

13. The Virgin's tears

Barely a half a mile separated Plymouth Town from Mill Bay, but they were different worlds. The town had grown up on the east side of a narrow peninsula, along the banks of Sutton Pool. It was the true Plymouth port: calm as a lake and fortified at its mouth with an opening so narrow that no smuggler could pass un-inspected. To the south, facing the sun, Plymouth Sound opened grandly on the Atlantic itself. On the west side was Mill Bay, whose broader waters touched the rugged Cornish headlands to the west. Only a few homes or warehouses could be seen there, and even fewer ships. But among them – and the largest -- were the *London Merchant*, *Duty*, and *Jonathan*.

Aboard the *Jonathan*, Red Sam was still furious at himself for the foolish bargain he'd made, but he took comfort from knowing that the Pool was a forest of masts, English, Dutch and Breton for the most part, with perhaps a few Portuguals trading under special license, and the streets and quays were crowded with a polyglot mass of

strangers from all Christendom. Two more strangers wandering in the city, no matter how oddly clothed, would draw no questions as they gawked at the ships or pressed their noses against the windows of shops where they couldn't even afford a "good day". If Will was as good as his oath – and Red Sam had sworn he'd have his hide dried and stretched for a sail if he wasn't – he and Maggie would be back on aboard *Jonathan* before nightfall and Sam would have no cause to worry, not even if Ugly Jackson called a morning muster.

It had been easy enough to slip them into a dilapidated Cremyll scow that came to sell his morning's catch. Sam quietly bought a few more whiting than the ship required – or were delivered -- and gave him instructions. He next told Jackson he needed the keys to rouse out some stores kept with the Bridewellians below. He had stomped noisily on the far side of the girls' compartment, drawing stares from the mystified prisoners -- while Maggie slipped unnoticed out the open door behind them. He performed the same charade for the lads, adding a few choice curses as he rummaged around with his lantern while Will darted out to join Maggie in the darkened corridor. Thinking himself the greatest of fools, Sam joined them a moment later and re-locked the door. Wordlessly, he tossed them some clothes he'd left in the corridor and began to leave – before he hesitated and turned around.

His lantern lit their anxious faces, but deeply shadowed his own. Only barely could they see his exasperated smile and heard him whisper: "Impossible reckless scoundrels! If you're not back tonight, I swear I'll find you and thrash you to an inch of your life. Now get

you gone before I change my mind!” He’d twirled around with his lantern and disappeared, leaving them in the dark.

Some moments later, they arrived on a mostly empty deck. Sam’s old Monmouth cap was pulled low over Will’s eyes. He wore the mates’ spare trousers with the legs turned up almost to his knees. Both he and Maggie had a hooded cloak that had been lent to Sam a wink and a nod by one of his crew with no questions asked nor answers expected.

Sam was nowhere to be seen when they dropped into the fisherman’s boat as arranged; and so it was that Sam never saw them sail west to Cornwall – not east to Plymouth Town.... They veered quickly across the Tamar River, rounded the loom of Mount Edgumbe and ran up onto a pebble-strewn beach in a cove near the little town of Cremyll. Will and Maggie splashed ashore, leaving the old fisherman wondering silently at their change of instructions, but asking no questions. He told them how to find a boat to take them from Cremyll back to the ship -- not that he expected them to do so, for he knew a runaway when he saw one.

He didn’t see why the mate would help a runaway, and even less why these two would head straight toward a dead end which would lead them to barren rocks in front of the sea. But none of that was his concern. He stayed a moment, watching them hurry up to the path along the lower flank of Edgumbe hill, then shrugged, pushed his boat into the water and clambered aboard.

Maggie and Will had already forgotten him before they had gone more than a few hundred paces. The path rose steeply at first, and they discovered behind them a fine

view of Mill Bay, with the *Jonathan* and the others rocking gently on the far side. Will regretted having lied to Red Sam, but thought it was simpler to say he wanted to admire Plymouth's shops than to explain that he sought to climb an ancient steeple on a barren moor to spy far-off Virginia....

Up they walked along the lane. Bald hills rose on either side and before them as well. Further ahead, the lane would slope up and curve down and eventually run through the tiny port villages of Kingsand and Cawsand sitting right at the edge of the tide. There was only a single lane all the way to the church, and no way to get lost.

At first, they walked without speaking, enjoying the solid earth under their feet and the first hints of spring in the fields. The weather-beaten hills were nearly bare; and covered only with close-growing heath and a few scattered sheep. When they began to talk at last it was about the ordinary things they saw: a bird soaring over the hills or the early flowers at the foot of the hedge. But the farther they walked, the less they talked. They could hardly believe they were free to go where they pleased and do what they wished. It was as though they were out for an ordinary walk in the countryside, and they were almost afraid to talk, for fear of breaking the spell.

After less than an hour, the path plunged down to a place where, rounding another bend, they saw all of Plymouth Sound laid out before them: a living tapestry of wind-swept grandeur. Beyond the green flanks of Mount Edgcumbe and Maker Heights they just glimpsed Saint Nicholas' island. Beyond it, five miles or more, rose the citadel guarding the entrance to Plymouth Town and the Pool. Further still, stone headlands of Devon rose above

the restless sea, wreathed with white surf, while nearby, the low stone houses of Kingsand nestled between the water and low cliffs behind. But of the great Atlantic itself they could see nothing at all, for Rame Head reared up above the town and barred the view.

"Come on, Maggie," cried Will, his reserve breaking down as his goal came into view. He left her behind in his hurry to scramble ahead. By the time they reached the village, Will's stomach was growling despite his excitement. They searched out a comfortable place to stop, and Maggie took out yesterday's bread and two small, wizened apples she had saved for their venture.

"Mary Nicholls says everything is bigger in Virginia," said Maggie at last, contemplating the remains of her apple.

"How would *she* know?" mumbled Will, still hard at work gnawing carefully his apple's stem.

"Her father told her so, the night before they brought her to Bridewell."

"How would *he* know?" repeated Will, now staring at the last crust of bread.

"Well, everyone says *something* like that, Will! Some of it has to be true. It's what they all say."

Will gave the skeletal core a disappointed look and spat the final seed into the morning sun. It arced gracefully over the cliff and dove toward the waters below.

"Do you believe 'em, Maggie?" he asked at last, not daring to look at her.

She looked down and tried to smooth her unfamiliar, wrinkled trousers. "Do you?" she replied.

He didn't answer at once, but held out a hand to help Maggie rise up and they continued along the path.

"I don't know," he said at last. "I don't, really. But then I guess I do, at least a bit. Maybe fish don't jump into the boats like in Samson Hollyday's stories. But there *are* plenty of gentlemen -- and ladies too -- who've gone for Virginia, just like Red Sam said. Why would *they* be going unless it's better than here?" Will swallowed the last piece of their dark bread. "I heard Red Sam tell Mr. Keyes that he'd had sailed up the bay last year and that Chesapeake is a dozen times larger than Plymouth Sound; says it's more like a sea than a bay. You can't even see across! And even the rivers are so wide you can't hardly see across them either. Sam said he'd sailed up the bay all the way to where the Patowomeke or Potowotomacke or whatever the savages call it comes in -- and it's twice as wide as the Thames at its mouth!"

"Do you believe him, Will?" Maggie asked again.

"Why do you keep asking like that, Maggie? Why should Red Sam lie to me? And besides, Mr. Keyes says the Company is giving him - *giving* him -- fifty acres along a river just because he's paid his passage himself. Imagine buying fifty acres in England for five or six pounds!" He paused. "I wouldn't mind serving a planter like Mr. Keyes in Virginia."

"*You* serve a planter! Will, you don't know any more about farming than I do!"

"Well I can learn, can't I? I learned Red Sam's hitches just by watching! Why can't I learn farming by watching Mr. Keyes?"

"He's doesn't know farming any better than you don't! He's a city man by the look of him. What's his trade, anyway?"

“How should I know?” snapped Will. “All I know is that nobody grabbed him up off the street or pulled him out of Bridewell or the Clink to ship him to Virginia! I know at least that!”

She didn't like to see him like this. He was the one who had got them on board *Jonathan* together; he had amazed - - *amazed* -- Red Sam with that hitch, and won them this lovely day in the hills; and she didn't want to spoil it with an argument. And she didn't want him to be unhappy, especially not with her.

“Will,” she declared suddenly, stopping in her tracks. “There's another way. You don't have to serve Mr. Keyes or anyone else in Virginia.” She pointed to Kingsand's houses jumbled together in a row of granite walls and thick thatch roofs that sheltered the fishermen and their families from ocean-born storms. They heard a baby's cry come from one open window and the sound of children at play from another.

“You can bind yourself 'prentice to one of the fisherman here, or anywhere else along the coast. They don't know how we got here and probably wouldn't care if they did.” She paused. “We don't have to go back to the ship, Will. We could stay here.”

He stared at her; and for just an instant, he hesitated. The Cornish coast was sparkling in the sun; the eternal stone hills kept the town between the windswept heights of Rame Head above and the life-giving waters of the Sound below. He could stay; *they* could stay, after all....

He shook his head. “No, Maggie. It won't do. I gave my word: I promised, just like Red Sam promised we could see Virginia from the steeple.” Then he laughed. “Besides, I want to see if the fish in Virginia really do jump into the

boats, like Tom Cornish says! And if Virginia's not all they say it is, then we can always come back when our terms are up -- I mean, *I* could come back," he corrected himself awkwardly. "Not you, Maggie. Some rich Virginia planter will have married you before long."

He laughed again; but Maggie didn't. "We'll see, then, won't we," she said quietly.

Will glanced at her for an instant, then bent over to choose a pebble polished by a million tides, aimed it at a piece of driftwood twenty yards further on, and struck his target square on. "Come on, Maggie," he grinned. "No more questions! Let's go see Virginia!"

With a determined pace now, they passed through the town and its sister village of Cawsand just beyond. A few fishermen passed along the strand and stared at them, but no one asked questions or tried to stop them.

Past the last house, the lane led up and up again between the looming, treeless hills that were covered now with heather and gorse and gorse and heather and nothing else at all. A wind blew from the ocean and they pulled their caps over their ears.

"When we get to Virginia, I want to see the savages everyone talks about," said Will after a while. "They've got bright red skin and they all go about naked, you know."

Maggie blushed. "Will!"

"Well, not naked I mean, but they just don't wear any clothes," stammered Will. "Not like we think of, I mean...the womenfolk don't that is."

"*Will!*" exclaimed Maggie again; but she was smiling as well as blushing red like an Indian herself.

“Oh, Maggie, you know what I mean!” exclaimed Will. “Besides, no matter how they're dressed, none of 'em could be as pretty as you.”

Maggie said nothing and while they both looked straight ahead as they walked, Will saw out of the corner of his eye that she was smiling; and he was suddenly unbearably pleased with himself.

The lane here was hedged on either side and they could not see very far. But when at last the lane turned sharply to the left they caught sight of a stone spire crowning the hill on the far side of Rame village.

"We're almost there!" cried Will, and he grabbed Maggie by the hand to pull her on. The few houses they saw hardly amounted to a village. Still, as they neared the first house, they met an odd figure, slouched against a wall, with his feet on a low bench. A large, but very scrawny, mutt lay alongside. They came closer still, and heard a soft wheeze coming from under a shapeless hat that was pulled over the man's eyes. A hand bell balanced on his lap. The mutt bared his teeth as Maggie and Will approached; but when Maggie gave him their very last crumb, he wagged his tail like a puppy, and his master wheezed on in peace.

As they came to the other houses, everything seemed completely empty: no children in the lane; no girls hanging laundry; no men returning from tending sheep or fields. It was as though everyone had fled, leaving a dozing man with the bell to proclaim the news to an indifferent world. They exchanged an uncomfortable glance but hurried on towards the church. Already, they caught glimpses of the sea in gaps between the silent houses. Will burned with excitement.

When they passed the last house, they came to a mottled gray-green stone church, crowned by a steeple of stone. Beyond was rock-strewn land that sloped unevenly down to a tiny rock chapel perched on the edge of the immense, unbroken sea. Will grabbed Maggie and fairly dragged her to large wooden door. "Come on, Maggie!" he urged; and pushed the door open.

It swung quietly inward on a sight neither Will nor Maggie had never seen -- a world long forbidden and now nearly forgotten in London, where voices floated on incense-laden air, and gentle plainchant echoed at the far end of the darkened chapel, rising and falling like the swell of the encircling sea. *Pange lingua gloriosi, corporis mysterium...* Near at hand, where the stairs rose to the steeple, dozens of candles flared before a stone Lady who was hiding in her niche by the door and weeping still after sixteen centuries. A false panel, carefully whitewashed to match the wall, leaned alongside, ready to cover the niche again on a moment's warning.

Will stared open-mouthed at the graven image that gazed serenely back. He stumbled a few steps into the nave while Maggie stood petrified in the doorway. The sound of Will's new shoes on the stone floor spread like ripples in a pond. Faces turned toward him in surprise, then horror, then despair. The plainchant faltered and died; and scores of pale faces fixed Will and Maggie and people drew apart to let them pass.

A robed priest emerged from the shadows, his shoulders bent. In the dim light they could not see his eyes but sensed a grim resignation in his measured step. He held up a hand and greeted them: "*Pax Domini sit semper vobiscum.*" But as he drew closer he saw from their young --

and blank – faces that they were no investigators searching to discover forbidden Roman rites. He repeated with a softer voice: "the peace of the Lord be with you always."

Will and Maggie barely heard him: they were transfixed by the sight of the object behind. It was a cross, but not a cross of the risen Christ they knew, clean, straight and sober. Instead it was a hideous Thing -- defaced by a twisted, bloody Body that hung there in the flickering candlelight. This was no symbol of their Lord raised gloriously from the dead to save his chosen ones, but a broken pitiful man nailed forever in painful barbarous death.

The priest gazed at their young and uncomprehending faces, and guessed that that old fool of a watchman Battersby had let them pass without a warning, thinking them harmless. But in some ways, this was even worse than a surprise visit from the churchwardens in Truro who, at least were local. The Rame folk knew many of them, knew who would stay silent, and whose silence could be bought. These strangers were complete outsiders and completely unpredictable. Their wide-eyed wonderment could make them more deadly since there was no telling where they would go, who they might talk to...or what they might say.

The priest had barely begun to consider what to do when a dog's barking and a harsh ringing bell sounded outside. The door burst open suddenly and framed frantic Battersby against the bright March sun. "Put all away!" he shouted uselessly. "They're coming, they're coming..." He saw the two figures in the midst of the congregation and his voice died miserably in mid-cry. The ringing bell echoed against the whitewashed walls until it, too, died away and

the mutt was left sniffing Will and nuzzling Maggie, hoping for another crumb.

No one moved, until a quicker-thinking Maggie spoke. "Please excuse us, Reverend, we didn't know anyone was here. We just wanted to climb the steeple tower, sir; for the view you see; if it wouldn't disturb your..." She sought the right word, and not finding it, ended with "disturb your Divine Service. Sir."

"Of course, of course, young Mistress," replied the priest, catching her game. "We were just gathered to sing uh, sing in the Cornish fashion. A bit different than in London, or even in Plymouth. You *are* from London though, are you not?" They nodded and he went on, "I thought so by the sound of you, though I might not have guessed it from your look." He smiled slightly as he began to sense he might yet survive the encounter. "Perhaps you've come from a ship in Plymouth? Bound for Virginia perhaps?" he guessed.

Will started to reply, but Maggie cut him off. "Just to climb the steeple, sir, and we'll be on our way." She glanced a bit conspicuously at the forbidden crucifix before adding, "And you can finish your, uh, Cornish songs in peace. We'll mind our business and let you mind yours." She hesitated again and then added, "As we both might prefer."

"Of course, miss, of course," the priest replied with relief. "Mr. Battersby here will show you the way. There is indeed a fine view of the Sound from the top. It will not disturb you if we sing?" They shook their heads. Almost immediately, someone in the back started a country folk prayer:

*God let never all come at ill
But through Jesus own will,*

Sweet Jesus Lord, Amen.

Forty voices joined in before the end, and the “amen” rang out firmly before the prayer began again.

God let never all come at ill...

Battersby tugged Maggie’s sleeve and she and Will followed him back towards the entrance. They came again to the Virgin, who seemed to be guarding the curving stairs leading up to the steeple. The candlelight played across the Lady’s sorrow-filled eyes. Such was the long-dead sculptor’s craft that Maggie thought for an instant the stone indeed was weeping. Then she saw the whitewashed panel against the wall, and remembered tales she had heard about Cornish papists gathering at night for prohibited sacrifices. But Battersby set his bony hand on her shoulder and guided her firmly toward the stairs, then let them climb winding steps alone. As they went up, the ancient plainchant rose behind:

Fructus ventris generosi

Rex effudit gentium...

Around and around they climbed the worn stone steps. The light grew brighter as they neared the top. Will reached the platform first and gave Maggie a hand up the final steps. Then he jumped to look out the first window he saw. It faced east, and had a commanding view of the Sound. Plymouth was hidden by the heights above Penlee Point; but all the rest of the Sound lay below: sails of the countless small craft and a few ships riding the southwest breeze home to port. Just topping the hill in the distance, he saw the masts of the *Jonathan*, the *Merchant* and the *Duty* in Mill Bay, waiting to sail to an unknown fate.

Maggie was already at opposite window, facing the west. Will rushed over and nearly knocked her down in his urgent need.

"Show me, Maggie! Let me see!" he cried. "Where is it? Show me Virginia! Now!"

Maggie stepped aside silently and let Will push forward. He looked out on the heather and brilliant yellow flowers that covered the headland below. Further beyond, the sea danced in the westering sun. Further still lay the horizon -- the vast empty horizon -- where the sea embraced the sky: and between sea and sky, there was nothing, nothing at all.

Will stared for a long moment at what he'd already known but had refused to believe. The wind swirled through the open tower, swelling his heaving chest even as the empty horizon emptied his soul. Maggie touched his arm. "Will," she whispered, "Will...."

He turned and looked at her, unseeing; and Maggie saw the same face Little Liz had made that day in Bridewell: betrayal and loss; the pain of private treason. Then Will's eyes closed as he broke down at last and wept, sobbed as he had not done since his mother died, wept in great gasps against Maggie's breast. "He lied! Maggie; he lied!" he cried at last. "Even Red Sam! He said it was there! He swore it! He lied, Maggie! They all lied! Virginia is all a lie! a lie! a lie...."

She held his head tight against her as she gazed at the horizon and thought of the desert that had welcomed the Israelites to bondage in Egypt, there to make bricks without straw and cry their lamentations to the Lord. What bondage, she wondered, what bondage awaited them in the

Virgin's namesake across the sea? What songs would they sing in a strange and distant land?

Maggie barely heard it when Battersby blew out the candles at the foot of the stair and restored the false panel to close the niche. Secure in the darkness, the forbidden Virgin wept once more.

Ave Maria, gratia plena....