

## 8. Twelve to nineteen?

Maggie was wiping tables and straightening benches when the Constable and the Registrar brought Will back, pushed him forward into the refectory, then turned and stalked out. Will stumbled a few paces to where he could steady himself against a table, then looked up, grim-faced and pale. Maggie rushed over and took him by both hands, saying nothing.

“Maggie,” he croaked, “remember Davis, the cook on the Strand, up by St. Mary’s church? His ‘prentice and that blackguard Will Gylliam stole his grain and when Tewman found ‘em out, he said they were good to hang for it; but they claimed that it was *me*! Said that all they’d done was hide what I’d stolen.” He paused and lowered his voice even further. “They mean for me to hang in their place, Maggie!”

She stifled a gasp. “What will you do?”

“Tell the truth again tomorrow,” he shrugged. “What else can I do?”

“Tomorrow!”

“Trial’s tomorrow morning, they said; it’ll all be done by tomorrow night.” Will stood up. “Be here at breakfast, Maggie, will you?” He tried to smile, but couldn’t. Before

Maggie could think of anything to say, Will mumbled “got to sleep”, pulled his hands away from her and walked out.

He was so different now than just weeks ago, she thought. They were all different. Life on Dolittle Lane had never been easy, but folks faced it together. There, Will had been plucky, scrappy, as carefree as only a lad of fourteen can be. That was gone now; now, he was like a man grown up before his time. No, that was not quite it either. The men she knew were weighed down with things and either grew strong enough to bear the load or else buckled. Like her uncle, she thought: he wasn't a bad man; just weighed upon until he had bent like a pillar asked to carry too much. It was not like that with Will; more like he had simply been stunned, perhaps that he'd entered a world where things you did or said almost without thinking might break, or even end, a life.

Will reached the far door but just as he passed through it, he turned back at last and winked at her, flashing a shadow of his old grin.

“Oh dear God,” she said silently, “Let truth be enough tomorrow. Just this once.”

The proctor appeared; and clapped twice to shake Maggie out of her reverie. “Yes'm,” she muttered and grabbed up the last bowls, swept the bread crumbs into a cloth and hurried to clean the next bench.

The next morning dawned full of rain and a blustery wind that blew straight up the Thames from the east. Surely, no ships could sail today, thought Maggie. She came down early, looking for Will, but there was no sign of him. When breakfast was done, she went anxiously to her weaving, talking to no one. The morning's work was a blur.

When they stopped for lunch, she hurried into the courtyard for news. The rain had stopped, and the clouds looked ready to break. Change was in the air; and they all sensed it. When Maggie spotted Tom Cornish in the crowd, she rushed over.

“Where is he –” she began.

Tom cut her off with a shake of his head. “Nobody really knows, Maggie. Old Ugly came in this morning at first light with a constable. They pinned his arms like yesterday and bundled him out. So like I said, Maggie, nobody knows – but it don’t look good. And don’t look like he’s comin’ with us. Sorry.” He tried to put an arm around her, but she pulled away and hid her face.

At that moment, the bell rang to call them back to work. Maggie joined her group silently and went to the workroom filled with spinning wheels, looms, and great spindles already thick with yarn. Mechanically, she set about preparing her loom and went back to the routine gestures, trying to lose her worries in the rhythm of the loom. There was no talking: just bobbins unspooling; the light clicking of the looms; and the soft thud as another row was battened down against the warp.

As she worked, all Maggie could think of was Will standing alone before a black-robed judge, alone before false witness; alone before crime on crime. She tried reciting a prayer, or a verse, or anything to fight the panic rising in her breast. But as she worked, the rhythms of the loom began to damp the fear..

*The Lord is my shepherd,  
I shall not want....*

The psalm had come on its own: the first phrase, then the next, and the next, again and then again. She let the gentle verses flow:

*He maketh me to lie down in green pastures;*

*He leadeth me beside the still waters...*

Her breathing slowed; the panic ebbed. Even her loom seemed to fade as well, and instead she saw a greensward climbing a hillside beneath graceful, towering oaks and a calm pond fed by a singing stream. The terrible, black-robed judge vanished from her mind's eye.

*He restoreth my soul....*

*He restoreth my soul....*

The cadence ran on as the alchemy of the loom transformed thread into cloth. Her hands worked on their own: London, Bridewell, Dolittle Lane; Virginia, ships, storms at sea – they all disappeared in the psalmist's art.

*And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

It was late in the afternoon, in the brief spell before supper, when the Bridewellians again filled the courtyard. The wind had veered sharply and was now chasing the clouds down river, towards the sea. Maggie was near the gate. The psalm had faded; the calm remained; and so she sat on the stone steps, waiting for news. Supper had nearly come when the gate opened and the Director marched in, flanked by two guards. They strode directly to Ugly Jackson, as he stood surveilling the yard. Maggie saw the Director take out a scroll of some kind and handed it to Old Ugly with a series of emphatic gestures.

This *was* unusual: the Director was nearly never seen. The newer Bridewellians didn't even recognize him and ignored his arrival completely. Maggie had barely begun

thinking what this might mean when the gate opened again and Will Micklewood came stumbling in. He was barely recognizable in a brand new shirt (with sleeves that even matched his arms this time) and wearing new shoes that creaked when he walked. Maggie ran up and embraced him the way her mother had used to sweep her into her arms after a nightmare. To her surprise, Will just pushed her away.

“Listen to me Maggie! There’s no time. We’re leaving! Right now!”

“But...what happened to you? Today?”

“Later! There’s no time! Listen: when they give out the numbers for the girls, you’ve got to be from twelve to eighteen! If they give you a different number, find a way to switch! Do you hear me? You’ve got to –”

A bell cut him off: a harsh, unmusical clanging. Before it had faded, the proctor’s voice rang out, harsher and less musical still: “Form your rows! Men and boys to the left, beginning here” – pointing with a staff – “girls over there! Quickly now. No talking! Do as you are told! Hurry, there is no time to lose!”

Two lines began to slowly form. Old Ugly appeared behind Will and shoved him towards the line on the left, as Maggie stared stupidly after him. Will twisted back and silently mouthed “twelve to eighteen!” before he was driven into the straggling mass being herded into line. The girl’s line was forming to the right: forty or more. Still dazed, Maggie joined the end of the queue. She saw Will one last time across the courtyard, giving her a look of utter desperation. Then the boys’ line advance and he was lost from view.

Now it was Ugly Jackson's shouting to the girls, calling in a voice of brass. "Hear me now! You will be counted. Remember your number! D'ye hear me now: remember it well." He then began to count from the front of the line, pointing and calling out the numbers as he went: "five, six, seven...." She waited no longer. She pushed forward, elbowing her way around the girls ahead. What had Will said? Twelve to nineteen? No, that wasn't right, was it? What had he said?

The girl in front of her pushed back and Maggie almost fell down. "Twelve, thirteen, fourteen..." she heard the count proceed. Like a cat, she jumped ahead, dodging and weaving towards the front.

"Seventeen, eighteen – what are you up to?" Old Ugly had fallen into an argument just ahead of Maggie where an oldster stood, who must have been near thirty. Another guard hastened over. "Not in this courtyard, you," he ordered. "Get out! Get in the next courtyard over! Not even Virginia want you! Go now!"

Maggie had pushed forward again and now found herself just behind Little Liz and Alice Larrett as the counting resumed. "Eighteen, nineteen, twenty!" Old Ugly called, pointing to Liz, Alice and Maggie, before sweeping on down the line: "twenty-one, twenty-two....".

"Alice," panted Maggie, can I switch with you?"

"What for?" replied Alice, immediately suspicious.

"Just because."

"Because what?"

"I like nineteen."

"You're twenty; what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing," shrugged Maggie. "I just like nineteen better."

“If *you* don’t want to be twenty, why should *I* take it?” insisted Alice. “Nobody never gave me nothin’ that was better than what they had! I’m not moving.”

Maggie tried to push by but Alice stepped into her path. Suddenly Old Ugly’s switch came whistling down on Maggie’s calves. “Quit pushing! Stay in line! Silence!” Alice made a face at Maggie and stuck out her tongue.

The line began to move towards the entrance to the main building. She was number twenty and Will had said twelve to nineteen, hadn’t he? But did it really matter? Matter for what?

Maggie’s calves still burned from the switch. She glared at Old Ugly so fiercely as she passed him that he actually took a step back and turned away. Still, needing to do something, he flicked his switch against the wall where it made a fine *smick!* And he shouted to no one in particular: “keep moving now, all of you. Stay in place! Take your bag as you come by the table; then move forward again. No talking! Take your sack and keep moving.”

She could see the lads’ line now on the other side. The Director and the Registrar were there and appeared to be checking names against a roll and separating the lads into two different queues.

When Maggie neared the table just inside, she saw that three of the old Bridewellians, women in their thirties, stood on the other side. A large jumble of bulging canvas bags was piled behind them. As each girl arrived at the table, she was one of the sacks and her name was marked off a list. Little Liz, Alice Larret and Maggie each took their bundle and marched towards the gate.

“Alice,” whispered Maggie again, “be a good girl for once and switch with me, just for friends?”

Alice shook her head without a sound and looked the other way.

They were leaving Bridewell now and Maggie saw that there were wagons pulled up in a row, waiting for them. She *had* to no more than nineteen, Maggie thought. Will had said so and he must have had a reason. It was nineteen, wasn't it? *Wasn't it?* They were almost out into the street when Little Liz leaned around Alice and whispered to Maggie. "I'll switch, if you want." Ignoring a black look from Alice, Maggie nodded quickly and slid past. As they passed, Little Liz lowered her voice to the softest whisper: "But you won't tell nobody what I said about my daddy, cross your heart?"

Maggie nodded solemnly. "Never ever."

Alice grabbed Liz and shoved her back into Maggie's former place just as Old Ugly came up and began counting again. When he reached eleven, he lowered his staff to stop the queue and directed the first eleven girls to mount the first wagon. He shut the gate behind them and the wagon clattered down the lane. "Next," he cried, "here's for *Jonathan*." He counted under his breath as the girls passed by: "seventeen, eighteen..." Then he lowered his staff like at a toll gate behind Maggie – right in front of Alice Larett's nose. Alice's face filled with a sudden panic as he bellowed: "All right, now: twelve to eighteen! Up you go!" And he pointed them to the waiting lorry.

As Alice saw Maggie climb into her wagon, she stared at Maggie with hatred and envy. "You cheated!" she screamed, pushing up against Old Ugly's still-lowered staff. "You tricked me, you!"

Jackson jerked his staff back, then poked her stomach. "Silence, I said!" Alice doubled over, gasping as Little Liz

watched as the horse neighed, anxious to be away. Just before the wagon gate closed, she gave Maggie a tiny smile as the chain rattled home. The driver called to his team and they lurched forward. Maggie heard Alice's curse die away as the wagon turned the corner.

She had won, Maggie thought. It was twelve to *eighteen* that Will had told her. But she still really understand how Will had known or why it might really make a difference. Or what would happen to Alice, Little Liz and the others further back in the line. The questions piled up and she fought to recover the calm she had found earlier in the day. The wagon jerked from side to side over the cobblestones. Ann Momford sat in the straw beside her, rocking back and forth and moaning softly.

So was this it? Were they bound now for Virginia? A wagon wheel dropped in a rut and threw her down into the straw where she let herself lie still. She knew she and the others were "for Jonathan". That much, she understood.

But who, she wondered, *was* Jonathan?