carried on, staring the officer in the eye. "You've got to know where the Beadle is 'cause how can the Ward pay 'im every month elsewaise? There you have it, Constable: go ask the Beadle where *his* boy is!"

"Send the Beadle's boy instead of ours!" called another.

"Send the bloody Beadle himself!"

The voices jumped left and right. Constable Tewman knew how a London crowd could become a mob. He'd seen it more than once -- could happen in the blink of an eye – and this rabble was turning ugly fast. He glanced behind him, where the lane wound back to the street. There were no shops: just tenements and more tenements leaning out from either side with hard faces staring out of the windows above. It was thirty, no, forty yards or more to the tavern at the corner. The *Boar's Head* would be jammed with the regulars at this hour as they downed another pint. He could call for help if he got close enough;

but would anyone hear him above the din inside? If they did, would they come face the mob? Or join it?

But a crowd is a fickle thing and already the mood had changed. Old Pete picked up the banter where he'd left it. "Maybe Constable wants a different sort of beetle, the kind with six legs!"

"Six legs, Old Pete? With six feets, the Beadle would run 'round the Ward so fast he'd deliver his messages before they's even sent." Laughter from the crowd.

"Fee-*te*, not fee-*te*, young sprout! Six *feet*! Don't they teach you young'uns anything now? You only says one *feet* when you're talking about six of 'em. I mean...."

"You don't know what you mean no more, Old Pete!"

The round of guffaws and groans ceased as Thomas Dingfield stumbled forward and stood right before the constable. Dingfield was easy to recognize by the stench of day-old ale. "You want Withering, Constable?" he moaned. "I'm your man! Can't you see me withering, just withering away!" He rolled his eyes in mock distress and collapsed in slow motion onto the cobblestones, tongue panting, arms stretched wide: "A pint! a pint! give me a pint or I'll wither up whole!"

He stared at the Constable with a smiling, unfocused gaze. "But Maggie's not withering, and anyone what says so ain't seen 'er, 'cause she's a'blooming and a'blossoming like a rose in June!" He belched and Tewman pushed him away. "Aye, a rose she is," persisted Dingfield, clinging to the officer's arm, "but with as many thorns!"

"She only pricked you, Thomas Dingfield," cried the pox-faced woman with a wicked laugh, "when you tried to prick her!"

Coarse laughter convulsed the crowd and Dingfield swung around to face them, fists raised to fight an unseen foe. "Come say it to me face! C'mon and say it here!" he

shouted. He swayed a moment, staggered a few steps over to the wall where he turned, belched once more with remarkable force, then slid gently down the wall. There he sat comfortably on the wet cobbles with a beatific smile.

Tewman saw his moment. He took several determined steps towards the haven of the tavern and shouted with all the authority he could muster, "I'll be back tomorrow! And with a warrant," he cried. "They'll all be well cared for in Bridewell before they're shipped to Virginia; new clothes for each. And they'll be taught a trade there. Just like those sent last year."

The bantering vanished. "Last year? Where are they now, the ones from last year?" The pox-scars on the woman's face glared red and rough at the constable: "Where's Craupley? We ain't heard a word from him!"

"Nor little Shambrook nor Mary Hackett! Which nobody's heard nothing from them neither!"

"Not them, not from none of 'em! A hundred they were from all the Wards and nobody ain't heard nothing! Why'd you want a hundred more?"

Constable Tewman wiped his forehead with a large handkerchief and backed two more steps. He had a clean path now behind him to the tavern. A part of him marveled that he could sweat at all on such a cold day. "Well taken care of, I say. The City has raised 500 pounds to ship them. It says so right here and --"

"Just hang 'em and save the sterling, you f--- butcher!" It was a low voice, unseen, but close at hand and ripe with menace.

"Who said that?" roared Tewman. "I'll be back with a warrant I tell you, and anyone hiding them will go straight to Newgate and *will* be hanged if I have any say in it! On behalf of the crown, I *order* you to help find them!" But he backed two more steps toward safety.

"Find 'em yourself, you fat-bellied bugger!" came a cry from the back, where someone shoved or pushed or stumbled -- and in an instant the whole mass surged forward again. Tewman fell back before the foaming tide. "A King's warrant!" he cried one last time before he turned and ran. A small stone shot past his ear and skipped down the glimmering cobblestones.

"Tell King Jimmy to come himself with his pretty warrant!" screamed Thomas Dingfield, rousing himself from his gutter-throne. "We ain't sending Will and Maggie to his Virginia hell!"

At the garret window, Will Micklewood watched the constable flee. When he looked up, Maggie had vanished, and the shutter was pulled tight. He lingered at the window and saw Dingfield collapse again in a drunken heap along the wall, ignored by the crowd as it slowly broke up. The drab twilight faded into evening; fog came rolling up from the Thames; someone threw a thin blanket over Dingfield and disappeared into the shadows. Before long the alley was deserted, except for an occasional workman hurrying home and candles began to light a few of the windows.

Will sighed, and pulled the shutter tight. He had no candle to light that night; but he was used to the dark and rarely did it damp his spirits. Tonight was different, though. He lay in a corner of the little room for a long moment, eyes open. Everyone in the lane knew where he was, where Maggie was, too. It wouldn't be long before somebody snitched, maybe right now, maybe tonight -- certainly before tomorrow night, once the word got all around. He could lie there and wait; or he could run. But with no place to run, why bother to hide?

He lay in the darkness and gazed at the beam overhead. What was this all about anyway, that's what he

couldn't see! Mary Hacket, Craupley, Shambrook -- who were they? Transported to Virginia last year someone said? Just before he and his mum had arrived here from the farm, he guessed. A lifetime ago, yet no more than...he counted it out: eleven months since they had passed through the lively chaos of Southwarke to the smell of frying pan-cakes, crossed the great bridge, and threaded through crowded lanes into the Ward. Eleven months was time enough for her to die and for him to make a life scrapping on the streets, a world away from the quiet lanes and green fields of Kent he had known before. But Virginia was farther still, they said: unimaginably far.

He pulled the mite-infested blanket up to this chin and wondered what to do. Wait until they came back for him? Run away tonight? What about Maggie? Why were they coming for her? Would her uncle give her up?

The questions rose like waves on a troubled sea until, at last, he slept.