

## 6. Right damned bastards....

As days went by, rumors ran rife in Bridewell's courtyard and along the benches in the refectory. Some said they would be shipped to Barbados. No, insisted others: they were bound for the plantations in Ulster, or maybe Jamaica, or the Bermudas. Still, most said Virginia, which was what the constables had said even though no one much believed anything the constables said.

In sum, no one knew for certain, so rumor built on rumor and tale capped tale. Samson Hollyday claimed that fish in the great bay of Chesapeake jumped into the fishermen's boats with no need for either a net or a line. He claimed the woods were filled with so many deer you had to watch out they didn't trample you as they dashed about.

"You poor fools," Cornish called out to the crowd one day, after listening to Hollyday's fables. "If Virginia was like that, d'you think they'd be sending the likes of us? It's like me uncle always said: he wouldn't want to go nowhere anyone would pay good silver to send 'im, right?" But Cornish was shouted down, and the latest rumor ran 'round again.

Someone said it'd take a year and half or two years to get to the Chesapeake. Nonsense! cried another: if you climbed Rame Head just west of Plymouth Sound -- on a clear morning with the sun at your back, mind you -- you could see Virginia lying dark just along the horizon. Their heads swirled from one story to the next since no one really knew what fate awaited them. But although each day dawned fair and a favorable wind came steady from the

west, the wait went on; the tension rose; the rumors grew more outlandish.

January was nearing its end. One day, when Maggie was sent to retrieve a trifle left in the dormitory, Little Liz still there, weeping again in the corner. They called her Little Liz because they had to call her something even though she wouldn't give her name to anyone, not even to the Registrar when an rough-faced cove named Owen Evans had brought her in with about a dozen other girls that he said were from Ottery Parish in the West Country. When Evans said she was called Mary Crstel, the girl had screamed that it was a lie, that she'd never even heard of no Mary Crstel. But Evans had slipped the Registrar a coin when he thought no one would see, making the clerk grin like a clown and say 'certainly, certainly. Crstel, Mary' as he wrote something in his book. Then he had pulled her in and thrust her into the care of the woman who never smiled.

Ever since, the Brides had just called her Little Liz and left her alone.

On this day when Maggie saw her sitting alone on the floor, the girl had her arms wrapped around her knees and was rocking back and forth and softly crying. Maggie squatted down, put her arms around her, and gradually the rocking stopped. Abruptly, the girl looked up with a face so full of hatred and hurt that Maggie had to make an effort not to turn away.

"Maggie," she whispered, "he *sold* me! For twelve copper pennies, he *sold* me! No more drunk than usual, but he took Evans' six filthy tuppence, put his mark on their

paper, and they took me away. My *daddy* sold me for Virginia....” Her voice broke down in a fit of sobbing.

Maggie said nothing, but sat holding the girl’s head and staring at the wall behind, waiting Little Liz’ heaving breaths to calm, bit by bit, even as the girl whispered ‘*twelve copper pennies!*’ over and over again.

In that moment, Maggie recalled how her own uncle had sworn that he’d never give her up for Virginia – but then the very next day, he’d begun saying how everyone knew Virginia was finer than England, how he wished he was young like her and could go some place where a man could make something of himself. He’d heard that a maid in Virginia could have her pick among the men – maybe even marry a gentlemen with thousands of acres of prime land ready for planting. But no, he’d insisted, he wouldn’t go back on his word, even though Maggie’s poor dead mum and dad would’ve understood if she had chosen to go for Virginia. *They* wouldn’t have stopped her from seizing the chance of lifetime.

Then a few days later, two men had come to the door, spoken quietly to her uncle in the next room, and had led Maggie to Bridewell.

‘*Twelve copper pennies...*’ Little Liz mumbled one last time before seeming to doze.

How much, Maggie wondered: how much had her own uncle gotten for her?

The next day, Little Liz started talking with the others Brides. The day after that, Maggie saw her in the courtyard giggling and chatting with Alice and three or four others as though she hadn’t a care in the world -- but when Liz saw Maggie looking at her, she turned quickly away.

Maggie sighed, and forced Little Liz from her thoughts. She was more concerned about Will. He had left that morning in a work gang but hadn't returned. It was already late, the soup would soon be served, yet there was no sign of Will and his group. Just then, she heard a commotion at the main gate and saw Old Ugly Jackson -- the guard the Bridewellians hated most -- as he led the work gang back in with their tools. They clustered around the shed, handing shovels back to the husbandman. Will was standing next to Old Ugly and the husbandman, and there seemed to be some argument. Suddenly, an angry voice carried across the courtyard: "...don't care why he ain't got it! I gave you twelve spades this mornin' for a gang of twelve to clean the Bridge, so you owe me twelve back tonight. Let 'im can keep using his bloody hands till Doomsday for all I care 'til 'e returns the bloody shovel."

The voices died away; and Maggie watched as a dazed and filthy Will stumbled across the courtyard towards the common washtub fed by a downspout from the roof. His arms were black; his new shirt was smeared with horse manure. He plunged his arms into the frigid water and cleaned off what he could.

"Will, Will!" cried Maggie, running to him, "What happened? What have they done to you?"

He looked up and grimaced when he tried to smile. "Not much," he muttered; and returned to scraping caked manure off his arms. He worked diligently as Maggie stood by him, ignoring the stench, but too appalled to speak. Supper was called and the courtyard emptied out until he and Maggie were the only ones left. Will looked for a relatively clean spot on his shirt to dry his arms. Maggie waited.

“They’re right bastards, Maggie,” he said quietly. “Right damned bastards. They set us to shoveling manure off the Bridge, you see. Then, when Old Ugly was away at the front of the gang, some rogue springs up behind me, shouting and damning us all to hell because the merchants pay *him* to clear the Bridge, says he; and he’ll be damned if he’ll let us shovel his manure for free. Then he started shoving me and I so shoved him, and before I knew it he’d grabbed my spade and tossed it into the river. Old Ugly came running, but blamed *me* for losing the shovel and said I could clean up after every horse in London with my bare hands -- or use my nose -- for all he cared. And do it again tomorrow.” He paused and added as a calm matter of fact: “Right damned bastards.”

Will looked her in the eye and for an instant Maggie thought he would break down. Instead, he just shrugged and walked towards the refectory, repeating “right damned bas-tards” in rhythm with each step, leaving Maggie staring behind him.

But Will didn’t go out the next morning at all. As the regular work crews were being assembled after breakfast, a constable came into the courtyard with the Registrar. They looked over the crowd and when the Registrar pointed to Will, he strode over and barked “William Micklewood?” When Will nodded, the officer twisted him ‘round and slid a club to pin his arms behind. With a hand on either end, he shoved Will towards the entrance, intoning as he went: “William Micklewood: in the name of the King, I arrest you for suspicion of felony theft.” They were gone before the stunned crowd realized what had happened.

Maggie went to her weaving that day with death in her heart. Theft was a hanging offence. They all knew it. No one expected him to return. No one talked about Will that day. It was as if he were already tried, convicted, hanged, and his body jostled into a pauper's grave: unknown; unmarked; unremembered.

They didn't talk much about anything that day and Maggie talked about even less. She didn't even hear the new rumor that three Company ships were now at the quays: the *London Merchant*, *Duty*, and *Jonathan*, loaded with cargo and ready to sail.