

McAsh was until recently a coal miner."

Sir George threw a look of pure rage at York and said: "I know Reverend York."

The pastor quailed visibly.

Lizzie recalled how Sir George had silenced Reverend York in his own church at Heugh when Mack had made his protest six months ago. How much less courageous would the pastor be here in Sir George's court? His evidence would be worthless, she realised.

Suddenly she heard her own voice sing out: "And me. I will speak for McAsh."

Sir George was thunderstruck. It was one thing for a namby-pamby parson to plead for McAsh's life: that sort of thing was to be expected from clergymen. But a member of his own family speaking up for the accused man seemed to give confirmation of the defendant's wild allegations of conspiracy.

Jay was mad with rage; Caspar Gordonson looked surprised and pleased; Mack McAsh was simply astonished.

At last Sir George said: "There will be a short adjournment." He stood up abruptly and left the room by the side door. His clerk scurried after him.

Gordonson got to Lizzie first. "Thank you," he said. "It was the best thing you could possibly have done."

Before she could reply, Jay had grabbed her from the other side. "How dare you humiliate me like this?" he spat. "I absolutely forbid you to speak!"

"Are you intimidating this witness?" said Gordonson.

McAsh appeared and took hold of Jay's wrist. He did not appear to grip it hard but Jay went white and gasped with pain and released his hold on Lizzie. Humiliated, he reached for his sword.

The court clerk reappeared and diffused the tension, saying: "The magistrate would like to see you all in the back room, please."

They all followed him, Jay looking enraged, Gordonson delighted, and Mack tense.

They found Sir George at a small round table drinking claret. He did not ask anyone to sit down. Looking directly at Lizzie he said: "What the devil do you mean by this?"

His arrogant tone maddened her. "You know damn well what I mean by it," she spat. The men all looked startled to hear her swear. "McAsh is innocent. He doesn't know one end of a musket from another and he's never shouted 'Down with the King' in his life. I'm not going to stand by and see you hang him for your own nefarious purposes."

Sir George reddened and wagged a fat finger at her. "Remember that you're my daughter-in-law and--"

"Don't waste your breath," she interrupted him. "I won't be bullied."

Jay stormed: "You can't go against your own husband--it's disloyal!"

"Disloyal," she repeated scornfully. "Who the hell are you to talk to me about loyalty? I might not have done this before

I found out about the coal mine. But you betrayed me." She turned to Sir George. "The two of you shamelessly conspired to deceive me and break a solemn promise. And you have no right--no right at all--to ask anything of me. Now you're wishing you had treated me with decency, but it's too late." She took a deep breath. "I might as well tell you now that Jay and I will be leading separate lives from today. We'll be married in name only. I shall return to my house in Scotland, and none of the Jamisson family will be welcomed there. You can look to Jay's brother to give you grandsons. As for my speaking up for McAsh: I'm not going to help you hang an innocent man, and you can both--both--kiss my arse."

Sir George was too stupefied to say anything. No one had spoken to him that way for years. He was beetroot-red, his eyes bulged, and he spluttered, but no words came out.

Caspar Gordonson intervened smoothly. "Perhaps I could make a practical suggestion, Sir George."

The magistrate turned his angry eyes away from Lizzie with an effort. "By all means," he snapped.

"We all know that Mrs Jamisson's evidence will tend to undermine the prosecution--but juries are unpredictable, and they could yet convict McAsh."

"What's your suggestion?"

"If you would promise to impose a mild sentence, perhaps Mrs Jamisson might agree not to testify."

Lizzie said contemptuously: "You can't trust the Jamissons--"

a promise is nothing to them."

"I've thought of that," said Gordonson. "If Sir George fails to do what he promises, you can give evidence when we apply for a royal pardon. I believe the King gives his personal attention to such appeals."

Sir George said: "All right, all right, if we make a deal I'll stick to it."

The court clerk said: "The charge is treason--he can't be let off with a fine."

"That's a shame," Gordonson said. "If you can't give us what we want, the matter will be in the hands of the jury. Only I'm sure the Jamisson family would much prefer that Lizzie is not called to give evidence."

Sir George said: "I could transport him."

There was a long silence. They all looked at Mack. Lizzie said: "It's up to you to decide, Mack. I'll do whatever you say."

Gordonson said: "Refuse the deal, and anything could happen: the jury might find you innocent, although I doubt it. Most likely you'll hang. Accept the deal, and they will convict you, almost certainly--but you'll live."

"America," said McAsh with a note of wonder in his voice. "I've heard that the colonists believe in freedom."

Gordonson said: "A lot of people die on the voyage. And once you get there you're a slave for seven years."

"But it's better than the gallows," said McAsh.

"No question of that," said Gordonson.

Mack sighed. "I'll take it."

Lizzie slumped with relief. She had saved his life.

Then Sir George said: "I have one condition."

Gordonson looked worried again. "What?"

Sir George looked at Lizzie. "You have to forget all this nonsense about separate lives. If I reprieve McAsh, you are to be a proper wife to Jay, and give him children."

Everyone looked at her. She realised she had no choice. If she refused she would be killing McAsh. It seemed so unfair. But she could do nothing but give in. "All right," she said. "I accept."

Sir George said: "Then we're all in agreement."

It sounded to Lizzie like a life sentence.

Part II

The Crossing, 1768

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The day of departure came dreadfully quickly.

The convict ships had to sail in the spring, Mack explained to Peg, to arrive in Virginia just before the harvest. When all the planters were desperate for extra hands, the seven-year slaves fetched a high price. If the ships delayed they would arrive in the autumn, when planters were looking to shed labour, and it would be difficult to sell the convicts at any price. Peg was fascinated by this explanation: she had never before thought about what determined the price of things. Mack was so smart.

She was immeasurably grateful that Mack was with her in Newgate Jail. Before he arrived she had been put in a big room with twenty or thirty men and women, some of them completely insane, others blind drunk on the cheap gin sold by the jailers. Fights, robbery, prostitution and rape went on openly: no one here had any shame. The jailers stole the few coins she had when she was brought in, so she had no money to buy food, and she existed on scraps. She caught some kind of chill and became feverish, and she lay curled up on the floor, shivering, for two or three days. Cora was somewhere else in the jail complex in a room of her own where, presumably, she dispensed her favours to Sir George Jamisson in privacy. Then Mack arrived.

At first she was terrified he had been sentenced to hang. Then she learned to her joy that he, too, was being transported to America. It could not be a very big place--surely they would

be able to find one another there! He showed no anger that she had betrayed his address to Lennox: "You're not to blame, wee one," he said. It turned out that everyone sympathised with her: so much so, Mack told her, that the underworld had turned on Sidney Lennox and he had been found guilty of receiving stolen goods. Indeed, he was in Newgate right now, awaiting transportation to America.

Mack was kinder to her than ever, and when his lawyer friend paid the jailers for a private room, Mack insisted that Peg share it. The lawyer, Caspar Gordonson, bribed the jailers every day, so that Mack and Peg got decent food and wine, and hot water in the morning. Peg's fever left her.

She could have lived happily there for years, and she dreaded leaving, but her idyll ended after a week. One morning without warning they were herded out into the courtyard at dawn. A blacksmith came and shackled them in pairs with heavy leg-irons. Males and females were not allowed to be chained together. Mack was paired with a filthy old drunk called Mad Barney. Peg was luckier: she ended up with Cora.

"I don't believe Caspar knows about this," Mack said worriedly. "I suppose they don't have to notify anyone."

Peg wondered why he cared. The lawyer could not undo their chains. She looked up and down the line of convicts. There were more than a hundred of them, she reckoned; around a quarter of them female, with a sprinkling of children from about nine years upwards. Among them, to her horror, she saw Sidney Lennox. So

he would be on the same ship. However, she had Mack to take care of her now.

The great wooden doors of the prison swung wide. A squad of eight or ten guards stood outside waiting to escort them. A jailer gave a violent shove to the pair at the front of the line, and slowly they moved out into the street called Old Bailey.

"We're not far from Fleet Street," Mack said. "It's possible Caspar will get to know of this."

"What difference does it make?" Peg said.

"He might be able to bribe the ship's captain to give us special treatment."

Because the procession to the dockside was unannounced, there were no crowds lining the streets, as there would have been for a hanging; but many people stopped what they were doing to watch the convicts make their last, shameful progress through the heart of London. Some shouted condolences, some jeered and mocked, and a few threw stones or rubbish at the helpless prisoners. Mack asked a friendly-looking spectator to take a message to Caspar Gordonson, but he was refused. He tried again, twice, with the same result.

The irons slowed their pace, and it took more than an hour to shuffle to the waterfront. The river was as busy as ever, for the strikes were over, crushed by the muskets of the troops and the work of the hangman. It was a warm spring morning, and the sunlight glinted off the muddy Thames. A boat was waiting to take them out to their ship, which was anchored in midstream.

Mack read its name. "The *Rosebud*," he said.

"Is it a Jamisson vessel?" Peg asked.

"All the convict ships are."

As she stepped from the muddy foreshore into the boat, Peg realised this would be the last time she stood on English soil for many years, if not forever. Although she knew she ought to be scared, she actually felt a thrill of excitement at the prospect.

Boarding the ship was difficult: they had to climb the ladder in pairs, with their leg irons on. Peg and Cora managed easily enough, being young and nimble, but Mack had to practically carry Barney. One couple fell into the river. Neither the guards nor the sailors did anything to help them, and they would have drowned if the other prisoners had not reached out and pulled them back into the boat.

The ship was about forty feet long by fifteen wide. Peg had burgled drawing-rooms that were bigger. On the deck were hens in a coop, a small pigsty, and a tethered goat. On the other side of the ship a magnificent black horse was being hoisted out of a boat with the help of the yard-arm used as a crane. A scrawny cat bared its fangs at Peg. She had an impression of coiled ropes and furled sails, a smell of tar and varnish, and a rocking motion underfoot. Then she and Cora were shoved across the lip of a hatch and down a ladder.

There seemed to be three lower decks. On the first, four sailors were eating their midday meal, sitting cross-legged on

the floor, surrounded by sacks and chests that presumably contained supplies for the voyage. On the third, all the way down at the foot of the ladder, two more men were stacking barrels, hammering wedges in between them to prevent their shifting on the voyage. At the level of the middle deck of the three, which was obviously for the convicts, another sailor roughly pulled Peg and Cora off the ladder and shoved them through a doorway.

Peg peered at her surroundings in the gloom. The ceiling was the height of a man. It was pierced by two or three gratings which admitted a little light and air, not from outside but from the enclosed deck above, which itself was lit only by one or two open hatches. Along both sides and down the middle of the hold was a double row of what looked like shelves.

With horror Peg realised that they would be spending the voyage on these bare wooden shelves. They shuffled along the narrow walkway between the rows. The first few berths were already occupied by convicts lying flat, still chained in pairs. A sailor directed Peg and Cora to lie next to Mack and Barney, then roughly shoved them closer together so that they were touching. Peg was able to sit upright but the grown-ups could not, for there was not enough headroom, and the best Mack could do was to prop himself up on one elbow.

At the end of the row Peg spotted a large earthenware jar, about two feet high, cone-shaped with a broad flat base and a rim about nine inches across. It was the only item of furniture and

she took a minute or two to figure out that it was the toilet.

She had been on a ship once before. When both her parents were alive and times were good, they had taken a pleasure trip from Westminster to Greenwich. Peg had enjoyed the breeze on her face and the motion of the vessel, and she had happily watched the cornfields and meadows of Rotherhithe and Barking slip by. They had eaten dinner at a tavern in Greenwich, walked around for an hour or two, and returned the same day. America was obviously farther than Greenwich.

"How long will it take to get there?" she said to Mack, expecting him to say two or three days.

"Six weeks," he replied. "If we're lucky."

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Lizzie watched as her trunk was carried into the large cabin at the rear of the *Rosebud*. She and Jay had the owner's quarters, a bedroom and a day room, and there was more space than she had expected. Everyone talked of the horrors of the transatlantic voyage, but she was determined to make the best of it and try as far as possible to enjoy the novel experience.

Things were better between her and Jay. She had done her utmost to forget his broken promise, and he had forgiven her for coming to the rescue of Mack McAsh. His regiment had not yet embarked for Massachusetts, but Jay had obtained leave of absence to go ahead and take possession of his Virginia plantation. He would spend a month there with Lizzie then take a coastal ship north to Boston. As usual at this time of year, there was a Jamisson ship sailing to Virginia full of convicts; so Lizzie and Jay could be assured of the most comfortable accommodation possible.

As she was taking off her hat there was a tap at the cabin door. A thin, wiry man in a blue coat and a three-cornered hat stepped inside and bowed. "Silas Bone, first mate, at your service, Mrs Jamisson, Mr Jamisson," he said.

"Good day to you, Bone," Jay said stiffly, assuming the dignity of the owner's son.

"Captain's compliments to you both," Bone said. They had already met Captain Parridge, a dour, aloof Kentishman from

Rochester. "We'll get under weigh at the turn of the tide," Bone went on. He gave Lizzie a patronising smile. "However, we'll be within the Thames estuary for the first day or two, so Madame need not worry about bumpy weather just yet."

Jay said: "Are my horses on board?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let's have a look at their accommodation."

"By all means. Perhaps Mrs J. will stay and unpack her little bits and pieces."

Lizzie said: "I'll come with you. I'd like to take a look around."

Bone said: "You'll find it best to stay in your cabin as much as possible on the voyage, Mrs J. Sailors are rough folk and the weather is rougher."

Lizzie bridled. "I have no intention of spending the next six weeks cooped up in this little room," she snapped. "Lead the way, Mr Bone."

"Aye, aye, Mrs J."

They stepped out of the cabin and walked along the deck to an open hatch. The mate scampered down a ladder, agile as a monkey. Jay went after him and Lizzie followed. They went to the second of the lower decks. It was dark: what little daylight filtered down from the open hatch was augmented only by a single lamp on a hook. Jay's favourite horses, the chestnut and the two greys, stood in narrow stalls. Each had a sling under its belly, attached to a beam overhead, so that if it lost its footing in

heavy seas it could not fall. There was hay in a manger at the horses' heads, and the deck below them was sanded to protect their hooves. They were valuable horses and would be hard to replace in America.

Jay petted the horses for a while, speaking to them soothingly. Lizzie became impatient and wandered along the deck to where a heavy door stood open. Bone's voice followed her. "I wouldn't wander around, if I were you, Mrs J.," he said. "You might see things that would distress you."

She ignored him and went forward. She was not squeamish.

"That's the convict hold ahead," he said. "It's no place for a lady."

She turned around. "Mr Bone, this ship belongs to my father-in-law and I will go where I like on it."

"Aye, aye, Mrs J."

"And you can call me Mrs Jamisson."

"Aye, aye, Mrs Jamisson."

She turned around. She ducked her head under a beam, went forward a couple of paces, passed through the open door and found herself in the main hold. It was warm, and there was an oppressive smell of crowded humanity. She peered into the gloom. At first she could see nobody, although she heard the murmur of many voices. She was in a big space filled with what looked like shelving. Something moved on the shelf beside her, with a clank like a chain, and she jumped. Then she saw to her horror that what had moved was a human foot in an iron clamp. There was

someone lying on the shelf, she saw; no, two people, fettered together at their ankles. As her eyes adjusted to the gloom she saw another couple lying close to the first, then another, and she realised there were dozens of them, packed together on the wooden shelf that ran the entire length of the hold, shoulder to shoulder like forks in a drawer. Surely, she thought, this was just temporary accommodation, and they would be given proper bunks, at least, for the voyage? Then she realised what a foolish thought that was. Where could such bunks be? This hold occupied most of the space below deck. There was nowhere else for these wretched people to be. They would spend the next six weeks lying here in the airless gloom. McAsh was probably among them, but she could not see him: she could not distinguish anyone's features.

She turned around and retraced her steps, an indignant protest on her lips. Jay's horses were better cared for than the human beings! But when she reached Jay's side she caught the eye of Silas Bone, and saw a look of scorn on his face; and she bit back her words. The convicts were on board and the ship was about to set sail, and nothing she could say would change the conditions in the hold. A protest would only vindicate Bone's warning that women should not go below decks.

Jay was satisfied with his horses' treatment, and they went back up on deck. Bone said: "The tide's on the turn, Mr Jamisson. Captain will be impatient to weigh anchor."

"My compliments to the captain, and tell him to carry on,"

Jay said.

Lizzie and Jay stood in the bows as the ship began to move down river on the tide. A fresh evening breeze buffeted Lizzie's cheeks. As the dome of St Paul's cathedral slipped below the skyline of warehouses she said: "I wonder if we'll ever see London again."

"I shan't care if we don't," said Jay. "I want to live in America for the rest of my life."

"I have something to tell you," said Lizzie. "I've been waiting for the right moment."

"What?"

For a moment she stared down into the fast-moving river, its muddy water gilded by the afternoon sun. Then she turned to look at her husband. "We're going to have a baby," she said.

31

The old woman lying next to Mad Barney was dead. She had been dead for a day or so, Mack reckoned. He would try and get her moved today. She would start to smell soon.

It was the eighth day of the voyage, and the Rosebud was becalmed. Mack guessed they were still off the coast of England, for the crew kept the hatches closed, presumably to prevent escapes (although none of them could have swum more than a few yards, encumbered as they were with heavy leg-irons). There was no ventilation at all for the hundred or so people crammed into the hold. In the hot, still weather the atmosphere below decks was suffocating. To make matters worse, many prisoners had succumbed to jail fever, and they cried out for water all day long. Their piteous pleas were enough to drive someone mad.

Mack had caught fleas from Barney, but otherwise he was surviving well. He did not even have the dysentery which had afflicted almost everyone in the first few days. Peg was also doing well. By talking to Cora she was learning more about sex than she really needed to know, at her age, but Mack just hoped that was the worst thing that would happen to her on this voyage.

The prisoners were fed once a day: the time varied, and Mack guessed it depended on the whim of the first mate, a nasty piece of work called Silas Bone. The heavy door at the end of the hold would be noisily unbarred, and three huge barrels rolled in: one containing water, one rum, and one salt meat. A sailor armed

with a sword and a cudgel guarded the barrels while two others distributed the food and drink. Each prisoner got a piece of salt meat and a quart of water with rum in it. Sometimes there was a lump of bread to go with it, sometimes not. Occasionally a thirsty or hungry prisoner would try to snatch an extra portion: each time it had happened, the offender was dragged off his bunk, thrown to the floor, and beaten senseless by the sailors. Mack had asked Bone to bring extra water for the sick people but the mate had ignored him.

Mack had spent some time examining the irons on his leg. He could not get his foot out of the circlet without breaking his ankle. The fetters were secured with a simple iron pin that the blacksmith had hammered into place. Unfastening them would be easy with a heavy wooden-headed hammer; without one it was impossible.

Glancing over again at the dead woman, Mack saw with revulsion that a rat was eating her feet. "For God's sake," he muttered disgustedly. He had nothing to throw at it. He reached across Barney and shook the corpse's leg, rattling the chains, and the rat disappeared in a flash.

There was a noise at the door and Mack heard voices: someone was coming in. An excited murmur spread among the prisoners as they anticipated some relief of their tedium. The big door swung open and a sailor came into the hold. Mack recognised Bone, the first mate.

Bone had in his hand some kind of whip, and as he spoke he

tapped prisoners on the leg with its handle. "Up on deck," he said. "You, you, you--look lively, get up that ladder, it's exercise time." He picked only men, Mack noted.

When Bone drew level with Mack and Barney, Mack said: "Bone! That woman there is dead."

"Speak when you're spoken to," Bone said. "Get up on deck."

There was no point in arguing. Mack decided he would try again later. "Come on, Barney," he said.

"Rice pudding," Barney mumbled absurdly, but he slid to the edge of the bunk. They were on the lower of the two shelves, but even so it was difficult, shackled together, to co-ordinate their leg movements and get to the floor. Mack had to take Barney's arm and half-lift him. "Down at the bottom end of Costermonger's Alley," Barney said.

All Mack's muscles hurt after seven days of inaction, but he was so relieved to be moving that he did not care. They shuffled along to the ladder, following others, and with considerable difficulty climbed up. Once again Mack had to practically carry Barney. However, he no longer noticed the smell of the man: the stench in the hold made all other odours negligible.

The sunlight dazzled Mack after the gloom of the hold, and for a while he was blind. When his vision cleared he saw that it was late afternoon. The *Rosebud* was anchored a mile or so off the coast. He could make out a sandy beach, grey cliffs and green hills: he presumed it was the south of England but it might

have been anywhere. On deck the crew stood around wearing furtive grins. Mack had seen that look on the faces of apprentices lounging outside taverns in London, when there was mischief afoot and they were waiting for it to happen.

One of the seamen took a hammer from a toolbox behind the mainmast and began to strike off the prisoners' irons. Another sailor blew a few notes on a pipe. When there were about a dozen prisoners on deck, Bone came up from below. "Let the ball commence!" he shouted, and the sailors all laughed.

The piper began to play a jig. Bone shouted: "Dance!" Mack realised that this was to be the prisoners' exercise. "Dance, you idle devils, dance!" Bone yelled, and he cracked his whip around their feet.

Some of the men began to shuffle from foot to foot. Bone cracked the whip again and others joined in. The crew laughed uproariously at the comic spectacle. Mack realised the exercise was necessary if they were to survive the voyage, but his pride would not let him dance at the bidding of this bully. "Lift up those feet!" Bone shouted. "Put a bit of vim in it!" The younger men were able to do as he urged but the older ones such as Barney were stiff from their confinement and they groaned with the effort. Bone stung their ankles with his whip, and they yelped in pain and strained to do better, causing more helpless laughter among the crew.

Bone ignored Mack's silent rebellion until all the others were dancing. Then he turned his eyes on Mack with an expression

that looked like relish. He flicked the whip again, but instead of the ankles it lashed Mack's face. Mack flinched, too late: he felt warm blood run down his cheek and realised he could lose an eye this way. It was foolish to defy authority over such a piece of petty tyranny, he told himself; and before Bone could crack the whip again he began to dance to the tune.

Looking aft along the deck he saw the door to one of the passenger cabins open, and a woman in a blue dress stepped out. It was Lizzie Jamisson. She stopped short when she saw what was going on on the main deck. She met Mack's eye as he danced, and he burned with shame. Would she intervene, he wondered, and put an end to this indignity? She stared at him for a long moment, but he could not read her expression. Then she turned around and went back inside her cabin.

Bone cracked the whip, and Mack danced on.

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All the men were exercised that afternoon. Then, before the women could be taken on deck, a wind sprang up. The burst of activity above could be heard clearly by the prisoners. The anchor was weighed and the sails were unfurled and the ship began to move. The breeze blew through the open hatches into the hold and brought grateful relief to the panting convicts.

An hour later the ship was bowling over the waves at a fair speed. Mack lay on his back with his eyes closed, enjoying the fresh air. A cool breeze was something he would never again take for granted, he was thinking. Unusually, the sick people were

quiet, soothed by the refreshing atmosphere.

His reverie was interrupted by a low female voice. "McAsh, are you asleep?"

He opened his eyes, surprised: he had not heard the big door being unbarred and opened. He was more shocked to see Lizzie Jamisson standing at his feet. He sat up quickly and banged his head on the shelf above.

"Are you all right?" she said anxiously. "I startled you."

He stared at her in the dim light. With her clean face and her crisp dress, she looked like an angel of mercy in the hellish cavern of the hold. "It's nothing," he said. "Why are you on this ship?"

"We're going to live in America," she replied. "My husband's regiment has been posted to Boston, and we're taking over the Jamisson plantation in Virginia. How are you?"

"I'm still alive, and I'm not even sick yet," he said. "I count myself lucky."

"The smell down here is like nothing on earth." She pointed at the woman next to Barney. "What happened to her feet?"

"She's been dead for a day or so, and the rats are eating her," Mack said bluntly.

"Good God," Lizzie said. She swallowed hard. Mack thought she was going to throw up, but she only put her hand over her mouth and breathed through her nose for a few moments.

"I told Bone but he wouldn't listen," Mack said.

"I'll get the poor woman moved," Lizzie said with an effort.

"If that sort of thing goes on we'll all die of the plague before we're half way to America."

"There's something else you could do. A lot of people have jail fever but they get the same water ration as everyone else. They need extra."

"I'll tell the captain," Lizzie promised.

"But you shouldn't come down here," Mack said. "You might catch the fever."

She gave him an odd look. "You're always thinking about other people, McAsh."

"I don't mean to sound ungrateful," he said hastily.

She shook her head. "I know. But you're right, I won't come below decks again unless you send for me. There's a seaman called Bell, bald with only one ear and a goitre on his neck, they call him Beau Bell, you can trust him with a message."

"I've seen him."

She reached out and took his hand. It was an odd gesture, half handshake, half comforting squeeze, and she looked embarrassed as she let go. "Good luck," she said awkwardly. She turned and walked quickly away.

"Thank you," Mack said, but she was gone.

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The female prisoners were brought up on deck for exercise as soon as Land's End, the extreme south-western tip of England, disappeared below the horizon.

There was a different mood among the crew, Jay noted. Yesterday, before the men were exercised, the sailors had worn mean smiles, in anticipation of some cruel amusement. Today they were like the neighbourhood dogs when a bitch is in heat: prowling, quarrelsome and distracted.

The first mate, Silas Bone, had spoken quietly to Jay on deck in the morning. "If you don't mind me saying so, sir, it would be better if Mrs J. stayed in her cabin when the women are brought up, later on."

"Why's that?"

"Well, sir, when we're at sea, we don't always do things just the same way they're done on land, and Mrs J. might take offence. Whereas, if she's not around, she won't worry. What the eye don't see, the heart don't grieve for, as the saying goes."

"All right," Jay had said, although he did not really understand. However, that afternoon, with the ship doing eight knots and the coast of Brittany on the port bow, he arranged for Lizzie to have a hot bath. Big stewpots of sea-water were boiled in the galley and poured into a wooden tub in the cabin, and when the tub was full Jay closed the door and left her to enjoy the

unexpected luxury.

All the female prisoners were brought up at the same time. There were about thirty of them, aged from around nine to over sixty. They stumbled on to the deck, blinking in the sunshine. They were all filthy dirty and their clothes were rags. A seaman struck off their fetters with a hammer. All the crew were on the foredeck except for the captain, who was in his cabin, and two sailors who were occupied with the ship, one at the wheel and the other on the lookout in the crow's nest.

One of the sailors began to play a jig on a pipe, and Bone cracked his whip and ordered the women to dance. The men's dancing had been a cause of hilarity, but it was different with the women. The sailors jeered the old crones in their efforts to dance, but they watched the younger women with different eyes. Some of the women swayed their hips and shook their bosoms, as if they were trying to inflame the crew: Jay wondered what good they thought that would do them.

One of the crew began to operate the hand-pump and another picked up the canvas hose and sprayed sea water over the women. The privilege of a wash had not been given to the men.

When they were all drenched, Bone said quietly to Jay: "Is there one that you'd like for yourself, sir?"

"What?" Jay said. "What do you mean?"

"The crew are about to pick their 'wives' for the voyage, but of course as the owner's son you have first choice, if you wish."

"No, no," Jay said hastily. "Not at all." He was too startled and embarrassed to ask questions, but in truth he was fascinated and strangely excited by what Bone said.

Bone turned away and spoke to one of the crew. "All right, bosun, you first."

The bosun grinned and licked his lips, then went up to one of the women and took her by the arm. Jay recognised her. She was an attractive young woman with a lot of black hair, and her wet dress clung to a voluptuous body. He remembered her name: Cora. He had seen her in court: she had murdered a man, but for some reason his father had sentenced her to transportation rather than hanging. When brought up from below she had been shackled to Peg Knapp, the child who had been persuaded to betray McAsh. "What's your name?" the bosun said.

"Cora." She had been one of those who danced enticingly, and now she smiled and batted her eyelashes at the bosun. Jay realised she had known what was going to happen and she had wanted to make sure she was selected.

The bosun took her to the hatch and the two of them disappeared below decks. Bone nodded to another crewman, who picked out another young woman, a shy-looking type with fair hair and a slim, delicate frame. But this one resisted, screaming "No! No!" She wriggled out of the sailor's grasp and tried to throw herself overboard, but the other seamen grabbed her and stopped her. They held her and the sailor punched her in the face, making her nose bleed, then in the stomach. She doubled

up, and when the crew released her she slumped on the deck. Her sailor pulled her roughly to her feet and shoved her to the hatch, and she went down the ladder.

Jay was mesmerised. Most of the women were willing, perhaps because they felt anything was better than the squalor and chains of the hold. Others screamed protests and had to be dragged away. The sailor they called Beau Bell, who was the ugliest man Jay had ever seen, chose a negro woman with very dark skin and proud eyes. A very young sailor chose a heavy-set woman old enough to be his mother. The men were completely shameless in their choices: they did not care what the others thought, they just took what they wanted.

What riveted Jay was the knowledge that the women had no choice, no say in the matter at all: they were completely in the power of the crew. It was better than paying a prostitute, much better, for the prostitute could always refuse a man or change her mind, but these women could be forced to do anything at all. Jay regretted refusing Bone's offer, but he did not have the nerve to say so; and anyway his wife was on board.

The selection went on until all the crew had picked women except for the cabin boy and the two who were steering the ship. The least attractive women, the old ones and the children were left.

Jay found his voice and said: "What about the other two--the man at the wheel and the one on the lookout?"

"They don't like women," Bone said with a leer. "They'll

pick out a couple of boys later."

Jay found that most shocking of all. In England the penalty for sodomy was death. Yet it seemed to be openly tolerated at sea--even on his own father's ships.

He could probably have put a stop to all this, if he had wanted to. A word to the skipper would have done it. Captain Parridge obviously knew that this was going on, but if Jay complained he would pretend to be shocked and order it stopped. However, the crew clearly considered it their right, and Bone had guessed, correctly, that Jay would be more intrigued than revolted.

Bone and the cabin boy replaced the shackles on the rejects. When they came to a thin, pale girl of about eleven years, Bone said: "Not her. Take her to my cabin." Jay stared at Bone, shocked. He knew there were men who liked immature girls but he had never known anyone be open about it. Looking scared, the child followed the cabin boy. Jay told himself that it would have been worse for her if she had been hanged.

As the rejects were returned to the hold on the second lower deck, Jay decided to take a look below. The first lower deck was used for storing food and drink for the voyage, and the sailors slept among the barrels. He got off the ladder there and peered into the gloom. He could hear cries, groans, and muffled screams of protest. He picked his way between the sacks of oats and casks of salt meat to the open space where the sailors slung their hammocks.

There he stood, open-mouthed, and stared for a long time.

33

Next day the *Rosebud* skirted the Bay of Biscay, and the weather turned nasty. The sunlight coming through the hatches was dimmed; a gusty wind rocked the ship; rain pattered on the deck above; and the temperature fell. Then a storm began to buffet the ship like a series of mighty slaps from the giant hand of a disapproving God.

At one moment the prow pointed up to heaven and at the next down to the bottom of the ocean. Sometimes the ship leaned so far sideways it seemed it must turn upside-down. The roar was deafening as millions of gallons of water washed over the decks in giant waves.

The hatches were closed tight, so the hold was in total darkness, and quite airless. As the ship pitched and rolled, the helpless prisoners were thrown around like dice in a cup. Mack had experienced storms on his voyage from Edinburgh down the east coast of Britain to the mouth of the Thames and, although they had been a lot less wild, they had taught him that a little ship could ride massive waves. But most of the prisoners had never seen the sea, let alone sailed on it, and they were driven mad with fear.

When the bows reared up out of the water they all rolled aft in a crazy jumble of arms and legs, piling up on top of one another willy-nilly, bruising each other cruelly with their chains, until those at the bottom of the stack shrieked that they

were being crushed to death. Then they would crest the wave, the prow would drop with a sickening lurch as if the ship were falling off a cliff, and the prisoners would all roll the other way. When it leaned to one side or the other they would fall off the shelves into the narrow walkways, tumbling on one another in a screaming, terrified heap.

There would be a few minutes' respite, when the swell eased and they were able to keep their places during the up-and-down motion. Then another big one would throw them all around. Many puked constantly, adding the smell and slimy feel of vomit to the nightmare. The children cried pathetically; the men cursed God and the saints and their parents and anyone else they could think of; the religious prayed, to no effect; and the women all wailed as if at a funeral. Mad Barney seemed immune to the general fear, and laughed uproariously for hours. Mack held Peg's bony childish frame in his arms, trying to keep her from being crushed. She cried, but his embrace gave her courage and helped her resist the panic that possessed almost everyone else.

Mack had no way of keeping track of time but the storm seemed to last about twenty-four hours. When at last it eased up he went around the hold assessing the damage. He hobbled along the narrow walkways in the dark, with Mad Barney trailing behind him talking nonsense. Mack spoke to each prisoner. Four were dead, three old ones and a ten-year-old boy. Three men moaned with the pain of broken limbs. There were ten people bleeding heavily from wounds caused by other people's fetters.

Sidney Lennox, whose death would have been a blessing to the world, was among those who had escaped serious injury.

An hour or so later the hatches were opened, letting in precious air. Shortly afterwards the door opened and Silas Bone, the chief mate, came in, followed by three seamen. Mack hobbled quickly along the gangway to meet them and said: "We have four dead and thirteen seriously injured."

Bone glared at him malevolently for a moment, then appeared to decide to accept his help. "Show me the dead," he said.

Mack did so. Bone told the seamen to strike off their fetters and throw the corpses overboard, then pair up those who were left.

Mack said: "Can we take the injured up on deck for treatment?"

"There's no doctor on board," Bone said.

"But still--"

"Shut your damn mouth, I told you there's no doctor," Bone said.

"Are you going to leave them here?"

"Until they die. Then they can go up on deck for treatment." Bone laughed harshly.

The jars that served as toilets had overturned during the storm, and the deck underfoot was awash with filth. Mack said: "If you would unchain a few able-bodied prisoners we could clean up, and maybe swab the deck with vinegar--"

"Go to the devil," Bone said, and he turned away.

*

During the next week the jail fever spread among the prisoners until two people in every three had it. They became burning hot and delirious, soiled themselves constantly, and moaned and begged for water all day and all night. Most days one or two died, usually the old and the very young. The corpses were taken away by the sailors who came down at feeding time, so one of Mack's requests to Lizzie had been granted; but the other--more water for the sick--had not.

After Cora became the bosun's "wife", Peg had somehow escaped being re-chained to another prisoner. She still had the irons on, but there was no one in the other fetter. Perhaps they thought she was too small to bother with. Anyway, she was able to move about freely. Between the curved wooden hull of the ship and the straight boards of the deck there was a narrow gap that she could squeeze through. At night she took off her rag of a dress and wrapped it around her irons to silence them, then she was able to move about the ship at will. She crawled about behind barrels and hid in furled sails and coils of rope, like the rats. She talked to Cora and brought back reports of the "wives". Sleeping in a hammock was comfortable once you got used to it, they said--much better than the hard deck--and even two together could manage provided they slept back-to-back. They received sailors' rations, with hard-tack biscuits and extra rum, and fresh meat when the captain killed a pig. They had the run of the first lower deck; and most of them thought they were well

rewarded for submitting to the seamen's desires. Even the two teenage boys who had been forced to become sailors' "wives" seemed reconciled to their fate. But Sally Deights, the twelve-year-old girl who had been selected by Silas Bone, had not emerged from his cabin, and no one knew how he was treating her.

Fourteen days into the voyage Mack caught the fever. He seemed to go into a long, heated dream. Most of the time he thought he was down a badly ventilated coal mine in summer, when the air felt too hot to breathe. The noise of his own heartbeat was the sound of the roof breaking up. Then he thought there had been a collapse, and that was why it was so dark and there was a heavy weight on his chest. His sister Esther and his cousin Annie were in the mine with him, and they were dead, and that made him cry; but then Esther somehow was beside him, whispering that she had found a barrel of lemons belonging to the captain and had stolen some, and she squeezed the juice into his mouth. It was painfully bitter, but at the same time wonderfully refreshing, and he thanked her and told her he was glad she was not really dead.

When he began to come out of it he was too weak to move, but his mind was all right, and he realised that Esther and Annie were dead after all, which made him weep helplessly for hours. He also wept for himself and what he had become, chained like an animal, fed and watered daily by his keepers, lying in his own filth, completely controlled by others, powerless to alter his fate.

That too passed, and instead of feeling sorry for himself he got angry. No law on earth could justify this torture; nothing excused the cruelty of the captain and crew of the *Rosebud*. The prisoners were criminals but few of them had done anything as bad as to deprive fevered people of water, rape unwilling women and boys, and leave the wounded to bleed to death.

But there was no point in raging inwardly against the cruelty and injustice of what was going on. He had to either accept it or change it. There were a hundred or more convicts and only about a dozen crew: it must be possible for the prisoners to overpower their keepers. Of course, that was what the fetters were for. They changed the odds. But they could be removed. It only needed a hammer. The bosun had one, and used it to free small groups of prisoners for exercise. How could Mack get hold of that hammer?

He thought of Peg, and then immediately dismissed her. No doubt she could steal the hammer on her nightly wanderings, but if she were caught she would be viciously punished. Mack could not contemplate the risk of that little girl being flogged or even hanged.

The other possibility was Lizzie. No one would flog her, of course. But would she do it? She was impossible to predict. Sometimes she would be arrogant and uncaring; then on another day compassion would overcome her native prejudices. However, he had nothing to lose by asking her, for he felt sure that even if she

refused him she would not betray him.

He had a means of contacting her: she had told him that Beau Bell could be trusted with a message. He would have to wait until Bell came below. The duty of giving the prisoners food and water was done by a different group of three or four sailors every day.

In the event it was two days before the sailor with one ear and a lump on his neck appeared in the convict hold. Even then it was not a straightforward matter to speak to him. Two gangways ran the length of the convict hold. Mack's position was beside the starboard gangway, and it so happened that Bell worked the other one. Two sailors went slowly down the aisles giving out big wooden beakers of rum-and-water and lumps of leathery salt pork while the third guarded the barrels. Mack drained his beaker in a few swallows, as they all did: they were always thirsty, and anyway the beakers were snatched back soon afterwards and re-used for other prisoners, for there were not enough to go around.

As soon as he had finished the drink Mack got off the shelf, pulling Barney along with him, and worked his way around to the far gangway, still clutching his precious strip of meat in his hand. The sailor on his side took no notice. The third sailor stood by the barrels of fresh water and rum, guarding them from prisoners who might try to steal extra rations. As Mack approached, the guard shook a club threateningly. Mack put up his hands in a gesture of helplessness and shuffled past the

raised club. He got by without being struck, and thanked his stars. He went along the second gangway until he drew close to Beau Bell.

"What are you after?" the sailor said gruffly.

Mack was about to speak when he caught the eye of Sidney Lennox, who had just been served his meat. Mack closed his mouth like a trap. He could not speak in front of Lennox: it was too risky. "Nothing," he mumbled, and he turned around. Despondently he returned to his place.

*

His luck changed the very next day. Beau Bell was once again on feeding duty, and this time he worked Mack's aisle. Mack was able to murmur to him: "Please tell Mrs Jamisson I must see her as soon as possible." Bell made no reply, but later in the day the big door was opened and Mack saw a shadow in a dress standing just outside. He clambered off his wooden bed, with Mad Barney in tow, and went to the door.

When he approached her she shrank away from him involuntarily, and he realised he must look very like Barney: ragged, emaciated, unshaven, with matted hair and wild eyes and open sores on his filthy skin. She seemed like a creature of a different species, a fairy or an angel or a goddess, by comparison with the degraded animal that he was. Her face was clean, her hands were white, and a smell of soap and lavender came off her pink silk dress. The sight of her brought tears to his eyes, for she reminded him that there was another life, in

which people could drink as much water as they needed and wash whenever they wanted to and breathe the fresh air. He could not speak, and Barney filled the gap, gabbling more coherently than usual: "Pretty lady, smells of flowers, nice dress, pretty lady." As Mack wept in front of her he realised that his spirit was near to being broken.

His distress seemed to revolt her, and she made no attempt to comfort him. That helped him to pull himself together. At last he was able to say: "We have to put a stop to this."

"What?" she said. "We can't stop the ship."

"The short rations of water, the leaving the wounded to bleed to death down here, the rape of the women."

"The women seem willing," she said.

"You would be, if the alternative was this," he said, indicating with a gesture the hold behind him.

She tossed her head. "Don't be an insolent fool."

"You know this is wrong," he said.

Her attitude changed, and she bit her lip. "I can't do anything. They won't do what I tell them. My husband says it's up to the captain, and the captain won't take orders from me."

"It doesn't make sense," Mack said despairingly. "The more people that die, the less money they make when they come to sell us in Virginia."

"I tried that argument. The captain says there's no spare water on board, only just enough to get us to America. Barrels of water take up valuable cargo space and don't make any profit.

There's no doctor on board for the same reason."

"But if they spent a little extra on keeping us alive they'd make more than their money back!"

"I agree, but the Jamissons don't think like that. It seems they would rather save a pound by meanness than spend a pound to make two."

"Aye," Mack said despondently. "I recollect they had the same attitude to the idea of ventilating their coal mines to let firedamp escape. It would have made them money in the long run but they wouldn't do it."

"I've tried every argument, but it's no good," Lizzie said.

Mack took a deep breath, inhaling her delicious perfume. "Do you really want to help?"

"Of course, how can you ask that? Do you think I would let this go on, if I had the power to stop it?"

"There is a way."

"What?"

"The bosun has a big wooden hammer that he uses to strike off the prisoners' fetters when we're exercised."

"And...?"

"It's kept in the tool chest just aft of the mainmast, and the chest is not locked. You could just open the lid and take out the hammer."

"What are you getting at?"

"Bring me that hammer and I'll put an end to this cruelty in an hour."

"How?"

"I'll take over the ship."

She looked scared. "Tell me how."

"There are still at least forty strong young men down here who haven't succumbed to jail fever or injuries from the storm. I'll unchain them. We'll come up on deck and overpower the crew."

"There would be bloodshed."

"Not as much as we'll suffer down here when the next storm hits."

"And then what? What will you do when you're master of the ship?"

Mack had not thought that far ahead. Improvising, he said: "Turn around, go back to England, anchor off a quiet beach, go ashore and disappear."

She shook her head. "Ninety convicts in rags can't disappear into the English countryside. You'd be as conspicuous as an invading army. The first peasant that saw you would report you to the local magistrate, and you'd all be back in jail in no time."

She was right, but it was not enough to dissuade him. "Then we could sail on, to America. Land some place where there are no magistrates."

"And what if the redskins capture you?"

"Then we'll be no worse off than we are now!"

"You'd be worse off dead."

"No, we wouldn't!"

She shook her head. "I won't do it."

He could not believe she was refusing him. "You have to!" he shouted in frustration.

She straightened her shoulders. "I don't have to do anything," she said coldly.

He knew he was defeated, and tears of rage and despair came to his eyes again. "Damn you, then," he said, and he turned away so that she would not see him sobbing.

He jerked cruelly on the chain, causing Barney to yelp with pain, and returned to his place, dragging his muttering partner behind him. He threw himself on the hard wooden shelf, and did not look up for some time.

He had no guts left. Nothing he tried worked, and his constant rebellion against authority had done nothing but bring him to the lowest depths of human degradation. If I had never written that letter to Caspar Gordonson, he thought, I'd been in Heugh now.... He remembered that he would have died in the mine, like Esther and Annie, and he would be in a grave in Heugh's churchyard. Still, he thought, I'd rather be lying in the cold earth in Scotland than in this stink of despair.

Darkness was falling outside, and Mack began to drift into an exhausted doze; but he was jerked awake by yet another visit to the hold. He looked up incuriously, too dispirited to take much interest. It was Silas Bone and a couple of tars. Mack wondered vaguely what they wanted, for the convicts had been fed

earlier and it was too dark for exercise.

He soon found out.

The three men came right over to where he lay. He smelled rum on their breath: they were drunk. They each held one of the heavy wood clubs they carried when they were serving the food and drink. Don't hurt me, he thought feebly, I can't take any more. But they were not interested in him. They passed him and seized Peg. She screamed.

Mack's lethargy left him in a flash of rage and he sat upright. "Leave her alone, you drunken pigs," he roared. Bone swung his club and hit Mack across the side of the head, but Mack hardly felt it. "What do you want with the child?" he yelled.

One of the seamen grunted. "Silas' wife died on him," he said.

The other said: "That's right, poor Silas is a widower," and they all laughed drunkenly.

Mack said: "Sally Deights is dead?"

"Jail fever," said a sailor.

Bone said: "No, she died of fright when she saw the size of my cock!" The others burst out laughing again.

Mack realised that Bone had picked on Peg to replace the dead child as his "wife". The idea filled him with rage. It was dreadful enough that grown women should be forced to submit to the sailors' sexual demands--but the thought that the same was to happen to Peg made him blind with fury. As Peg wriggled and screamed, Mack leaped off the shelf and threw himself at the two

men who were trying to hold her.

He got his hands around the throat of one of them, causing the man to let go of Peg and defend himself. The other one managed to keep hold of the squirming child. Bone deployed his club, hitting Mack about the head and body. The other prisoners nearby shrank back from the fight. Barney did likewise, pulling on the chain that attached his leg to Mack's, unbalancing Mack. Mack clung to the sailor's neck, trying to choke the life out of him as fast as he could so that he could turn to Bone and kill him next. But the man jerked away, and Mack lost his hold and fell awkwardly into the gangway. His victim rounded on him with the club, hitting him as he lay on the deck unable to get up. He twisted and turned, covering his head with his arms, but Bone joined the sailor, and the two clubs rained down blow after blow on his head and legs and arms, until at last he blacked out.

*

When he came round he had trouble thinking straight. His body was a mass of agonizing bruises, he could not see out of one eye, and his left hand was numb, but the worst of it was the confusion. He had to keep reminding himself where he was.

He managed to crawl back to his place on the wooden shelf. He lay still for a long while, trying to order his thoughts. Coloured lights swam in his vision whether his eyes were open or shut.

Eventually intelligence began to return to his brain. He remembered that Peg had been taken away, and he had failed to

save her. He recalled that Bone had been very drunk. There was a chance he would be too drunk to do Peg much harm tonight. With luck there might still be a few hours in which she might be rescued.

Mack began to think how he might use those few hours to change the course of events. After a while he realised that there was nothing, absolutely nothing, that he could do to help her.

34

Jay Jamisson went out on deck to smoke a pipe while his wife got ready for bed. The *Rosebud* was in mid-Atlantic. Apart from one terrifying storm the weather had been good. Life on board was uncomfortable and primitive but Jay was fascinated by the way the crew used the convicts as a kind of harem. Whenever he could think of an excuse he would go below to the crew deck, where the women lay about in hammocks waiting to do their masters' bidding. The Jamisson family had owned convict ships for years but Jay had never realised that the transatlantic voyage was an orgy of rape. The thought aroused him in a peculiar way. He did not want one of the convict women for himself: they were so dirty and diseased that he could not possibly desire them. All the same he daydreamed of walking through the hold, pointing to a woman and saying "You," and taking her where she lay in her chains. The idea that he was free to do that, any time he wished, obsessed his thoughts. Standing on the forward deck, watching the sun go down over the western horizon, he played the scene in his head again and again.

His dreams were interrupted by a sailor called Capp. "Message for you, Mr Jamisson sir," the man said in a low murmur. "*The sun has rose.*"

Jay was startled. That was the code phrase Sidney Lennox used when he had information for the Jamissons. Jay knew that Lennox was on board, of course. Sir George had saved him from

hanging, by sentencing him to transportation, and they both felt that had ended the family's obligation to one who was, after all, a common criminal. But had Lennox now found some way to be of further use? Jay would have to find out.

He wondered where to see Lennox. He could have the man brought up on deck. However, that would take time, and it would be ostentatious, too. Better to go below and see Lennox there. The convict hold was a gruesomely insanitary hole but he could stand it for a few moments.

"Take me to him," he said.

"Aye, aye, sir." Capp led the way across the deck to a hatch and down the ladder. On the first lower deck the sailors and their "wives" were gambling and drinking rum by candlelight. Jay and his escort climbed down past that level to the next deck, where they stepped off the ladder. Capp lifted a lighted lamp off a hook and went along a short passage to the massive door of the convict hold. He removed the heavy bar and opened the door. A cloud of evil-smelling air escaped and enveloped the two men. Jay snatched his handkerchief from his sleeve and held it to his nose, wishing he had had the foresight to soak it in brandy. Before going in, Capp took a heavy club from a rack beside the door. Jay took one for himself then followed the man inside.

The smell was overpowering, and he could not breathe. After two paces he reached out and grabbed Capp's shoulder. The man turned, and Jay motioned him outside. "Bring the damned fellow out here," Jay gasped when he could breathe again.

"Aye, aye, sir."

Jay stared into the hold while Capp went back in. The shifting light of Capp's lantern played over the chained feet of the rows of prisoners, and their eyes shone out of the background gloom like animals in the night. Some coughed, others moaned, and several muttered madly. It occurred to him that one of them might make a dash for freedom, and he hefted his club. Then he realised they could not dash anywhere, that was the point of the chains. All the same he remained alert. A rat ran up his leg and down again, and he swung at it with the club: it was a lucky strike and he smashed its head like a raw egg. Then another one ran past. There were rats all over the ship but they were not normally so bold. As his eyes adjusted to the low light he realised, with a shudder, that they were swarming in the convict hold in their dozens, running across the deck, up and down the wooden posts that supported the shelves, and over the legs of the chained prisoners, some of whom seemed too weak to swipe them away.

Capp came back leading two people, Sidney Lennox and the prisoner he was chained to. Jay was shocked by the change in Lennox. He had always been a vigorous man, heavily muscled, but he was wasting away. Jay knew he was thirty years old, but he might have been sixty: his skin was blotched, his hair was falling out, and he walked unsteadily and stood stooped. Chained to him was a boy of fifteen or sixteen, who was as thin as a skeleton but otherwise seemed to be in better health, no doubt

because of his youth.

The boy began speaking immediately, in a high-pitched child's voice: "Oh, sir, please take us out of here, I beg you, everyone is dying and there's not enough water--"

Lennox punched him in the mouth with surprising strength and the boy's pleading ended abruptly in a cry of pain.

Lennox turned back to Jay with an apologetic look. "I hope you don't think I got you down here just to ask for special treatment, Mr Jamisson," he said with his old subservience. "But there is something you ought to know."

"All right, man, out with it," Jay said impatiently.

"It's just that Mrs Jamisson has been down here, and I didn't like the look of it."

Jay frowned. Lizzie down here? What the devil was she up to? "What did she do here?" he said angrily.

"Spoke to Mack McAsh."

McAsh again! "Damn his eyes," Jay said. The miner was as sly as an alley cat. Lizzie's weakness was a soft heart and McAsh played on it effortlessly. "I'll soon put a stop to that," Jay said.

"Pardon me for making a suggestion, Mr Jamisson, but it might be best to say nothing."

"What are you talking about?"

"Just wait and watch, so to speak, and see what happens. If you make a fuss now, you may never know what it was all about."

"Just leave that sort of decision to me, you insolent wretch," Jay said furiously. "Get back to your filthy hole."

"Yes, sir, begging your pardon, sir."

Capp gave the two prisoners a powerful shove and they staggered back inside.

Jay turned away and went up the ladder without waiting for Capp. Although he was angry he realised that Lennox's suggestion made sense. If he confronted Lizzie now she might make up some excuse. The way to find out what she was up to was to keep a close eye on her and nip it in the bud.

He came up on deck. It was dark, but a candle lamp hung outside the door to his cabin. He walked aft, adjusting his tread automatically to the movement of the ship. He paused outside the cabin and took several deep breaths to calm himself. Then he went inside.

Lizzie was waiting for him, and she was angry.

"There's a child in Silas Bone's bed!" she said immediately.

Jay was taken aback. He was feeling injured and it shocked him to be addressed in this accusing way. "What?" he said. "What?"

"I heard the sound of weeping from Silas Bone's cabin, so I looked inside," she said. "He's got one of the convicts in there, a girl of about thirteen. She's chained to the bedpost, crying, and he's on the floor in a drunken stupor. It's obvious he means to misuse her. Fortunately he's incapable of it tonight, and by tomorrow she will be out of there."

"Will she? How come?"

"Because you're going to send her back below and put a stop to this!"

Jay recalled that this self-righteous bitch had been secretly visiting the convict hold and speaking to McAsh behind his back. "You keep your nose out of it," he said harshly. "It's none of your damn business."

"Don't be such a fool," she said. "A child is about to be raped under our noses--how can it not be our business?"

"Such things happen at sea."

"Not while I'm aboard the ship."

"Who the devil do you think you are?"

"I'm a woman, and I won't stand by and see another woman misused. I should have spoken up before, when I found out about the sailors taking so-called "wives" for the voyage. But I convinced myself they were better off than if they stayed in the hold. I never thought those animals might prey on children."

"Now listen to me. You will do nothing about this, do you understand? This is my father's ship and you will not tell me or the captain how to run it. Now I'm going to bed, and I want to hear no more about it."

She opened her mouth to speak then changed her mind and closed it again. Slowly she stood up and turned away from him. She began to undress.

She appeared to have given in--something he had never known her do before. He found it highly suspicious. As he began to

take off his clothes he resolved that he would not let her out of his sight.

35

Mack's bruises hurt more and more as the night wore on, and he did not sleep at all, despite a terrible weariness. Towards dawn, when he was in the depths of pain and despair, Mad Barney died.

It happened quickly. Barney had seemed to be sleeping heavily, as he usually did--Mack imagined he was shielded by his own insanity from the full horror of the madness all around him. Suddenly Mack felt him move. It was too dark to see, but exploring with his hands Mack established that Barney was sitting bolt upright. "It hurts!" he said. "My God, it hurts!" It was the most coherent utterance Mack had ever heard from him. A moment later he fell back heavily. Something in the way his head thumped on the boards, as if there were no muscles in his neck, made Mack think life had left him. He put his hand on Barney's chest: there was no heartbeat. Next he looked for a pulse and found none. Finally he put his cheek next to Barney's mouth and nose, and he could feel no breath.

He was sad. He had learned, in three weeks of being chained to Barney, that a lunatic was still a person with a character. Barney had been an amiable soul, and endlessly patient, although childishly greedy about food and drink, and there had been a mad logic to his conversational nonsense that was occasionally quite funny. He stank to heaven, but so did everyone else after a few days in the hold. In his odd way he had been a congenial

companion.

But now he was dead, and it only took Mack a few minutes to realise that this made escape a little less impossible. Now he might be able to detach Barney from the leg irons.

He carefully rechecked the corpse for vital signs, and confirmed there was no pulse, no breathing and no heartbeat. In the darkness the eyes of two or three rats glinted at him as they waited for their chance to get at the body, confirming Mack's diagnosis.

He examined the leg irons with his fingertips, as he had innumerable times before. As always, he concluded that the only way to get the clamp off the foot was to break the ankle. But now Barney would not feel a broken ankle.

Mack took Barney's foot in one hand and his shin in the other, lifted the leg, and smashed it down as hard as he could on the boards of the shelf. He had been tremendously strong once, and in the old days he could have broken Barney's frail bones with a single blow; but imprisonment, disease and starvation had weakened him, and Barney's ankle remained intact. Frustrated, Mack repeated the action again and again, giving vent to his anger and frustration. The dead body began to yield to the continual abuse: the skin tore, the tendons snapped, and at last the bones began to fracture. One more blow and the foot hung limply from the shin. Mack twisted it and forced it through the iron clamp.

Now he was free from Barney. Like Peg, he could move around

without dragging his companion along.

Peg had got out of the hold by squeezing through the narrow gap between the curved wooden hull of the ship and the straight edge of the deck. Thin as he was, Mack could not get through the same space. Could he enlarge it? The deck was only wooden planking, but the planks were fixed with nails and he could not pull nails out with his bare hands. If he could find something to use as a lever he might be able to spring a board. But there was nothing here in the hold.

Climbing off the shelf, he went to the door, carrying his chain in his hand. He had looked at this door often enough but now he examined it by touch. It was studded and hardly moved when he leaned on it. He ran his fingertips around the jamb and found that it fitted closely: even if he had had a thin-bladed knife he might not have been able to slip it through the crack. The hinges were on the outside, of course. Once again he longed for something he could use as a crowbar.

He came to the conclusion that there was no way out of the hold. He was free of Barney, but that did not get him far, he thought.

Then he heard someone on the other side of the door.

*

Lizzie lay awake all night, listening to the regular breathing of Jay beside her. When she estimated there was about an hour left before dawn she slipped out of bed. Jay's breathing did not falter.

She pulled a silk wrap over her nightdress and slipped outside. The night air was cold. There was no moon, but the stars were very bright and she could clearly see the deck and the rigging, all silver and black.

The bosun has a big wooden hammer that he uses to strike off the prisoners' fetters, Mack had said. It's kept in the tool chest just aft of the mainmast, and the chest is not locked....

The ship moved and sounded constantly, a symphony of creaks and groans, knocks and splashes, and she felt no need to tread quietly. There was a sailor on watch at the wheel, but she could see by the light of his lantern that he was asleep. She walked forward to the mast, found the tool box, and opened it. The big wooden-headed hammer was on top. She took it out and closed the lid. Then she went to Silas Bone's cabin.

She opened the door softly and peeped inside. She could see the outline of Bone's form, flat on his back on the floor, apparently still asleep. There was a sour smell around him. The little girl sat on the bed, white-faced and wide-eyed, staring at Lizzie.

Lizzie went in and tiptoed around Bone to the bed. She showed Peg the hammer and pointed at the leg irons. Peg wore a special child's size, and Bone had chained her to the bedpost.

Lizzie had seen the bosun striking off these fetters. The circlet that went around the prisoner's leg was made of two semicircles hinged together. Each half had a flange with a hole pierced in it, and when the circlet was closed the flanges lined

up so that a tapering iron pin could be wedged through the holes. The only way the circlet could then be opened was by knocking the pin out with a hammer.

Lizzie got Peg to sit on the edge of the bed so that the irons rested on the solid frame of the bedstead. To muffle the noise she covered the point of the pin with the edge of Bone's blanket, folded over several times. Then she tapped with the hammer.

Nothing happened.

She hit it again, harder. Still the pin did not move. It looked easy when the bosun did it but he was practised. Also, he was not frightened of making a noise.

Lizzie realised she had to risk waking Bone. If he tries to stop me I'll use the damned hammer on him, she thought. Holding it with both hands she lifted it above her head and brought it down with all her might. There was a terrific bang and the pin popped out.

Peg opened the circlet and freed herself in a flash. Lizzie looked anxiously at Bone. By a miracle the noise had not awakened him. He must still be dead drunk, she thought.

Peg was rubbing her leg. Lizzie took her arm and gently hurried her out of the cabin, closing the door softly behind them. The sailor on watch was still asleep.

Lizzie and Peg looked at one another in the starlight. Lizzie stretched out her arms and Peg came to her like the child she was. Lizzie folded the thin frame in her arms and hugged the

girl, feeling her tremble with relief.

Lizzie knew what she had to do next, although she hated the thought. If she simply let Peg go free, the child would be recaptured during the day and would end up chained to Bone's bed again by nightfall. There was only one way to save her, and that was to free Mack and let him take over the ship. She had been thinking about it all night, and she had made her decision.

She gently unwound Peg's embrace and handed the hammer to her. "Give this to Mack McAsh," she whispered.

Peg did not have to be told twice. She took the hammer. Barefoot, she ran nimbly over the deck and disappeared down an open hatch.

Lizzie sighed. The die was cast.

She returned to her own cabin and stepped inside.

Jay grabbed her by the shoulders, threw her against the wall, and punched her in the stomach.

Then he hit her again.

*

The door opened and Mack saw Peg standing there with the bosun's hammer in her hand.

"Thank God!" he said. "Did Bone hurt you?"

She shook her head. "Too drunk."

She looked distressed, and as always she was pretending not to be frightened, but she seemed all right, and Mack felt profoundly relieved. "How did you get away?"

"Your pretty friend Mrs Jamisson rescued me."

So Lizzie's sense of right and wrong had won out in the end. Somehow Mack was inordinately pleased that it was she who had saved Peg from Bone. It seemed to prove something, although he was not quite sure what, and he did not have time to reflect on it now. "And did Lizzie send you down here with that hammer?" he said.

"Yes."

She obviously intended him to take over the ship, as he had said he would. This was his chance. It was still night: the sailors would all be asleep for a little while longer.

There were two ways he could do it. One was to free everyone in the hold first, and let the mob overwhelm the crew. There would be chaos and much bloodshed, the whole thing would be impossible to control, and the outcome would be in doubt. The alternative was to free a handful of prisoners, raid the armory for guns, and take the captain hostage first. As Mack's mind raced over the implications he liked the subtle approach more and more. Such few men as were above deck--the captain, Silas Bone, the bosun, Jay Jamisson, and whoever had the watch--could all be locked in the captain's cabin. Then, as the rest of the crew emerged on deck, sleepy-eyed, in the morning, they could be menaced with guns and taken prisoner, one by one. It was quiet, careful and sure.

He would free ten convicts, all strong youngsters who had survived the storm and the fever with their faculties intact. He already knew who they were: he was the one who kept tabs on

the prisoners' health, and told the crew where the corpses were.

First he had to free himself. He took the hammer from Peg. The job was more difficult than he had anticipated, because of the awkwardness of wedging the irons so that the pin could be knocked out. In the end he fixed the circlet in the angle made by the shelf and an upright. The prospect of freedom gave strength to his arm and he knocked the pin out with one blow. He heard a collective sigh from the other prisoners as his chain fell to the deck.

He turned around and stared into the near-dark. He knew that every eye was on him. That door never opened without everyone watching: they always hoped it meant food, drink, or at least some relief from the tedium. "Everyone stay calm," he said. "If you can all keep quiet for a few minutes, we'll have everyone out of this hole by daybreak, and we can all drink as much fresh water as we like." They all began to murmur. Someone cried out and was silenced by a blow.

Mack went to work freeing his team. He talked as he unchained them. "We have to move quietly, to avoid waking the crew," he whispered. "We'll go up on deck and creep into the captain's cabin. We'll take him hostage. The keys to the armory must be about his person or close to hand. When we have them we'll get a firearm each. Then we'll take the other men one by one." It was not much of a plan but Mack had had so little opportunity to study the territory: he knew only what he had been able to see during the exercise periods. However, he had the

advantage of surprise and that could mean everything.

When his men were free he picked up his chain, to use as a weapon, and the others followed suit. Then he led them out of the hold.

He found the ladder and climbed up. It was still very dark when he emerged into the cold night air on deck. He knelt beside the hatch, peering about him, as the others came up. He looked aft, expecting to see a sailor on watch at the wheel, but there was none. On each side of him he could make out the bulky shapes of the longboats lashed to the deck. When all ten men were on deck he hesitated a moment more. Where was the sailor on watch? He was probably asleep, but if not he had to be silenced before he could give the alarm. Mack decided there was no time to worry about that. He had to proceed. The captain's cabin was aft. Mack stood up and waved his men to follow him.

The silent night was cracked by the explosion of a gun. Another shot rang out, then a volley. All around Mack the men fell. Then something hit the back of his leg, below the knee, like a kick from a horse, hurting like the devil, and he went down.

*

Lizzie was lying on the floor of her cabin when the shooting started. Jay had punched and kicked her repeatedly, only stopping when she collapsed. She was still lying where he had left her.

She had wanted to run and warn Mack McAsh, but for a long

time she could not summon the strength to get to her feet. Jay had punched her in the stomach so many times that the pain forced her to lie still. She knew Mack's insurrection was doomed, but she could do nothing about it.

When she heard the guns she tried again. She rolled on to her front, pulled her knees up beneath her, and pushed up with her hands. In that position she crawled to the bed and levered herself upright. She was in agony but she had to see what had happened. She made the three steps to the doorway in a rush, then leaned on the wall and opened the door.

A cloud of gunsmoke was blowing away over the starboard bow. Jay, the captain, the bosun, and two sailors stood by the boats holding pistols. Around the hatch ten or eleven prisoners were kneeling or lying flat, some wounded or dead, others with their arms raised in surrender. Lizzie sought anxiously for McAsh and found him, clutching his leg but moving, obviously injured but alive.

It had failed, Lizzie thought; it had all been for nothing. The torture and the rape would go on, and Peg Knapp's fragile childhood would be brutally violated by Silas Bone.

Just as she was thinking that, Bone's cabin door opened.

None of the men around the hatch saw him.

The gunfire had obviously awakened him from his drunken sleep. He staggered across the after deck, leaned over the rail, and vomited. Then, with a slow inevitability that was gruesome, he lost his balance and slipped over the rail.

He made no sound: he must have been choked with vomit and unable to cry out. The splash he made falling into the water was indistinguishable from the background noise of the sea slapping the sides of the ship. Lizzie looked at the men on the foredeck: the crew were making the convicts lie flat, ready to be chained up again, and nobody had seen Bone.

Lizzie knew that if she gave the alarm now Bone might be saved. And if she remained silent, Peg would be saved.

After a long moment she took a step backwards and closed the cabin door.

36

Lizzie was forced to watch the flogging.

She could hardly stay upright, Jay had beaten her so badly, but he would not let her stay in the cabin. "You caused this, with your female meddling, and you'll damn well look at the consequences, you interfering witch," he raved. She knew he would beat her again if she tried to disobey him; so she dressed and did her hair and staggered out on deck.

The sun was up and the ship was bowling along in front of a stiff breeze. The bosun had the wheel, and the captain and the rest of the crew were assembled on the quarterdeck. Lizzie leaned on the mizzenmast for support and watched.

Mack was brought up from below, unchained and stripped to his breeches. His broad back had once rippled with strength, she recalled; now his skin hung loosely and there was an unhealthy yellowish tinge. He had a crude bandage around the calf of his left leg and he was limping heavily.

Two sailors held his arms and marched him to the mainmast. They lifted his hands over his head and lashed his wrists to the mast. Then they stepped back.

Captain Parridge said: "Forward, Mister Bosun."

The bosun had in his hand a cat o' nine tails, the long-handled whip with nine thongs of hardened leather. The thongs were knotted several times, embedded with sharp stones, and tipped with wire to draw blood. He drew them through his hands

experimentally.

Lizzie shuddered.

The captain said: "One hundred lashes, Mister Bosun."

Several crew members gasped. Lizzie had heard of men being given twelve and twenty-five lashes, and even fifty in extreme cases, but a hundred was unheard-of.

The bosun measured his distance from Mack's naked back.

Lizzie shouted: "McAsh!"

Everyone froze.

"Silas Bone is dead!" she called.

The crew stared at her in silence.

"He fell overboard while puking drunk," she said. "He won't harm any more children."

Mack lifted his head. "He's in a worse place than I am, then," he said. "His body is at the bottom of the ocean, and his soul is in hell."

Some of the sailors crossed themselves fearfully.

The bosun turned a quarter-circle, drew back the whip, and extended his right arm to its full length. Then he delivered the first stroke, spinning on his left foot to add momentum to the lash. The whip whistled through the air and landed with a sharp crack. Mack's body jerked involuntarily and his gasp was heard all over the deck.

"One," said the captain.

The bosun drew back the whip, revealing angry red weals across Mack's skin. Unhurriedly, he turned a quarter-circle away

again, stretched his arm back, breathed in, and swung again with all his might.

"Two."

After the sixth stroke, droplets of blood began to speckle the skin of Mack's back. The seventh enlarged them, and soon they were open cuts. On the tenth stroke Mack cried out, and on the eleventh he screamed.

After twenty strokes there was nothing to be seen on his back but blood, and it was soaking his breeches and running down his bare legs. He had lost the strength to writhe, but he made ghastly groaning noises continuously.

After fifty strokes the bosun was tired, and handed the whip over to another sailor. The flogging recommenced with renewed vigour. Lizzie had never been so sickened. Mack's back looked like something in a butcher's shop, raw meat with the tendons and bones showing whitely, yet the flogging went on. She prayed for him to pass out, but he still groaned or gasped with every slow stroke. Blood pooled on the deck around his feet, and grisly fragments of flesh and skin flew off the tails of the whip as the flogger swung it back through the air. The sun rose higher and the ship sailed on as the flogging went on interminably. Jay was pale and sweating, and even the crew looked disgusted.

At last the captain said: "One hundred. Dismiss."

A sailor untied the rope that bound Mack to the mast. He staggered a couple of steps then fell to the deck.

Lizzie looked at her husband and saw horror in his eyes.

At first she thought he was reacting to the flogging, but he said: "What happened to you?"

Following the direction of his gaze she looked down at the front of her dress and saw a huge bloodstain on the front. She felt frightened and confused, thinking that it must be Mack's blood, but unable to see how it could have got on her. Then she realised it was her own. After a moment understanding dawned on her, and she understood where it was coming from.

She felt sad and bitter. She looked back up at her husband. "It seems I'm no longer pregnant," she said to him. "You have killed our child."

Part IV
Virginia, 1768-1769

37

Peg had decided that she wanted to have a little store.

She remembered playing shop when her mother was alive. In those days, when her father had been working, they had had a dining-room with a pine table and six chairs. Peg would lay out her wares on the table: a comb, a handkerchief, a stale pastry, a clay pipe, an old newspaper and a slice of cheese. Then her parents would come in, admire the goods, ask the prices, and make a selection.

Lying on her back, staring up at the grating in the ceiling, she escaped from the depressing grip of unrelieved tedium and misery by imagining that she had a real store, with shelves and a counter and sacks of goods on the floor. It would be a good way to live, she thought: you could see the money coming in all day.

She was roused from her daydream by an excited cry from up on deck:

"Soundings at thirty-five fathoms, captain--sand and reeds!"

A cheer went up from the crew, and a moment later the prisoners joined in.

Peg turned to Mack, lying next to her. "What's a fathom?" she said.

"Six feet of water," he smiled. "It means we're approaching land!"

"At last," she said.

The second half of the voyage had been better than the first. The death of Silas Bone removed the worst brute from the crew--and perhaps the prisoners' revolt, though it failed, had signalled to the rest of them that they had been too harsh. Whatever the reason, there had been more fresh water for them to drink, the sick had been taken up on deck for air, and the prisoners had been made to scrub out their hold with vinegar once a week.

After the flogging Peg had been allowed to bathe Mack's back in sea-water, and spread it with lard given to her by Mrs Jamisson. Then the prisoners had taken turns staying awake all night, one on either side of Mack, to keep the rats from eating his shredded flesh before it healed.

Now, three weeks later, the wounds had closed and he could sleep on his back, although it was still puffy and red, and of course it would always be scarred. Peg wondered if Mack's mind was scarred too. She saw a difference in him. He had always been an optimist, had believed that people could be free if they really wanted to; but now there was a grim pessimism in his outlook.

However, he joined in the general jubilation at the news that they were approaching land. When the first sounding was taken it seemed to be about midday. A couple of hours later they drew eighteen fathoms and white sand. Next time it was thirteen fathoms and shells; and then, towards the end of the afternoon, the prisoners heard the cry: "Land ho!"

Peg wished she could go on deck. This is America, she thought. I've crossed the world to the far side, and I'm still alive; I wish I could see America.

Not all of those who had left England would see the new world. One hundred and eleven prisoners had boarded at Wapping, but thirty-seven had died in the last six weeks. Of the seventy-four left none were in good health, and several were gravely ill. The extra rations of water, and the cleaning of the hold with vinegar, had reduced the slaughter from intestinal disorders, but as the voyage wore on the prisoners suffered new illnesses, scurvy and the ague, and as always the oldest and youngest were most liable to die.

But Peg had survived, with Mack's help. His determination to protect her was a mystery impossible to comprehend. Sometimes she wondered if he might be an angel from heaven, come down to earth disguised as a Scottish coal miner with light-green eyes; but a real angel would have saved Mad Barney and Sally Deights, and stopped the storm that had so terrified them all. Peg no longer believed in angels or heaven. She had when she was younger and had a mother and a father, but now she was older and knew better. The nearest thing to angels, in real life, was people like Mack McAsh and Lizzie Jamisson, who were brave and kind most of the time, helped others when they could, and fell into despair when they could not.

That night the *Rosebud* anchored in relatively calm waters, and the seamen who brought the prisoners' food told them they

were off Cape Henry, near the town of Hampton in Virginia. Next day the ship remained at anchor, and someone must have gone ashore for supplies, because at night a mouth-watering smell of fresh meat roasting came from the galley, torturing the prisoners who got cold salt pork as always.

"What happens when we get to Virginia?" Peg asked Mack.

"We'll be sold, and have to work for whoever buys us," he said.

"Just like slaves?"

"Aye, just like slaves, but only for seven years."

"Seven years," Peg said thoughtfully. She would be grown-up by the end of it. "Who will buy us?"

"Farmers, planters, housewives...anyone who needs workers and wants them cheap."

"Who gets the money?"

"Sir George Jamisson."

A dreadful thought struck her. "Will we be together?"

Mack shook his head. "Not much chance of that, Peg."

Peg was devastated. It had not occurred to her that she might lose Mack. She had been longing for the end of the voyage, so she could get out of this hole and breathe again, but now instead she started to dread it.

I won't die, she thought. I won't cry, and I won't die.

They weighed anchor the following morning. Mack always asked the sailors where they were. On the first day they made the mouth of the Rapahannock river. Contrary winds kept them

there for two wasted days, then they went upriver.

Exercise periods on deck continued intermittently, and it was as the ship tacked up the river that Peg got her first sight of America. Thick woods and cultivated fields lined both banks, she saw as she went through the familiar ritual of dancing to the bosun's pipe. At intervals there would be a jetty, a cleared stretch of bank, and a lawn rising up to a grand house. Here and there around the jetties she noticed the huge barrels known as hogsheads, used for transporting tobacco: she had watched them being unloaded from ships in the port of London, and now it struck her as amazing that every one she had ever seen had survived the hazardous and violent transatlantic journey to get there from here. The people in the fields included a lot of negroes, many more than in London. The horses and dogs looked the same as any others, but the birds perching on the ship's rail were unfamiliar breeds, she noticed. There were lots of other vessels on the river, some merchantmen like the *Rosebud*, a man-of-war of the British Navy, and fleets of smaller craft.

That brief survey was all she saw for the next four days, and she hugged it to herself like a treasured picture as she lay in the hold: the sunshine, the people walking around in the fresh air, the woods and the lawns and the houses--it was all painfully desirable. Perhaps she would be sold along with Mack after all.

At last they anchored off Fredericksburg, their destination, seven weeks after leaving London.

That night the convicts got cooked food: a broth of fresh

pork with Indian corn and potatoes in it, a slab of new bread, and a quart of ale. The unaccustomed rich food and strong ale made Peg feel dizzy and sick all night. The following morning they were brought up on deck in groups of ten. Seen from the ship, Fredericksburg did not look like a thriving port, Peg thought. It was just a scatter of houses along the riverside, with cultivated fields coming right up to the buildings, and chickens and sheep foraging in the muddy street.

The prisoners were given soap and made to wash, and a barber shaved the men and cut their hair. Those whose clothes were so ragged as to be indecent were given replacement garments which they recognised as having been taken from the convicts who had died on the voyage. Peg got a blue wool dress that had belonged to poor Sally Deights: she washed it with river water and soap. The captain made a list of the surviving prisoners and asked each one what his trade had been at home. Those who had been casual labourers or, like Peg, had never earned an honest living were encouraged to exaggerate or invent something. Peg was put down as a dressmaker's apprentice. She realised that all this was a belated effort to make them look attractive to buyers.

That afternoon two men were brought down into the hold to inspect them. They were an odd-looking pair: one wore the coat of a British soldier over homespun breeches, the other a once-fashionable yellow waistcoat with crudely-sewn buckskin trousers. Despite their odd clothes they looked well-fed, and had the red noses of men who could afford all the liquor they wanted to

drink. One of the crew whispered to Mack that they were "Soul Drivers". Peg later found out what this meant: they would buy groups of convicts, indentured servants and slaves and herd them up-country like sheep, to sell them to remote farmers and mountain men. However, either they did not like the look of the *Rosebud's* cargo or--more likely--they offered too low a price, for they went away without buying anyone.

That night there was another good meal. Peg ate it more slowly, and slept soundly. In the morning she noticed that everyone was looking better: there was a little colour in their cheeks, and they were able to smile. Throughout the voyage they had been fed only once a day, but today they got breakfast: porridge and molasses and a ration of rum-and-water.

Consequently, despite the uncertain future that faced them, it was a cheerful group that mounted the ladder out of the hold and hobbled, still chained, on to the deck. There was more activity on the waterfront than Peg had previously noticed, with several small boats landing, numerous carts passing along the main street, and small knots of smartly-dressed people lounging around doing nothing in particular, as if it were a holiday.

The *Rosebud's* boat was alongside, and all the signs were that the convicts were to be landed. The captain appeared with his list and began to call out names. The first to go were the strong young men, including Mack and Lennox. Even if they were sold to different buyers, Peg thought they might finish up not too many miles apart: Fredericksburg was a small town, and she

had high hopes. But what sort of person would buy her? Perhaps a kindly housewife who wanted kitchen help, and would teach her to bake bread and sew shirts. But it might be someone like Silas Bone. She shuddered with horror.

Peg went on shore in the last boatload an hour later. It was good to put her feet on solid ground again, although it was odd not to have to adjust her walk to the movement of a ship on the water. As she hobbled down the unpaved main street in her chains she stared about her, looking at America. The town centre had a church, a town hall, a market house and a gallows. Brick and wood houses stood widely spaced along either side of the road. Would she be living in one of them? There were no side streets, just fields.

However, this little town was thronged with people, horses, carts and carriages, and Peg guessed they must have come from the countryside all around. The women's new bonnets and ribbons and spotless lace, and the polished boots and clean gloves of the men, indicated that this was some kind of special day, and she overheard several people talking of horse races and betting odds. The townspeople looked at the convicts with mild curiosity, the way they might have watched a horse canter along the street, as if this was a sight they had seen before but which continued to interest them. Peg looked at every fine lady and wealthy gentleman and wondered anxiously whether they would be the ones to buy her.

The town petered out after half a mile. In a big field

beside the river tents had been erected and a straight racecourse laid out. There were vendors selling beer and rum, bananas and cakes and hot sausages. Rows of stalls offered spades and axes, gunpowder and lead for ammunition, saddles and harness, tin cookware and cheap pottery. There were acrobats and fortune tellers and rope dancers. Peg saw a puppet show and longed to stop and watch it, but of course she could not. Instead the convicts were marched into the largest tent of all. There in the shade several hundred people were for sale: black slaves in their shapeless, drab, home-made clothes; ragged convicts in irons; and the penniless but desperately respectable indentured servants, people who had sold five years of their lives to raise the transatlantic fare.

Peg could not see Mack anywhere. Surely he could not have been sold already? She had to know where he had gone!

They were herded into pens like cattle. The buyers, who were presumably planters and farmers, strolled up and down the tent looking them over. Peg felt resentful of the way they gawked, but she was so glad to be out of the ship's hold that she would have put up with a lot worse than stares. Captain Parridge stood in front of the convicts, acting as a hawker. He was not too dour to be a good salesman, Peg thought--he would not have lasted a day as a London barrow-boy.

Peg asked Cora what had happened to Mack, but no one knew. She tried to ask Captain Parridge, but he ignored her.

A fat farmer with a smug air approached Parridge and said:

"I don't suppose you've got a carpenter?"

Parridge pointed at a convict called Lightning Jem. "Mr Jeremiah here is a sawyer." Peg knew that in fact Jem was a burglar who had never sawed through anything but locked doors.

But Captain Parridge's lie did not do him any good. "Anyone can saw," said the farmer. "I want a man as can build a house."

"How about a tailor?" said Parridge. "I've got two very good ones."

"What do I want with a tailor, when I've got a wife?" said the farmer, and he moved on.

Business was slow all morning. Most people were more interested in the horse racing, and Peg could hear the roar of the crowd as the races began and ended and money was won and lost. In the adjoining pens, young men with craft skills were sold for twelve or thirteen pounds each: builders, a furniture maker, two leather-workers who said they could make harness, a gunsmith and a boat builder. Rather surprisingly a dancing-master was snapped up quickly for eleven pounds. There was a surplus of schoolteachers, clerks, labourers and housemaids. Nobody wanted a dressmaker's apprentice. It all seemed so unreal, that people could be bought and sold, or left on the shelf, just like the dusty goods on the shelves of a street-corner chandler's shop in London.

Peg caught the eye of a black girl her own age in the next pen. "What happens if no one buys us?" she said. "Do you know?"

"Everyone gets bought in the end," the other girl said in

a slow drawl. "The masters reduce the price in the afternoon. I've been here before."

Her name was Daisy, and she had been bought and sold three times in the last two years, always by bankrupt tobacco planters, she said. She was the daughter of slaves and had been sold away from her parents at the age of eleven. "That's how old I was when my parents died," Peg said.

"How did you live, with no mother or father and no master to feed you?"

"I never went hungry," Peg said proudly. "I stole things--hats and wigs and watches--and sold them."

The girl's hand went to her mouth in a pantomime of shock. "Stealing's wrong," she said.

Peg was stung. "I'd rather be a thief than a slave," she said. She turned away.

Daisy just did not understand, she thought. She had had it drummed into her that it was wicked to steal, but all her life she had been fed and clothed by the people who owned her--she had never lived on the streets of a city. She had probably never seen a city.

Peg felt sorry she had so quickly become bad friends with Daisy. It was a lesson to remember, she decided: colonials don't necessarily think the same way Londoners do. But I'm going to become a colonial now, at least for seven years.

A wealthy-looking middle-aged man came up and stared at Cora through his eyeglasses. "Can this one do laundry?" he said to

Captain Parridge. "I need a laundress."

Cora batted her eyelids at him and said: "I can do anything you like."

The man looked at her speculatively. "How much, Captain?" he said.

"A healthy young girl like that, ten pounds, English, or the equivalent in tobacco."

An ugly, well-dressed woman came up and took the buyer's arm in a proprietorial way: his wife, Peg assumed.

The man said: "This young woman is a laundress, my dear."

The wife gave Cora a hard look. "Forget it," she said to her husband, and marched him away.

There was a lull in the early afternoon while the racegoers ate their picnic dinners. The convicts were given small beer and dark, coarse bread. After dinner business was brisker. Cora was bought for nine pounds by a couple of older women who looked like sisters: they probably thought she would liven up their household, Peg thought, but they might have bitten off more than they could chew. Although it was hardly a surprise, Peg felt shocked. Mack was nowhere to be seen and now Cora was leaving her. Was she going to end up friendless again? While the sisters were negotiating Cora's price, Peg found out that they lived here in Fredericksburg and they were both called Miss Pennyweather. She memorised the name in the hope that she might somehow stay in touch.

Cora said Goodbye and hugged Peg hard, then went off to

start a new life.

The footmen and the schoolteachers and the housemaids were sold in ones and twos as the afternoon cooled into evening. Peg scrutinised at the buyers: wealthy planters with vast households, young couples wanting cheap servants, and farmers needing field hands. She examined their faces, anxiously trying to guess whether they were kindly or cruel, generous or mean, decent or perverted. A pretty young woman in an expensive dress looked at her for a long time, and Peg's hopes lifted high, but the woman went away without speaking, and Peg was plunged into uncertainty and apprehension again.

The races ended at sundown. The customers began to drift away and the stallholders started to pack up. Peg counted twelve left out of the *Rosebud's* cargo: six feeble men in their fifties, three old women, a girl and a boy both about ten years old, and herself. She wondered how they could be sold when all the customers were leaving. Then the Soul Drivers reappeared.

With a sinking heart, Peg realised that her destiny would not be decided today, after all: instead she would be driven up-country and sold later. But where was Mack?

The two oddly-dressed men who had boarded the *Rosebud* were not the only ones who came at the end of the day to pick up bargains. There were half-a-dozen other disreputable-looking types making low offers for the remaining unsalable individuals. However, it was the original two who finally bought Peg and the eleven others for a total of twenty-five pounds--just over two

pounds each.

The same two bought the remaining slaves from the next pen-- a similar assortment of the old and the very young, including Daisy. They rounded up their purchases and drove them, just like cattle, out of the field and on to the road. Peg and the convicts still had their leg-irons on. The slaves were not chained, just roped together, and Peg guessed they were less likely to run away, perhaps because it would more difficult for them to pass as free.

They reached the dusty road and turned west, away from the town, walking towards the setting sun, their irons clanking. Peg realised she would probably never see Mack McAsh again. She fought back the tears. *I won't cry*, she thought. *I won't cry, and I won't die.*

38

Lizzie and Jay were taken upriver from Fredericksburg in a sailing barge, with their chests of linen and china, Jay's horses and wine, and Lizzie's clothes in trunks. Lizzie gazed, fascinated, at the countryside on either bank. There were few towns or villages: Virginia was divided up into plantations and farmsteads. Every mile or so there would be a break in the vegetation which revealed a broad green lawn leading up to an elegant house with shady verandas.

She was determined to be hopeful and forget the past. For a while, on the *Rosebud*, she had wanted to kill Jay. But then what would she do? She was alone in a new country and she had to make the best of it. She told herself that she was not the first woman to be beaten up by her husband, nor the first to have a miscarriage. She would get over both. She would make the best of it.

Jay had not made love to her since the convicts' failed revolt. She hoped it was because he was feeling guilty. If he had embraced her too soon she might have refused him, as a punishment. But several weeks had gone by and now she was aching for affection. When they were in their new house, and the floor stayed still instead of rocking up and down all night, things would go back to normal, she thought.

She recalled how she had dreamed of Virginia. Her visions had been nothing like the real thing. She could never have

pictured these lush fields of high green tobacco plants, swarming with black-skinned slaves working under the hot sun. How would life here match up to her hopes? She imagined an informal, free-and-easy life, a society in which she could wear loose clothes and joke with workmen and ride a horse astride like a man. She could hardly wait.

Jay would be away from home a lot, of course, and she would have to run the estate. She was looking forward to the challenge. She was planning to learn everything about tobacco cultivation. There were sure to be neighbours who would help. An overseer had been running the plantation for years--not very well, by all accounts. She wondered what he was like.

The barge eased around a bend in the river and a deck-hand lowered its square sail. Lizzie saw a jetty and a group of men with ropes. As the boat eased up to the dock, a house came into view.

"This must be it," said Jay.

Lizzie stared at her new home.

It was not like the other big houses they had passed. Most of them were wood-frame buildings painted white or pastel pink, with tall white columns and shutters, surrounded by shade trees and rolled lawns. This looked more like a Scottish castle: it was built of stone, with round turrets and a tower and rather small windows.

It seemed a bit bleak, but Lizzie suspended judgement until she could get a closer look, and she waited impatiently for the

barge to be tied up at the jetty.

As soon as she could she jumped ashore. Leaving Jay to supervise the unloading, she hurried up the dirt road that ran from the jetty to the imposing front of the house. She almost expected to see a drawbridge. As she came closer she realised the house had a neglected air. There were some broken windows, a chimney leaned perilously, and the paint was peeling off the woodwork. She would get a team of men and women working on it tomorrow, she decided. They would clean and repair and redecorate the place from top to bottom.

The front door was either stuck or locked. She went around the side. The windows were closed tight and the blinds were drawn. She and Jay were expected, of course, but the staff had no way of knowing when they would arrive: the voyage could take anything up to three months.

At the back of the house was a yard and several outbuildings. Only one of them was in use: a hammering noise and a plume of smoke indicated that it was a smithy. As she looked around, a fat-bellied white man in a straw hat came out of the building, wiping sweat from his face with a rag. He started in surprise when he saw her, then said: "Good day to you, miss."

"I'm Mrs Jamisson," she said.

"Oh! Good heavens!" He took off his hat. "Bill Sowerby, overseer, at your service, madam." He recovered his composure enough to bow.

"The house looks run-down," Lizzie said.

"It hasn't been lived in for years."

"It needs a good clean."

"Yes. I would have organised that, but I didn't know just when you would get here, you see."

You could have had the house cleaned anyway, Lizzie thought. She said: "Let's open the doors and go in, shall we?"

"Yes, indeed. I don't have the keys about me, but I'll send for them. It won't take ten minutes."

Lizzie smothered an impatient sigh. Sowerby had all the marks of a muddler. "Send, then," she said.

"Very good, madam. Cass!"

A black man emerged from the smithy. He was tall and muscular, but he spoke deferentially. "Yes, master."

"Go to my house and fetch the house keys from the hook in the kitchen."

"Yes, master. Should Timmy go, so I can carry on making these horseshoes?"

"Yes, yes, send Timmy."

A lad of about sixteen came out of the smithy at a run and shot across the lawn.

Lizzie continued around the outside of the house, with Sowerby in tow. Some of the windows did not have blinds and she was able to look inside. The rooms were dark and dusty, the furniture shrouded in sheets. "Have you got any paint?" she said.

"Paint, madam? I don't think so." He sounded mystified.

"We're going to need a great deal of it," she said.

They met up with Jay on the far side of the house, and Lizzie introduced Sowerby. "The house needs a lot of work," Lizzie said. "It hasn't been cleaned for years."

"Well, you'll have plenty of workers to help you," Jay said. "You can take your pick of the slaves."

"What the deuce is that?" said Sowerby.

Lizzie and Jay followed his gaze. Across the lawn, emerging from the woodland on a dirt road, was a long line of ragged men marching two by two. They headed toward the house.

"Who are they?" said Lizzie.

Jay looked pleased with himself. "More slaves," he said. "They're convicts from the *Rosebud*. I picked out the youngest and strongest men, and had them sent here."

Lizzie felt strangely shocked. She had thought she would never see those men again. She wondered if McAsh was among them.

"Just what we need," said Sowerby. "Extra hands in time for the harvest. If you'll excuse me, madam, sir, I'll go and deal with them." He set off across the lawn to meet them.

Lizzie was struck by a thought. "What about paying for them?" she said to Jay.

"I'm sure my father wouldn't ask me to pay him," Jay said smugly.

The convicts were still wearing their fetters, Lizzie saw as they came nearer. In fact some of them were bleeding at the ankles where the irons chafed as they marched. She recognised

McAsh. She wondered what had happened to the little girl, Peg. Then she saw Sidney Lennox.

"Oh, no," she said. "Not Lennox--we don't want him!"

"On the contrary," Jay said in an offended tone. "I plan to make him overseer."

39

Mack stared across the lawn at Lizzie Jamisson, standing so proudly in front of the huge, ugly house. She looked cool and beautiful. Mack was tired and thirsty and bleeding, and at that moment he would have killed her if he could.

The convicts were marched behind the house to the workshop, where a blacksmith struck off their chains. Mack felt a sense of liberation, even though he was not really free. This was the first time since the night of the coal-heavers' riot that he had not been either imprisoned or chained up or both. I could just run away, down to the river, he thought, and I could jump in and swim across and make a bid for freedom. But where would I go?

The leg-irons were thrown into a car--to be returned, Mack presumed, to the *Rosebud*. He hoped he would never see them again. When all the convicts had been unfettered, a middle-aged negro with grey hair said: "Everyone follow me and I'll take you to your quarters."

The plantation looked beautiful in the cool of the evening. They walked along a footpath that wound between fields of green wheat, tall Indian corn growing out of hillocks, and the fragrant tobacco plant, and pastures and woodland where cattle grazed. Men and women were at work in every field, weeding between the rows and picking grubs off the tobacco leaves.

Mack drew level with the grey-haired slave who was leading them. "I'm Malachi McAsh, they call me Mack."

The man shook hands. "I'm Kobe." He pronounced it to rhyme with Toby. "Kobe Tambala."

"I suppose this place belongs to Jay Jamisson," Mack said.

"Do you know him?" Kobe said. "He's new to us."

"I know him too damn well," said Mack. "I've known him all my life. He's a jackal, eating the flesh of living human beings." Kobe gave him a sceptical look, and Mack added: "You'll see what I mean, all too soon."

"What about the wife?"

"Not as bad as him. She lives off the blood of her fellow creatures, as they all do, but if she actually sees one bleeding she won't turn away."

"You've been flogged, I guess," the man said.

Mack flushed red. The pain of the flogging had ended, eventually, but the damage to his self-respect was slower to heal, and he still felt the humiliation. Surely people could not tell just by looking at his face? "What are you talking about?" he said resentfully.

"No offence," Kobe said hastily. "It's just that folks who talk the way you do have generally been flogged, I've observed. Sorry I mentioned it."

Mack forced himself to be friendly. "I used to be a coal miner, back at home."

"Coal? I've heard of it. A rock that burns better than wood, is that right?"

"Yes. Trouble is, you have to go deep underground to find

it."

"My people were farmers in Africa. My father had a big spread, bigger than this place. I was captured when I was seventeen years old."

Mack was surprised: he had never thought of slaves as coming from rich families. "What kind of farm?"

"Mixed, like this--cattle, wheat--but no tobacco. We have a root called the yam that we grow. Never seen it here, though."

Mack said: "There was a child on the boat with me, a girl called Peg Knapp. Is there any way of finding out who bought her?"

Kobe gave a humourless laugh. "Everybody's trying to find someone they were sold apart from. People ask around all the time. When slaves meet up, on the road or in the woods, that's all they talk about."

"Peg Knapp," Mack repeated. "She's only thirteen. She doesn't have a mother or father."

"You're a slave, now, Mack. Nobody has a mother or father."

They arrived at a muddy compound with a dozen or so small wood cabins. Several elderly black women were cooking over open fires, and a few naked children played in the dirt. The cabins were crudely built with rough-hewn planks, and their shuttered windows had no glass.

As they looked around, one of the convicts said in a tone of outrage: "Do we have to live with the blackies?"

Mack laughed. After seven weeks in the hold of the *Rosebud*

it was a miracle that any of them could complain about their accommodation.

Kobe said: "White and black live in separate cabins. There's no rule about it, but it generally works out that way." He paused, then went on: "Before you settle in, there's one thing you need to know, so pay attention. You don't have chains on now, and some of you are already figuring how far you can get by sunup. If you run away and get caught, your sentence will be extended--maybe doubled. We got people here run away so many times they won't be free until they're a hundred years old. I'm not saying don't do it. I just want you to know what you're risking." He looked at the cabins. "Now, these houses sleep six people, and the ones at the far end are empty. I guess you can decide among yourselves who goes where. Oh--which of you is Sidney Lennox?"

Lennox stepped forward. "That's me."

"You're not going to be living here. You come with me."

"Why?" said Lennox apprehensively.

"You'll find out."

*

Mack saw Lizzie again early the following day. After a breakfast of a boiled corn dish called hominy the convicts and the slaves were marched across the fields to where the tobacco plants were ready to harvest. On the way, with the sun already getting warm, he saw her on horseback, trotting along the footpath beside the river, wearing a loose linen dress and a big hat to shade her

face.

The tobacco plants stood in neat rows about three feet apart. They were about as tall as Mack, each with a dozen or so broad green leaves. The workers were divided into three groups. The first were given sharp knives and set to cutting down the ripe plants. The next group went into a field that had been cut the previous day. The plants lay on the ground, their big leaves wilted after a day drying in the sun. The hands were told to split the stalks of the cut plants and spear them on long wooden spikes. The third group, which included Mack, had the job of carrying the loaded spikes across the fields to the tobacco house, where they were hung from the high ceiling to cure in the air.

Soon after they began work Sidney Lennox arrived, wearing new clothes, accompanied by a fat-bellied, lazy-eyed man who seemed to be teaching him the rudiments of tobacco cultivation. The fat man carried a whip, and Mack noticed that the black slaves were careful not to look at him. One of them whispered that he was the overseer, Bill Sowerby.

It was a long, hot day. The newcomers were unable to work as hard as the others. Mack found himself constantly overtaken by women and children. He realised he had been weakened by disease, malnutrition and inactivity while in jail and crossing the ocean.

At sundown, feeling exhausted, they left the fields; but instead of returning to their cabins they were marched to the

tobacco house, now lit up by dozens of candles. There they worked on, stripping the leaves from cured plants, removing the thick central spine, and pressing the leaves into bundles. As the night wore on, some of the children and old women fell asleep at their work, and an elaborate warning system came into play, whereby the stronger ones covered for the weak, and woke them when a supervisor approached.

It must have been past midnight, Mack guessed, when at last the candles were snuffed and the hands were allowed to return to their cabins and lie down on their wooden bunks. Mack fell asleep immediately, and it seemed only seconds later that he was being shaken awake to go back to work in the dawn light.

*

Mack knew he had to do all he could to avoid Lennox's notice. He was determined to give the man no reason to even look at him. Following the example of the slaves, he took care never to meet the overseer's eye. He and the other new hands quickly learned the slaves' way of moving, always slow but never still, conserving energy without ever stopping work. Lennox and the other supervisors used the whip constantly but the hands always kept their shirts on, even at high noon, and although it was humiliating to be lashed like a beast of burden, the pain was no more than a momentary sting, nothing by comparison with the cat o' nine tails.

Despite his resolution he had his first confrontation with Lennox within a week.

It was the middle of the day, and they were harvesting tobacco again. Lennox was walking up and down the rows of plants, growling abuse and hurrying the slower workers with a kick or a touch of the whip. The sun was hot and everyone was longing for the bell that would release them to sit in the shade of the trees at the edge of the field and drink from the stream.

Mack was working alongside a slave boy of about sixteen years called Cyrus. He was tall and thin, and Mack's mother would have said he had outgrown his strength. As the sun rose higher Cyrus began to perspire heavily and his breathing became ragged, and Mack wondered if he would make it to dinnertime.

The Jamissons appeared, on horseback, touring their estate, Jay sweating in a blue wool coat, Lizzie looking relaxed under a parasol. Lennox hurried over to them and bowed, becoming servile as he always did with his superiors. Mack watched out of the corner of his eye as he continued to cut down the tobacco plants.

Suddenly Cyrus fell to the ground.

Mack dropped his knife and knelt beside the boy. He felt his forehead: he was simply overheated, it seemed, and he had fainted. Lennox came up. Without thinking, Mack said: "He'll be all right. He just needs a drink of water and a rest in the shade."

Lennox kicked the boy in the ribs with a heavily booted foot.

Cyrus's body jerked with the impact but his eyes did not

open.

Mack heard Lizzie Jamisson say: "Stop it, don't kick the child!"

"Lazy black devil, I'll teach him a lesson," Lennox said, and he drew back his foot to kick Cyrus again.

Mack reached out and grabbed Lennox's foot before the kick connected. Lennox lost his balance and flailed his arms. Mack tried to save him but he fell to the ground with a heavy crash.

All work stopped as everyone suddenly became silent and still.

"The boy has fainted," Mack said, still kneeling. "There's no point in kicking him." He knew he was wasting his breath.

Slowly, Lennox got to his feet.

Mack said: "I'm sorry, sir."

Lennox smashed the butt of the whip across Mack's face.

Mack fell sideways. He knew he could strangle Lennox with his bare hands, but it would be the same as committing suicide. He lay still. Lennox kicked him.

"Stop it!" Lizzie called in a commanding voice.

Jay said: "Don't interfere!" Lizzie began to protest, but Jay overrode her voice. "Come away," he insisted. "Carry on, Lennox."

"Yes, sir," said Lennox.

Mack heard the horses trot away.

Lennox kicked him again.

Mack curled up in a ball, covering his head and his

genitals, and suffered the kicks until Lennox was tired.

The bell rang for dinner time, but no one moved.

"Stand up," Lennox said to Mack.

Mack struggled to his feet, but he could not straighten up because of the pain in his stomach and ribs.

"Go and get your dinner, the rest of you," Lennox said. "You, McAsh, stay here."

Slowly the others drifted away to the shade of the trees.

Mack gradually straightened his body. Looking across the field, he saw Lizzie and Jay at the far side. They had reined in their horses and they appeared to be arguing.

After a while they rode off.

Mack stood in the middle of the field, under the noon sun. throughout the dinner hour.

Then, when they all came back, he started work again.

*

There was no work on Sunday. The newcomers lay exhausted in the shade all day. The others--mostly black slaves with a sprinkling of convicts--did repairs to their cabins, washed their clothes, or went into the woods and set traps for small game.

In the cool of the evening Mack found Kobe fishing at a bend in the river, using a home-made rod with a string line and a bent hatpin for a hook. Kobe gave him a friendly nod and Mack took that as an invitation to sit down on the grassy bank.

After a moment Kobe said: "I've been asking after your friend Peg Knapp."

"Have you learned anything?" Mack said eagerly.

"Last night some of us went over to visit with the folks at the Thumson place."

Colonel Thumson's plantation was the neighbouring estate, Mack knew. So that was where the blacks had disappeared to yesterday evening. It was news to Mack that slaves had a social life.

Kobe went on: "There's a young white woman called Cora, been bought by the Pennyweather sisters in Fredericksburg, she was on the same ship with you."

"Yes, I know her. Surely she wasn't at your party."

"No, but I got a message from her. She says Peg wasn't bought by anyone around here, but sold to soul drivers and taken up country."

Mack's heart sank. This was bad news. "Does anyone know where she went?"

Kobe shook his head. "Nobody ever hears what happens to people who get taken by the soul drivers."

Mack's groaned. Poor Peg. What on earth would become of her now?

He brooded for a while, then said: "Is it really so difficult to run away?"

"It is if you're stupid," Kobe said immediately. "And most of these people are stupid, that's how come they were captured in the first place."

"And if you're not?"

"It still isn't easy. As soon as you run away, the master puts an advertisement in the newspaper, describing you. The papers are full of these notices."

"But you could keep out of sight."

"The runaway's problem is, he has to eat. If he stays within the boundaries of the colonies, that means he has to get a job, and anyone who's likely to employ him has probably read about him already."

Mack grunted. "I see."

Kobe said: "It's not surprising. All these plantations are worked by slaves of one kind or another: if they didn't have a good system for catching runaways, the planters would have starved long ago."

"But you said *if he stays within the colonies.*"

"Yes. West of here is the mountains, and on the other side of the mountains, there are no newspapers. Not many white people, either. No sheriffs, no judges, no hangmen."

"How big is the territory?"

Kobe shrugged. "Some say it stretches for hundreds of miles before you come to the sea again, but I never met anyone who really knew."

Mack felt excited. "Then surely a man could disappear there and never be found!"

"That's the truth. Also, he could be scalped by natives and killed by mountain lions. More likely he could starve to death."

"How do you know so much about it?"

"Before I came here I was slave to a pioneer farmer in the Monongahela Valley." Kobe smiled ruefully. "Pete Dilson was a tailor from Dublin, Ireland, and what he knew about farming could be written on a thimble. He didn't drain his land, couldn't doctor his cattle, didn't even know he was supposed to weed his rows of corn. And he didn't want to be told by a nigger, neither. There were a lot of pioneers like that. They break their backs for a few years turning a perfectly good piece of land into a useless patch of mud, then they quit."

"But some succeed."

"The ones who know what to do. The German farmers are the best: square fields, good fences, fat wives."

"German?" said Mack. "Is that a country, or a religion?"

"I never asked."

Mack was thoughtful. "West of here, you said. How far are the mountains?"

"About a hundred miles."

"So close!" said Mack.

"It's farther than it sounds," said Kobe.

*

The bell woke Mack at dawn on Monday morning. He was sleeping in the clothes he wore all day, homespun breeches and a loose smock. He went down to the river and plunged his head into the water, then returned to the compound and took a bowl of hominy from the old women. He sat on the ground and ate it quickly, using his fingers: no cutlery was provided for slaves. As he was