

Careenage

Being the confessions of Thomas Tewksbury,
also known as John Claybourne, pyrate.

A Novel

Brice Austin

Careenage, *n.* (a) The careening of a ship . . . the expense of this. (b) A careening place.

Careen, *v.* To turn (a ship) over on one side for cleaning, caulking or repairing. To clean, caulk, etc. (a ship so turned over).

Prologue

Of the Island. Feral donkeys. A Careenage of the Soul. "If this could but be Eternity."

Few will have knowledge of this place for it barely exists, lying somewhere among the Leeward Islands, surrounded by reefs which discourage ships from attempting to make landfall. It is small, perhaps ten miles in length, five in width, and volcanic. There is little to recommend it for settlement as the supply of fresh water is limited and the precipitous slopes of the interior ill-suited for cultivation on a large scale. Yet my wife Alice and I have lived here comfortably enough for years, a pair of regular Robinson Crusoes. And there *were* others before us, long ago, for in our wanderings we have sometimes stumbled upon ancient artifacts: crude tools and shards of broken pottery. Now, however, there are no inhabitants save ourselves and a flock of boisterous green parrots, and feral donkeys which wander the highlands foraging upon wild grass, braying their affection for (and sometime displeasure with) one another, the sound of which reverberates even above the almost continual crashing of waves against the rugged coast. Where did they come from, these donkeys? I cannot imagine that they are natives. Perhaps the Spanish brought them here long ago, during their early days of exploration and conquest? In any event, the animals have come to tolerate, perhaps even befriend me. They seem to understand that I mean them no harm, that I do not intend to kill them either for blood sport or food, that I have had quite enough of murder, be it of beasts or men.

Which brings me, in a rather roundabout way, to my purpose in writing this confession. For it is here, on a remote and unnamed island that I, a man who has sailed perhaps every league of ocean between Europe and Africa and the Americas, resolve to undertake what I have come to think of as a final careenage, that of my soul, to prepare it for the approaching voyage into the unknown, that "undiscovered country." In so doing, I hope to scrape away the barnacles of sin that have accumulated upon the hull of my spirit and replace any moral timbers which may have rotted out

along the way, having been compromised by the Teredo Worms of Life and Time, and make repairs with the caulk and oakum of Repentance. Though there is, of course, some question as to whether any of it will truly matter, whether a confession, however remorsefully undertaken, can make amends for a life of depravity. The Catholic, I am told, believes it possible and fervently so; however, I do not subscribe to that faith, having been indoctrinated at an early age into the ways of the Church of England. Still, I am determined to unburden myself, if for no other reason than to foster some hope within my breast that I may one day be reunited with my beloved Alice, who lived a life far more exemplary than mine and therefore likely already resides in Heaven, if such a place exists.

What would she make of my intention to author such a confession? I imagine she would argue against the need for it, convinced as she was that I am a good man, one who was forced into the service of villains and then only as their Surgeon, one who saved lives and alleviated suffering whenever he could. If, however, she had been made aware of everything I have done, she may have felt differently. On occasion, I would attempt to relate to her something of my life among slavers and pirates as we walked together along the crest of the island, which was our habit each morning while she was alive, but invariably she would forbid me to speak of it, not wishing to have me relive those terrible years. Instead, she would assure me that the blameless life I have led since is all that matters in the eyes of both the Law and God. Yet how could she possibly have known the mind of either the Admiralty or the Creator, what each might or might not be willing to forgive?

On one such bright morning, after one such aborted conversation, I remember her taking my hands in hers and calling my attention to the blue, endless sea below and the far-flung white clouds above, saying with a heartfelt sigh: "If this could but be Eternity, Thomas." Words which I took to mean she would have been content for us to live here forever, taking our walks, communing with our feral equine companions, and listening to the sound of breaking waves. As was proven shortly

thereafter by her untimely death, however, such an existence could not continue indefinitely; indeed, nothing in this world can. And all things considered, that is perhaps for the best.

Now that she is no longer here in the flesh, I wish I had been able to share with her all my “crimes against humanity,” as they were so described by the tribunal at Cape Coast Castle. I wish I had begun this confession earlier, and unburdened myself to her whether she wished it or not, rather than to some future audience which may never exist. I said as much to her spirit this morning after I had undertaken my daily pilgrimage to the island’s summit to visit her grave. It is a poor one, her grave, little more than a mound of rocks. At its head there is a simple wooden cross constructed of tree limbs lashed together with twine. Both grave and cross face England, that mother country to which she and I had aspired to return one day, though we both knew we dared not as it would likely have resulted in my being hanged. That may yet come to pass. But whether I die here one day of old age, alone with my donkeys, or strangled upon a rope at Execution Dock, is no longer of any consequence. In either case, I must eventually meet my Maker, and He alone will decide whether I can be forgiven, and if Alice and shall ever be together again.

All I can do, all I must do, I think, is tell my tale and invite others, whether they be human or Divine, to pass judgment upon me as they see fit.

The Slave Round

1701-1703

Chapter One

Of my Origins. Some Unfortunate Events. Mrs. Duffer's Bosom. The Execution of a Notorious Pirate, at Wapping. How I came to meet John Claybourne.

I was born Thomas Tewksbury in the year of Our Lord Sixteen Hundred and Eighty-Seven, in London. My father was a Fleet Street tavernkeeper with literary aspirations that were never fully realized, though he was, at least, the author of several broadsides, popular songs condemning while simultaneously glorifying the exploits of the most notorious criminals of the Age. From those compositions he made little, a few shillings at best, but they were sung in the streets by many and not just the rabble. Once upon a time, I knew most of them by heart but can now recollect only the opening verse of one of the most renowned, a ballad purportedly written (that being merely a device of course) by the so-called Pirate King, Henry Every.

Come all you brave Boys, whose courage is Bold.
Will you venture with me? I'll glut you with Gold!

Was that the seed from which my later life sprouted? Perhaps. Though I think it more likely my destiny was determined by certain unfortunate events. The first was my mother's death while giving birth to her seventh child, which perished along with her. Within a fortnight, my father had departed this earthly realm as well, taken by Fever or some said Grief, leaving his five living children to fend for themselves. James, the eldest, who by Custom and Law was to have inherited the tavern, discovered there were outstanding debts to be paid, and thus lost everything in the moment of having acquired it. An embittered man, he sailed for the Colonies, where many years later I encountered him in a way I shall in due course relate. Rachel married, albeit to a man of little heart or means. Sarah became a prostitute. George, the youngest, was sent to an orphanage and from there indentured to a cruel man who rented out boys as Chimney Sweeps. Was he able to survive seven years of that difficult and dangerous labor? The desire to know is chief among the reasons

why I have considered returning to England despite the risk incumbent in doing so, for all during our childhood I thought of myself as his protector. There is, however, only one means by which that wish might now be fulfilled: if someday my whereabouts should become known and I should be carried off forcibly to Newgate Prison, I might yet learn something of my younger brother's fate while waiting stolidly to face my own.

But let us continue with the enumeration of Unfortunate Events. After my father's passing, I was forced to leave the school in which he had enrolled me several years earlier, perhaps as a means of satisfying vicariously his desire to be a Man of Letters. I did have some promise in that regard, I think, at least after a fashion, the same fashion as my broadside-composing sire. I have no proof of it, however, save the recollection of having authored a poem directed at one of my female classmates, liberally employing the rhyme scheme of "trumpet" and "strumpet," for which I was roundly beaten by the headmaster, a not-at-all-uncommon occurrence. Neither was it unusual to be set upon by my fellow students, many of whom resented the fact that while I hailed from a family of modest standing was more accomplished than they, not only in the composition of bawdy poetry but in Maths and Sciences. Despite the torment I endured at their hands (and feet, and on one never-to-be-forgotten occasion, a carriage whip), I have often wondered what I might have achieved had I been afforded the opportunity to try and outlast their brutality, had I eventually gone on to attend University. That would have made for a very different life indeed! But my father died, and I was forced to withdraw from school, and my future became what it became.

It was Winter by then and I but fourteen. I began wandering the streets of London alone. I avoided my former home and my father's tavern as they reminded me too much of happier days, and I did not wish to become an object of pity. I have since come to recognize this as a terrible mistake, for it was Pity I sorely needed, and Charity. Together, they might have steered me back towards a respectable life. Instead, I began frequenting that part of the city surrounding the Cripple

Gate and wasted away to bones and skin. I have no doubt whatsoever that I would have perished during that bitter February had it not been for the kindness of a matronly woman, the unfortunately (though not altogether inaccurately) named Mistress Duffer. It was she who found me on a street corner, nearly frozen, and took me into her home, or at least one small part of it. For at the outset, she instructed me that I was to inhabit only the bedroom that had once belonged to her son, who happened to have been precisely my age when he perished in the Plague. She also warned me that I was never to give her husband any reason to suspect I was living there, as Mister Duffer's grief had taken quite a different path from her own, one which would suffer no reminder of the child he had so tragically lost. There I remained for several months until the worst of the weather had abated, eating scraps of food delivered to me by my benefactress, who seemed to profit emotionally from having the room occupied, if only by an orphaned waif. What I remember best about those days now is her bosom, how I was engulfed in it whenever she brought me sustenance. I suppose the affection she lavished upon me and which I tolerated as best I could, was the compensation she required for her kindness in nursing me back to health.

“My dear boy, my dear, dear Eden!” she would exclaim, calling me by her dead son's name, all the while smothering me with ample breasts. I endured both the delusion and her cleavage for the sake of the bread crusts she brought me, and cheese rinds, and bits of beef left over from her husband's table. I almost certainly owe my life to her but in some respect owe it to him as well, for had Mister Duffer not discovered us one day and banished me from his home, screaming at his wife that I was a ragamuffin who could not possibly take the place of their lost child, I might have stayed there indefinitely, ultimately perishing from mammary suffocation.

It was April by then and the weather fairer. I found myself on the street again but in better circumstances than before. I slept out in the open and was none the worse for it. However, the challenge of acquiring daily nourishment remained. Thus, out of necessity, I took to begging and

then thievery, eventually preferring the latter as it allowed me to assume a more active role in my survival. I pilfered baked goods from bakeries, nuts from nut women's barrows, sometimes even pickled fish from the trays which street vendors carried about on their heads. Those were petty crimes but crimes nonetheless, and one leads to another, becomes yet another step along the road to ruin such that one day a man looks about him and no longer recognizes his surroundings nor remembers how he came to inhabit them. My own such journey eventually led to a meeting with one John Claybourne, which came about in the following way:

It was the twenty-third of May in the year Seventeen Hundred and One. I remember the date precisely because it is one recorded in History, marking the execution of the notorious pirate, William Kidd. In those days (and I imagine it is still true), such events were a spectacle, one of the chief forms of entertainment in a city as thirsty for blood as it was for ale. I was no exception. I took up a position at Wapping Dock along with half of London, it seemed, waiting for that reviled criminal to be brought forth and hanged. Though I had yet another motive for being there. Crowds of people invariably attract street vendors and the confusion inherent in such gatherings creates opportunities for the thief. While the attention of those merchants was focused upon the Magistrate riding his horse through the streets, wielding that symbol of the Admiralty, a silver oar, leading two ox carts mounted with iron cages holding the prisoners, it was a simple matter to help myself to their wares: turnips and cabbages and—*bless my soul!*—even a few oranges, as round and golden as the sun overhead. Having filled the pockets of the coat Mrs. Duffer had awarded me as a parting gift, I moved deeper into the crowd of onlookers, some of whom were jeering at the condemned men as they passed, shouting pleasantries such as “Ye’ll be dancing in air before long and pissing yourselves!” while bombarding the cages with dead cats and excrement.

Having grown up a Londoner, I had attended executions before, though none of a man so infamous as Captain Kidd. The ox carts reached the end of the street, at the Old Wapping Stairs.

The prisoners were removed from their cages and led, arms bound at the elbows behind them, down to the mudflats exposed by low tide. It was nearing five o'clock in the afternoon. They were forcibly dragged up the makeshift scaffold to the gallows. Kidd was clearly drunk, bellowing that he was the most maligned man in History, that he was being led to slaughter by the very men who had commissioned his ill-fated voyage. Still, once he had been positioned upon the platform and a noose had been placed around his neck, he dutifully warned the assembled public against following in his footsteps, providing a sharp contrast to the final remarks of one of his shipmates, who violently encouraged the rabble to "Go f___" themselves.

Behind me then someone began singing "Captain Kidd's Farewell to the Seas," a ballad far inferior (in my humble opinion) to the one my father might have composed had he still been alive to do so.

Some thousands they will flock, when we die, when we die.
 Some thousands they will flock when we die.
 Some thousands they will flock
 To Execution Dock
 Where we must stand the shock and must die.

Having robbed some members of the assembled throng, I should have beaten a hasty retreat then and there. Instead, I stood by, as inconspicuously as possible given that my coat was bulging with ill-gotten foodstuffs, and watched the conclusion of the execution, transfixed by it. The Chaplain led the pirates in the singing of one final hymn, a drunken affair, the verses as broken as upturned earth in the freshly plowed rows of a field. Then the blocks were removed from beneath the trapdoors upon which the five men stood. By design, they fell but a few inches so that their necks were not broken; instead, they slowly strangled to death, dancing upon air as the bloodthirsty spectators had anticipated and indeed demanded. The faces of the pirates grew redder as they gasped for breath, all save Captain Kidd. The rope from which he was suspended abruptly gave

way. He fell into the mud below and lay there, choking. Two of the Magistrate's men rushed to his side, lifted him up to his feet. Some among the crowd cried out that it was a sign from God, that the Captain must really be as innocent as he claimed, that his life should be spared. But English justice must be served: Kidd was dragged, even more forcefully than before, up the scaffold again. Another noose, at the end of another rope, was placed about his neck. He cried out, piteously, to his wife Sarah. Then, without further ado or fanfare, he was hanged yet again. His body dangled in the air like some ghastly ornament and then he did indeed piss himself. The gathered people, some on the dock around me, others in pleasure craft out on the Thames, laughed and taunted the man as he twisted in the wind and gasped for air, then died at last without dignity, his trousers wet and his face as purple as a ripe, bulging plum.

Despite the horror of it, I feel certain I would have stayed until the bitter end, serving as yet another witness as the bodies of the pirates were dragged into the mudflats and tied to wooden posts where they would remain for the customary three tides, if there had not come a sudden disturbance off to my left. Someone emerged from the crowd, followed by cries of "Stop, Thief!" That someone was running directly towards me. I tried to step aside but we collided all the same and both of us sprawled across the cobblestones. The boy (for I could see now that it was a boy) got to his feet first and ran. I found myself surrounded by people offering to help me up. Then I caught sight of the oranges I had stolen. They were rolling away down the street. Fearing my would-be benefactors would realize that I was a thief as well, I fled. Once I had traversed several city blocks and felt certain that no one had followed me, I turned into an alley and leaned against a brick wall there, gasping for breath. I put my hands into my pockets to determine what portion of my plunder remained. Most of it was still there, with the unfortunate exception of the oranges. I did, however, find something unexpected among the turnips and cabbages: a gold watch on a gold chain. I stared at it for a long moment, wondering where it had come from. That boy with whom I

had collided? I could not imagine how he had managed to put it there. We had only been in contact with one another for a few instants! More importantly, I thought to myself as I returned the watch to my pocket, what was I to do with it now? I feared what might happen should it be found in my possession. I knew I should dispose of it but could not bring myself to do so as I recognized the worth of the object, what it might be exchanged for. Thus, I left it where it had been so surreptitiously deposited and stepped back out into the street.

Someone took me by the arm. Thinking I had been apprehended by the police I tried to break free but could not. When I turned towards my captor, prepared to protest my innocence as vigorously as Captain Kidd had protested his, I was confronted not by a Copper but the smiling face of the boy who had collided with me earlier.

“Walk on,” said he, “as though we are acquainted. Which, in short order, we shall be.”

I had little choice but to comply; his grip was like iron. I had my first good look at him then. In some respects, he could have been my twin: he, too, had blue eyes, and unremarkable brown hair, and a broad, freckled face. We were roughly the same height. We strode along the busy boulevard together for quite a while. Eventually, he steered me in between two tall, grime-encrusted buildings then through a side door into one of them.

“Listen, I never . . .” I was determined to convince him that I had no intention of keeping his watch, which of course I knew was not his at all.

He placed a finger to his lips. He led me deeper into the building. It was some sort of warehouse with high ceilings and windows near the summit, through which shafts of late afternoon light labored to reach the dust-covered floor. Presently, we reached the far side, where someone awaited us: a middle-aged man with hair the color of damp straw, and eyes like black marbles.

“Ah, John Claybourne, so there you are at last,” he said with a snarl, “Let us hope you have something of value for me today. And who is this with you? A recruit, perhaps?” He looked me up

and down. I felt as though I were naked. My hands, perhaps out of shyness, retreated into my pockets, where they lingered upon the items I had stolen and the one I had not.

“I found myself in a bit of trouble today, but fortunately this lad was there to stand as me Adam Tyler.”

Adam Tyler? I thought to myself that Claybourne must have mistaken me for someone else.

“And what did you make off with, Lad?” asked the bearded man, studying me intently with his black, bird-like eyes.

“Show him, won’t you?” said Claybourne, nudging me and smiling.

I drew the gold watch from my pocket. I held it out to whomever might wish to take it. My only desire at that moment was to be rid of it and go back to my own life, such as that was.

The man with the yellow hair took the watch from me, examined it. He seemed pleased.

“Now, that’s a fine acquisition! Very well done, John. And you as well, Master . . . ?”

I stood in a state of bewilderment for a moment. Why was he asking my name when he and Claybourne apparently believed they knew it already, that to them I was “Adam Tyler?” I resolved to set matters aright. “Tewksbury,” I replied, “Thomas Tewksbury.”

To which the black-eyed man gave an approving nod. “Well then, Thomas, have you come to learn the trade? I must say, you are a bit old for it, Lad.”

“I’ll warrant he is no older than I, Deacon,” chimed in John Claybourne, vouching for me, though I could not imagine why.

The man named Deacon (or perhaps it was his profession) seemed to consider that for a moment. “Aye, and you are getting a bit old for it as well,” he muttered, in a tone of voice both chiding and ominous.

“Which trade?” I managed to ask at last.

“Why, that of the pickpocket of course!” replied John Claybourne, smiling. And then he presented me with one of the turnips I had stolen and which I believed to be safely stored within my coat. It had materialized, as if by magic, in the palm of his hand.

Chapter Two

The World of Pickpockets. Of "The Troupe" and their Nicknames. Handkerchief and Bell. The File, the Bulker, and the Adam Tyler. Guineas and Greed. Of Press Gangs and Spirits. Betrayal.

One may wonder why I chose to cast my lot with pickpockets, though a better question might be this: why would I not? I was already a thief, albeit one of little imagination and ambition, my goal each day being simply to steal enough food to survive until the next. Moreover, these new companions provided me with reliable shelter (the warehouse), as well as a sense of belonging; in short order, they became my second family—or rather, my only one given that the first had been scattered to the Four Winds. The unquestioned head of that family was the yellow-haired, black-eyed man always deferentially referred to as “Deacon,” though I cannot imagine he had any connection whatsoever to the Church. Regardless, he was our father figure, the one to whom we brought not only our troubles but the spoils we acquired from plying our trade. What did he do with those silk handkerchiefs and silver snuff boxes and gold pocket watches we delivered to him on a regular basis? Why, he transformed them, through that criminal alchemy known as “fencing” into pounds and shillings, some of which he used to provide us with food and clothing, while keeping the lion’s share for himself. The only coins of the realm we were ever afforded came to us by means of a nightly ritual in which he awarded a few farthings to whomever had procured the most valuable object that day.

I still see us within my mind’s eye at those evening gatherings, members of what I came to think of as “The Troupe,” sitting in a circle on the dusty floor of the warehouse, greedily consuming bowls of tepid bean soup, chewing stale bread, while sputtering candles cast a flickering light upon our smudged, grimy faces. Crow and Cricket and Biscuit are there, all boys much younger than I, as well as a willowy blonde girl known as “Her Majesty,” about the same age. I am there, too, of course, sporting my own nickname, “Turnip,” an inevitable one perhaps, given my initial

contribution to the collective on the night of my induction into it. The only one among us who seemed to have retained his birth name was the boy who brought me into the fold, though it occurs to me now that he, too, may have sported a pseudonym, for is John not a generic term for Everyman, are not all of us said to be Born of Clay?

Why this use of false names? The practice was actively promoted by the Deacon (that, of course, being his) as he believed it would afford some measure of anonymity should we be apprehended by the police. Which all of us were, at one time or another. But I am getting ahead of myself, and my story. Before I could become a fully functioning member of The Troupe, I had to undergo a regimen of intensive training. I was already adept at thievery in that I could snatch a piece of fresh fruit from a market stand and vanish into a crowd, but the picking of pockets is an art form, one requiring specific skills. These the Deacon instilled in me by means of a most peculiar method. He would hang a man's coat from a hook attached to a rope dangling from the warehouse ceiling and place a handkerchief in one of the pockets, alongside a bell. Then he would challenge me to remove the former without disturbing the latter, without allowing the clapper to so much as touch the metal casing surrounding it. Which was well-nigh impossible, or so I believed at first. Still, I strove to accomplish the feat hour after hour, day after day, false move after false move, each successive ring announcing my failure to the cobwebs and shadows inside that vast, empty building. All the while, my Master would provide "encouragement" in the form of a running commentary punctuated by mild physical abuse (boxing my ears, dragging me about by the nose), which I suppose was meant to emphasize the importance of the lessons.

Determined, I tried again. And again. Still, the bell proclaimed my lack of fitness for the task, though as time went on it did so more in whispers than in cries. In the meantime, there were other roles for me to play besides the starring one (that of the "File"), to wit the Bulker and the Adam

Tyler. But perhaps at this juncture it would be useful for me to describe our work in more detail, how The Troupe went about its business?

Three of us enter a crowded square, seeking out a promising Mark. *Ab, there stands one now, outside the Bookseller's, the gentleman sporting a top hat and tails!* The File and Bulker move closer while Adam Tyler holds back, posing as another patron of the marketplace. Now, seemingly by accident, the Bulker jostles our intended victim, dislodging some of his purchases from his arms.

My apologies, Sir! How very clumsy of me! And he stoops to help the gentleman.

Next time, kindly watch where you are going, young man!

Yes sir, I certainly shall!

Meanwhile, the File has taken up a position behind the unsuspecting victim and is robbing him blind. If all goes well the three of us will go our separate ways then, leaving our Mark none the wiser. If, however, he should become aware of the crime and whirl about at the critical moment, shouting out “Stop, Thief!”, the File will run into the crowd and hand off the stolen goods to his accomplice, Adam Tyler. The Mark, in pursuit, will invariably follow the File, who if caught will simply empty his pockets before his accuser and any bystanders, demonstrating to them that he has stolen nothing, that he is as innocent as the most innocent lamb.

Then why were you running, Lad?

I'm late to meet me Mum, Guvnor!

As can be discerned from the above, little was required of two of the three actors in these little dramas, mainly the ability to lie convincingly and blend into a crowd, skills which I already possessed in abundance and could contribute from the outset. Yet it was cause for celebration for everyone involved when the Deacon at last deemed me competent to take a turn as the File. For my own part, it was a matter of pride, proof that I was at last on equal footing with my companions; for

them, it meant there were more actors “taking point,” as we phrased it, making it less likely that any one of us would be recognized by the police.

My training complete, life went on for quite a while in predictable criminal fashion, consisting of daily robberies, occasional arrests, and even more occasional public whippings or hand scaldings for those of us unfortunate enough to be apprehended. Until at last, on a day much like any other, near the end of the year, something happened which fundamentally altered our unorthodox and yet ordered world.

The Troupe was working the streets in Eastcheap. It was our last “job” of the afternoon. I was playing the File to John Claybourne’s Adam Tyler. Her Majesty was the Bulker, a word not at all befitting her willowy frame. She was distracting the Mark with her cornflower blue eyes and wispy golden hair rather than resorting to an “accidental” collision. The man, perhaps a pedophile, was entranced with her, besotted. I could have removed a horse and carriage from his pocket and he would not have noticed! Which was fortuitous as the leather pouch I found there was quite large, and heavy, larger and heavier than anything I had ever attempted to pilfer before. Once I had removed it and seen the size of it, I let out a puff of air in surprise. The Mark overheard me. He turned around, saw what was about, and the chase was on. I zigzagged through the crowd like a rabbit, the hound in hot pursuit, barking with rage. But I was young and fast on my feet; I found my way to my Adam Tyler and slipped him the pouch, then continued running until I had left the crowded square far behind. Eventually, I collapsed against the brick wall of some nameless edifice, gasping for air. Once I had recovered, I followed protocol and took a roundabout way back to the warehouse. A few blocks short of it, however, John Claybourne appeared. He ushered me into an alleyway. On his face was a smile I could not fathom.

“Did you feel the weight of it?” he whispered urgently. “Do you have any idea what lies within?”

It took me a moment to realize that he was speaking of the leather bag I had stolen. I shook my head.

He looked over his shoulder as though to make certain no one had followed him. Then he handed the pouch back to me. "Have a look for yourself?"

Once again, I held it in my palm. It was indeed quite heavy. Tugging at the drawstring, I opened the bag. What I found there was a veritable trove of gold guineas! I removed one and held it up to the dimming daylight. I whistled, then said: "Won't the Deacon be pleased with *this!*"

"He would be pleased with half as much," said Claybourne.

I laughed, not fully taking his meaning. Then I saw the look in his eye and that laugh died upon my lips. "What are you suggesting?"

He drew a deep breath. "Merely this: that should we keep half for ourselves, he'll be none the wiser. In fact, I predict we will win the day's reward and claim a few coins as our prize. Though rest assured, those coins won't hold a candle to these!"

"I imagine not." Indeed, there was no chance whatsoever that the Deacon would part with even one gold guinea, when each was worth more than a pound! I opened and closed my hand as though preparing, like a magician, to make the coin I held disappear. Which I suppose is what I was contemplating.

"Think, man!" hissed Claybourne. "Our situation is certainly satisfactory now. We have a roof over our heads and enough to eat, but how much longer will we be content with so little? For that matter, how much longer will the Deacon be content with us? Eventually, he will wish to employ younger boys with smaller hands and lighter fingers, who require a bit less in the way of upkeep. Sooner or later, Turnip, we will need to make our own way in the world, make our mark!"

Make our mark. Or perhaps become one, I thought. For it seemed to me then that Life Itself might be the ultimate pickpocket, taking from each of us everything of value, piece by piece. Had it

not already robbed me of my parents? Of my siblings? But that leather pouch filled with guineas. I hesitated. My conscience (or perhaps it was the fear of being caught) kept advising me to reject Claybourne's proposal, and yet the bag was a compelling counterweight to that argument. I reminded myself that it was stolen goods. That it no more belonged to the Deacon than to anyone else (save the Pedophile, though he himself may have obtained it by nefarious means). I thought of all the good I might do for my brothers and sisters, should I ever be reunited with them. Of all the good I might do for myself.

My head, as though of its own accord, nodded. I heard myself say: "Very well." It was Greed, to be sure, that led me astray, for that is the most persistent of the Seven Deadly Sins, but there was another, perhaps more compelling reason why I did what I did. I could not bear to disappoint John Claybourne. I wanted to remain in his good graces as he was the only person in the world, at that moment, whom I considered a friend. We divided the coins into two roughly equal piles, then returned one of those piles to the pouch. The other we hid in a remote corner of the warehouse, in the dirt beneath a loose board on the floor.

That evening played out much as John had predicted. The Deacon was indeed pleased with our contribution. He awarded three farthings to each of us: Claybourne and myself as well as Her Majesty.

"A mere pittance!" hissed John with a mixture of disgust and mirth, after he had collected his reward and had sat back down beside me in the circle.

Under my breath, I bade him shut up, lest he expose us. Then the evening was over. The deed was done. If that had been the end of it, there would be little more to tell. But once one has taken the first step along such a path, it becomes very tempting to take another. Then still another. Having had such a successful debut as an embezzler, John soon wished for an encore. I could hardly object; I was in neither for a penny nor a pound but gold guineas! From that moment on,

whenever he and I worked together as File and Adam Tyler, we engaged in the same practice, siphoning coins from Marks whenever we could. Eventually, even that was not enough; we began keeping for ourselves valuable objects such as signet rings and bracelets, which Claybourne was able to fence, having learned that aspect of the trade, he said, at the feet of our Master. I suspect it was those transformative transactions that eventually led the Deacon to suspect us, for fences, even metaphorical ones, have cracks through which whispers may, and often do, pass.\

What was our goal? I, at least, had none, other than that of not being caught. Oh, I suppose I may have entertained some vague notion of helping James and Sarah and Rachel and George, if I could but have found them. Perhaps I thought I could restore what was left of our family to its former glory, such as that was. I must have known, however, or at least suspected, that such a thing was impossible. For there isn't enough money in the world to buy back the past. Even so, I kept planting gold and silver seeds in our clandestine garden without any expectation that they would ever sprout, much less bear fruit. And all the while, Time kept passing, as it will. Soon, England was at war again. None of us quite understood the reason; it had something to do with Royal Bloodlines and Succession, a topic which had little bearing upon our daily lives. All we knew for certain was that we were allied with the Portuguese and Dutch now, against the French and Spanish.

What did any of that matter to a band of urchins? For the youngest among us, not one whit. But Claybourne and I were both fifteen by then, old enough to attract the attention of the Press Gangs that began prowling London streets, seeking "recruits" for the Royal Navy. At first, we were afforded some immunity as only men with sea experience were sought after and neither of us showed signs of having any. We did not walk in that distinctive, rolling way that men do when they have spent the better part of their lives upon a pitching deck; neither did we wear jackets that had been treated with tar to make them waterproof; nor did we speak in the salty way that sailors do, propositioning any woman who happens along. Eventually, however, every man in the city who had

ever set foot on a vessel had been conscripted, and the Pressers were forced to expand their efforts, kidnapping men from commercial ships anchored in port. This left the merchants who financed such voyages in a bind as they no longer had sufficient crews. In desperation, they turned to hired Factors, who came to be known on the street as “Spirits,” agents who sought out any able-bodied man or boy whatsoever and enlisted him by any means necessary. No experience required. Nor consent.

What bearing did any of this have upon the arrangement between myself and John Claybourne? Well, it certainly divided our attention! Now we had to be wary not only of other members of The Troupe and our Master, but also of these Spirits roaming about in search of human prey. Despite the danger, however, we continued to steal whatever we could. Until one day, months later, our partnership abruptly came to an end, as did my very membership in The Troupe.

It was late morning. I was in the warehouse, preparing to set out for another round of pickpocketing. I was searching for my partner-in-crime when the Deacon called me aside and instructed me to remain behind. Instantly, I was on my guard, for that was something he had never asked of me before. Why was he asking it now? And where was John Claybourne?

“Looking for him, are ye?” said the Deacon, watching me closely. “Well so am I, Lad, so am I!” As he spoke, he placed an arm around my shoulders. Both the tone of his voice and the weight of his arm felt ominous. “It seems he may have left us and without so much as a fare-thee-well!”

“What? When?” There was no need to feign surprise; I genuinely felt it.

“During the night, it seems. Have you any idea where he may have gone?”

I didn’t and swore to it. Though I thought to myself that he must have realized the Deacon was onto us and thus had fled. I would have fled then myself had I not been held so firmly in place.

My Master steered me through the warehouse until we reached that portion of the floor where Claybourne and I had buried our ill-gotten gains. The loose board had been removed, the earth

beneath it upturned. So, I thought, the Deacon had indeed discovered our treasure and had claimed it for himself! Yes, sadly, I was that naïve. “Come now, Lad, you were closest to him, were you not? Where has he gone!”

Only then, with him squeezing my shoulder until it hurt, did I at last glimpse the truth: that it was John who had taken the treasure, that he had betrayed me. I told the Deacon everything then, as though he were in fact my Father Confessor. He seemed sympathetic enough; by the end of my tale, I thought he might even forgive me my trespass. With his arm still draped around my shoulders, but in what now seemed a kindly fashion, he led me out of the warehouse into the street and from there to a nearby tavern.

“There, there, Lad. Let’s have a dram and discuss matters further, shall we?”

We entered the pub. The light inside was dim. There was a strong smell of ale and tobacco. A man stood at the bar. Apparently, he was expecting us. He was enormous, with a full black beard and eyes as blue as mountain lake water. Those eyes were flat and cold, as though there was no soul behind them.

“Ah, I see you have someone for me today, Fitzwilliam!” he bellowed.

Fitzwilliam? It was a moment before I realized I had learned the Deacon’s real name.

“Aye, should you find him suitable.”

Suitable for what? I wondered.

The man with lake water eyes looked me over for a long moment, from on high. At last, he snorted. “I suppose he’ll do.”

Do for what?

“Then he’s yours.”

What did Deacon Fitzwilliam mean by that? I felt as though I were an actor in a play for which I hadn’t been provided the script. A leather pouch, one not nearly so large as that which

Claybourne and I had stolen at the beginning of our partnership, changed hands. I did then as well. One of those hands into which I was transferred clamped down on my arm like a vise. At last, I understood what was happening to me. I was being sold into servitude.

